BERKLEY
F961 MEDALLION 50¢

J.G.BALLARD

A NEW SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR O
THE DROWNED WORLD & THE WIND FROM NOWHER

THE BURNING WORLD



WORLD IN FLAMES

For the next three days the fire continued to burn in Mount Royal. Under a sky stained by an immense pall of black smoke, like a curtain drawn over a concluding act of the city, the long plumes rose high in the air. . . . .

Ransom strolled along the deserted streets, watching the dust columns rising into the sky from a landscape that seemed to be on fire. The light, ashy dust, blown across the lakeside town from the hundreds of incinerators on the outskirts of the city, covered the streets and gardens like the fallout from a volcano . . .

The city was totally deserted . . . . . .

THE BURNING WORLD

J. G. Ballard



A BERKLEY MEDALLION BOOK
published by
BERKLEY PUBLISHING CORPORATION

COPYRIGHT © 1964, by J. G. BALLARD

Published by arrangement with the author's agent

BERKLEY MEDALLION EDITION, AUGUST, 1964

BERKLEY MEDALLION BOOKS are published by Berkley Publishing Corporation
15 East 26th Street, New York, N. Y. 10010

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

PART I

1	The Draining Lake	7
2	The Coming of the Desert	21
3	The Fire Sermon	33
4	The Drowned Aquarium	44
5	The Burning Altar	60
6	Journey to the Coast	68
7	The Bitter Sea	78

PART II

8	Dune Limbo	93
9	The Stranded Neptune	106
10	The Sign of the Crab	113

PART III

11	The Illuminated River	122
12	The Smoke Fires	131
13	The Oasis	140
14	The White Lions	150
15	"Jours de Lenteur"	158

PART I

Chapter 1—The Draining Lake

AT NOON, when Dr. Charles Ransom moored his houseboat in the entrance to the river, he saw Quilter, the idiot-son of the old woman who lived in the ramshackle barge outside the yacht basin, standing on a spur of exposed rock on the opposite bank and smiling at the dead birds floating in the water below his feet. The reflection of his swollen head swam like a deformed nimbus among the limp plumage. The caking mudbank was speckled with pieces of paper and driftwood, and to Ransom the dreamfaced figure of Quilter resembled a demented faun strewing himself with leaves as he mourned for the lost spirit of the river.

Ransom secured the bow and stern lines to the jetty, deciding that the comparison was perhaps less than apt. Although Quilter spent as much time watching the river as Ransom or anyone else, his motives would be typically perverse. The continued fall of the river, sustained through the spring and summer drought, gave him a kind of warped pleasure, even if he and his mother had been the first to suffer. Their derelict barge—an eccentric gift from Quilter's protector, Richard Foster Lomax, the architect who was Ransom's neighbor—had now taken on a thirty-degree list, and a further fall of even a foot in the level of the water would split its hull like a desiccated pumpkin.

Shielding his eyes from the sunlight, Ransom surveyed the silent banks of the river as they wound westwards to the city of Mount Royal five miles away. He had spent the previous week alone on what was left of Lake Constant, sailing the houseboat among the draining creeks and mudflats as he waited for the evacuation of the city to end. After the closure of the hospital at Mount Royal he had intended to leave for the coast, but at the last moment decided to give himself a few final days on the lake before it vanished for good. Now and then, between the humps of damp mud, he had seen the distant span of the motorbridge across the river,

the windows of thousands of cars and trucks flashing like jeweled lances as they set off along the coast road to the south.

Ransom postponed his return until all movement along the bridge had ended. By this time the lake, once a clear stretch of open water thirty miles in length, had subsided into a series of small pools and channels, separated by the banks of draining mud. A few last fishing craft sailed forlornly among them, their crews standing silently in the bows.

By contrast, something about the slow transformation exhilarated Ransom. As the wide sheets of water contracted, first into shallow lagoons and then into a maze of narrow creeks, the wet dunes of the lakebed seemed to emerge from another dimension. On the last morning he woke to find the houseboat beached at the end of a small cove. The slopes of mud, covered with the bodies of dead birds and fish, stretched above him like the shores of a dream.

As he approached the entrance to the river, steering the houseboat among the stranded yachts and fishing boats, the lakeside town of Larchmont was deserted. Along the fishermen's quays the boathouses were empty, and the drying fish hung in the shadows from the lines of hooks. A few refuse fires smouldered in the waterfront gardens, their smoke drifting past the open windows that swung in the warm air. Nothing moved in the streets. Ransom had assumed that a few people would remain behind, waiting until the main exodus to the coast was over, but Quilter's presence, like his ambiguous smile, in some way seemed an obscure omen, one of the many irrational signs that had revealed the real progress of the drought during the confusion of the past months.

A hundred yards to his right, beyond the concrete pillars of the motorbridge, was the fuel depot, the wooden piles of the wharf clearly visible above the cracked mud. The floating pier had touched bottom, and the flotilla of fishing boats usually moored against it had moved off into the center of the channel. Normally, at late summer, the river would have been almost three hundred feet wide, but it was now less than half this, an evil-smelling creek that wound its way along the flat gutter of the banks. The caking mud was firm enough to support a man's weight, and a series of gangways led down to the water's edge from the riverside villas.

Next to the fuel depot was the yacht basin, with the

Quilters' barge moored against its boom. After signing the vessel over to them at the depot, Lomax had added a single gallon of diesel oil in a quixotic gesture of generosity, barely enough fuel for the couple to navigate the fifty yards to the basin. Refused entry, they had taken up their mooring outside. Here Mrs. Quilter sat all day on the hatchway, her faded red hair blown about her black shawl, muttering at the people going down to the water's edge with their buckets.

Ransom could see her now, beaked nose flashing to left and right like an irritable parrot's, flicking at her dark face with an old Chinese fan, indifferent to the heat and the river's stench. She had been sitting in the same place when he set off in the houseboat, her ribald shouts egging on the group of weekend mariners laying a line of cement-filled bags across the entrance to the yacht basin. Even at flood barely enough water entered the circular harbor to irrigate its narrow docks, and this had now leaked back into the river, settling the smartly decked craft firmly into their own mud. Deserted by their owners, the yachts were presided over by Mrs. Quilter's witchlike presence.

Despite her grotesque appearance, and insane son, Ransom liked and admired her. Often during the winter he crossed the rotting gangway into the gloomy interior of the barge, where she lay in a huge feather mattress tied to the chart table, wheezing painfully to herself. The single cabin, filled with dusty brass lanterns, was a maze of filthy recesses veiled by old lace shawls. After treating her from the flask of gin in his valise, Ransom would receive in turn a rambling disquisition on the evils of the world at large, and then be rowed back across the river in her son's leaking coracle, Quilter's great eyes below the hydrocephalic forehead staring at him through the rain like wild moons.

Rain!—At the recollection of what the term had once meant, Ransom looked up at the brilliant sky. Unmasked by clouds or vapor, the sun hung over his head like an inferno. The cracked fields and roads adjoining the river were covered with the same unvarying light, a glazed motionless canopy that embalmed everything in its heat.

Beside the jetty Ransom had staked a series of colored poles into the water, but the rapid fall in the level was too obvious to need calculation. In the previous three months the river had dropped some twenty feet. Ransom estimated that it had shrunk to less than a quarter of its original volume. As it sank into the center of the narrow gulley, it

seemed to pull everything toward it, and the two banks were like the faces of opposing cliffs. This was helped by the inverted tents suspended from the chimneys of many of the riverside houses. Originally designed as raintraps—though no rain had ever fallen into them—the canvas envelopes had been transformed into a line of aerial garbage scoops, the dust and litter raised like expiatory offerings to the sun.

Ransom crossed the deck and stepped down into the steering well. He waved to Quilter, who was watching him with a drifting smile. Behind him, along the deserted wharfs, the bodies of the fish, hanging from their hooks in the drying sheds, turned slowly in the air.

"Tell your mother to move the barge," Ransom called across the interval of slack water. "The river is still falling."

Quilter ignored this, and with an ironic grin pointed to the blurred white forms moving slowly below the surface.

"Clouds," he said.

"What?"

"Clouds," Quilter repeated. "Full of water, doctor."

Ransom stepped through the hatchway into the cabin of the houseboat, shaking his head at Quilter's bizarre sense of humor. Despite his deformed skull and Caliban-like appearance, there was nothing stupid or unintelligent about Quilter. The dreamy ironic smile, at times almost affectionate in its lingering glance, as if understanding Ransom's most intimate secrets, the seamed skull with its curly russet hair and the inverted planes of the faunlike face, in which the cheekbones had been moved back two or three inches, leaving deep hollows below the droll eyes—all these and a streak of unpredictable naïveté made Quilter a daunting figure. Most people wisely left him alone, possibly because his unfailing method of dealing with them was to pick unerringly on their weaknesses and blind spots and work away at these like an inquisitor.

It was this instinct for failure, Ransom decided as Quilter continued to watch him from his vantage point above the dead birds, that probably formed the tacit bond between the youth and himself. No doubt Quilter had quickly sensed that Ransom's frequent visits to the houseboat and the solitary weekends among the marshes along the southern shore of the lake marked a reluctance to face up to certain failures in his life. But perhaps he also realized the extent to which Ransom shared that sense of the community of the river, the unseen links between the people living on the margins

of the great channel, which for Ransom had begun to take the place of his home and his work at the hospital.

All summer Ransom had watched it shrinking, its countless associations fading as it narrowed into a shallow creek. Above all Ransom was aware that the role of the river in time had changed. Once it had played the part of an immense fluid clock, the objects immersed in it taking up their positions like the stations of the sun and planets. The continued lateral movements of the river, to which Ransom had become more and more sensitive during his visits to the houseboat, its rise and fall and the varying pressures on the hull, were like the activity within some vast system of evolution, whose cumulative forward flow was as irrelevant and without meaning as the apparent linear motion of time itself. The real movements were those random and discontinuous relationships between the objects within it, those of himself and the other denizens of the river, Mrs. Quilter, her son, and the dead birds and fish.

With the death of the river so would vanish any contact between those stranded on the drained floor. For the present the need to find some other measure of their relationships would be concealed by the problems of their own physical survival. Nonetheless, Ransom was certain that the absence of this great universal moderator, which cast its bridges between all animate and inanimate objects alike, would prove of crucial importance. Each of them would soon literally be an island in an archipelago drained of time.

Removing his cotton jacket, Ransom sat down on the bench by the stern window of the cabin. He decided to go ashore, but after a week on board the houseboat he felt uneager to leave it and make all the social and mental readjustments necessary, minimal though these would now be. He had let his beard grow, but almost everyone had left Larchmont and there was little point in shaving it off. Although the rim of black hair gave his thin face a gaunt and Rimbaudesque look, he accepted this new *persona* as part of the altered perspectives of the river, and as a mark of his own isolation in the houseboat.

He had seen the craft for sale the previous winter, while visiting a patient in the yacht basin. With its pastel blue hull and raked windows it looked totally un-nautical, but the functional design of the interior, and the absence of all overlay of personality, made it a perfect retreat. To the surprise of the

other yachtsmen in the basin, Ransom towed the craft away and moored it on the exposed bank below the motorbridge. The mooring was a poor one with a nominal rent, the smells of the fish-quays drifting across the water, but he was alone and the slip road nearby gave him quick access to Larchmont and the hospital. The only hazards were the cigarette ends thrown down from the cars crossing the bridge. At night he would sit back in the steering well and watch the glowing parabolas extinguish themselves in the water around him.

He had furnished the houseboat with far more care than he had given to the home he shared with Judith, and its cabin was a repository of all the talismans of his life. In the bookshelf were the anatomy texts he had used in the dissecting room as a student, the pages stained with the formalin that had leaked like a bland washed blood from the mutilated cadavers on the tables—perhaps somewhere among them the unknown face of his surgeon father. On the desk was the limestone paperweight he had cut from a chalk cliff as a child, the fossil shells embedded in its surface carrying a quantum of Jurassic time across the millions of years to him. Behind it, like the ark of his covenant, stood a diptych of photographs in a hinged blackwood frame. On the left was a snapshot of himself at the age of four, before his parents' divorce, sitting on a lawn with them. On the right, exorcising the terrors of this memory, was a reproduction of a small painting by Tanguy, 'Jours de Lenteur.' With its smooth pebble-like objects, drained of all associations, suspended on a washed tidal floor, this painting above all others had helped to isolate him from the tiresome repetitions of everyday life.

All these mementos he had smuggled under Judith's nose from their house during the previous months, setting up a small zone of inner reality for himself. Looking around him at the contents of the cabin, Ransom realized that the houseboat was as much a capsule designed to protect him against the pressures and vacuums of time as the steel shell of an astronaut's vehicle protected the pilot from the vagaries of space. Here his unconscious memories of childhood and the past had been isolated, and quantized, like the fragments of archaic minerals sealed behind glass cases in museums of geology.

A siren hooted warningly. An old river steamer, white

canvas awnings flared trimly over the rows of empty seats, approached the central passage between the main pylons of the bridge. Captain Tulloch, a thin bottle-nosed old buff, sat above the helmsman on the roof of the wheel-house, staring myopically down the narrowing channel. With its shallow draught, the steamer could glide over submerged banks barely two feet below the surface. Ransom suspected that Tulloch was now half-blind, and that his pointless passages in the empty steamer, which once carried sightseers across the lake, would go on until the craft ran immovably aground on a mudbank.

As the steamer passed, Quilter stepped down into the water, and with an agile leap swung himself on to the handrail, feet in one of the scuppers.

"Whoa, there! Full ahead!" The steamer rocked slightly, and Captain Tulloch hopped from his perch with a cry. He seized a boathook and hobbled down the deck toward Quilter, who grimaced at him from his handhold on the stern rail. Bellowing at the youth, who scuttled like a chimpanzee on its bars, Tulloch rattled the boathook up and down between the rails. They passed below the bridge and approached the Quilters' barge. Mrs. Quilter, still fanning herself, sat up and hurled a series of vigorous epithets at the Captain. Ignoring her, Tulloch drove Quilter forward along the rail, lunging at him like a perspiring pikeman. The helmsman swung the steamer hard by the barge, trying to rock it from its mooring. As it passed, Mrs. Quilter reached forward and jerked loose the line of the coracle. It bounced off the bows of the steamer, then raced like a frantic wheel between the hulls. Quilter leapt nimbly into it from the rail and was safely spread-eagled on the barge's deck as Captain Tulloch swung the boathook at his head, knocking Mrs. Quilter's fan into the water from her hand.

The hot sunlight spangled in the steamer's wake as Mrs. Quilter's laughter faded across it. Settling itself, the river stirred slowly, now and then breaking into oily swells. Its white banks were beginning to crack like dry cement, and the shadows of the dead trees formed brittle ciphers on the slopes.

Overhead a car moved along the deserted motorbridge, heading towards the coast. Ransom left the cabin and went out on to the jetty to inspect his raingauge. He had installed it three months earlier, but so far the cylinder had collected

nothing except a few inches of dust and fragments of dried leaf.

As he emptied the cylinder, a woman in a white beach-robe made her way down the bank fifty yards from him. She walked with the slow unhurried step of someone who has recovered from a long malady and feels that all the time in the world lies before her. The crumbling surface of the bank rose around her like clouds of bone-meal. She looked down with preoccupied eyes at the thin stream of water. For a moment, as she lifted her head to the sky, her solitary figure seemed to Ransom like the specter of the renascent dust.

Her strong face turned its level gaze upon Ransom, as if unsurprised to find him standing on the bed of the empty river. Although he had not seen her for some weeks, Ransom, conversely, knew that she would be among the last people to remain in the abandoned town. Since the death of her father, the former curator of the zoo at Mount Royal, Catherine Austen had lived alone in the house by the river. Often Ransom saw her walking along the bank in the evening, her long red hair reflected in the liquid colors of the water at sunset. Sometimes he waved to her as he sailed past in the houseboat, but she never bothered to reply.

She knelt down by the water's edge, frowning at the dead fish and birds that drifted past. She stood up and walked across to Ransom's jetty.

She pointed to an old bucket hanging from the wooden housing of the raingauge. "May I borrow that?"

Ransom handed it to her, then watched as she tried to fill it from the edge of the gangway. "Haven't you any water left?"

"A little to drink. It's so hot, I wanted to bathe." She lifted the bucket from the water, then decanted the dark fluid carefully into the river. The inside of the bucket was cloaked by a black oily veil. Without turning her head, she said: "I thought you'd gone, doctor. With everyone else, to the coast."

Ransom shook his head. "I spent the week sailing on the lake." He pointed to the glistening mudflats that stretched away beyond the entrance to the river. "You'll be able to walk across it soon. Are you going to stay on here?"

"Perhaps." She watched a fishing boat enter the river and approach them, its motor beating slowly. Two men stood in the bows, scanning the deserted wharfs. A crude black awning covered the stern of the boat, where three more

men sat around the tiller, their pinched faces looking across the water at Ransom and Catherine Austen. The craft's empty nets lay amidships, but the sides of the boat had been ornamented in a way unusual for the fishermen of the river. A large carp, slit down its belly, had been fastened to each of the rowlocks, and then turned outwards to face the water. The silver bodies of the six fish stood upright on both sides of the boat like sentinels. Ransom assumed that the boat and its crew came from one of the settlements among the marshes, and that with the drought and the end of the lake the small colonies were being drawn toward the river and Mount Royal.

Yet the significance of the mounted fish eluded him. Most of the fishermen from the marshes lived close to nature, and the carp were probably some kind of rudimentary totem, expressing the fishermen's faith in their own existence.

With a smile, Catherine Austen touched his arm. "Did you see their faces, doctor? They think you're to blame."

"For the lake?" Ransom shrugged. "I dare say." He watched the boat disappear below the bridge. "Poor devils, I hope they find better catches at sea."

Catherine shook her head. "They won't leave here, doctor. Can't you see? What do you think the fish mean on the sides of the boat?" She strolled to the end of the jetty, the white robe sweeping from her hips to the dusty boards. "It's an interesting period, don't you agree? Nothing moves, but so much is happening."

"Too much. There's barely enough time to hunt for water."

"Don't be prosaic. Water is the least of our problems." She added: "I take it you'll also be here, doctor?"

"Why do you say that?" Ransom turned to look up at a truck towing a large trailer across the bridge. "As a matter of fact, I intend to leave in a day or two."

"Really?" Catherine gazed out at the exposed lakebed. "It's almost dry," she said reflectively. "Do you feel, doctor, that everything is being drained and washed away, all the memories and the stale sentiments?"

For some reason this question, with its peculiar ironic emphasis, surprised Ransom. He looked down at the hard eyes that watched his own. "Do I take that as a warning? Perhaps I should change my mooring?"

"Not at all, doctor," Catherine said blandly. "I need you here." She handed him the bucket. "Have you got any water to spare?"

Ransom slipped his hands into the pockets of his trousers. The endless obsession with water during the previous months had forged powerful reflexes. "I haven't. Or is that an appeal to sentiment?"

Catherine waited, and then shrugged and turned away. Fastening her robe, she bent down and filled the bucket.

Ransom went over and took her arm. He pointed to the slip road leading down from the embankment. Directly below the bridge the trailer had parked, and the families of four or five adults and half a dozen children were setting up a small camp. Two of the men carried a chemical closet out of the trailer. Followed by the children, they walked down the bank, sinking up to their knees in the white dust. When they reached the water they emptied the closet and carefully washed it out.

"For God's sake. . . !" Catherine Austen searched the sky. "Doctor, people are filthy."

Ransom took the half-filled bucket from her and lowered it into the water. Catherine watched it glide away on the oily current, her face pale and expressionless. Professor Austen's wife, a noted zoologist in her own right, had died in Africa while Catherine was a child, and Ransom suspected the daughter's eccentricities were less a sign of innate character than of loneliness and vulnerability. Watching her, Ransom reflected that however isolated a man might be, women at least remained his companions, but an isolated woman was isolated absolutely.

Gathering her robe around her, Catherine began to make her way up the bank.

"Wait," Ransom called. "I'll lend you some water." With forced humor, he added: "You can repay me when the pressure comes on again."

He guided her on board the houseboat and went off into the galley. The tank in the roof contained little more than twenty-five gallons, laboriously filled from jerricans he had taken down to the river in his car. The public water supplies, a pathetic trickle all summer, had finally been discontinued three weeks earlier, and since then he had been unable to make good the constant drain on the tank.

He half-filled a can of water and carried it into the cabin. Catherine Austen was strolling up and down, inspecting his books and curios.

"You're well prepared, doctor," she commented. "I see you have your own little world here. Everything outside must

seem very remote." She took the can and turned to leave. "I'll give it back to you. I'm sure you'll need it."

Ransom caught her elbow. "Forget the water. Please. I'd hate you to think I'm smug, of all things. If I am well prepared it's just that . . ." He searched for a phrase. ". . . I've always thought of the whole of life as a kind of disaster area."

She watched him with a critical eye. "Perhaps, but I think you've missed my point, doctor."

She walked slowly up the bank, and without looking back disappeared toward her villa.

Below the bridge, in the shadow of the pylons, the trailer families sat around a huge garbage fire, their faces blazing like voodoo cultists in the serpentlike flames. Down on the water the solitary figure of Quilter watched them from his coracle, leaning on his pole among the dead fish like a water-borne shepherd's boy resting among his sleeping flock. As Ransom returned to the houseboat Quilter bent down and scooped a handful of the brackish water to his mouth, drank quickly, and then punted himself away below the bridge with his awkward grace.

Ransom prepared a light meal for himself, then spent the next half an hour sealing the hatchways and windows.

As he knelt down by the starboard window in the cabin something flashed past outside, and a sharp voice broke through the silence.

"Doctor! Quickly!"

A long wooden skiff, propelled by a tall sunburnt youth, naked except for a pair of faded cotton shorts, swung up and bumped against the houseboat, materializing like a specter out of the canopy of reflected light that lay over the black mirror of the water.

Ransom went up on deck and found the youth, Philip Jordan, fastening the skiff fore and aft to the rail.

"Philip, what on earth—?" Ransom peered down into the narrow craft. What appeared to be a large nest of wet mattress floc, covered with oil and cotton waste, lay in a parcel of damp newspaper.

Suddenly a snakelike head lifted from the nest and wavered uncertainly at Ransom.

Startled, Ransom shouted: "Philip, tip it back into the water! What is it—an eel?"

"A swan, doctor!" Philip Jordan crouched down in the

stern of the skiff, smoothing the clotted head and neck feathers. "It's suffocating in all this oil." He looked up at Ransom, a hint of embarrassment in his wild eyes. "I caught it out on the dunes and took it down to the river. I thought it would swim. Can you save it, doctor?"

"I'll try." Ransom stepped over the rail into the skiff, knelt down by the bird, and searched its mouth and eyes. Too exhausted to move its head again, the huge bird stared up at him with its glazed orbs. The oil had matted the feathers into a heavy carapace, and choked its mouth and respiratory passages.

Ransom stood up, shaking his head doubtfully. "Philip, spread its wings out. I'll get some solvent from the cabin, and we'll see if we can clean it up."

"Right, doctor!"

Philip Jordan, foster child of the river and its last presiding Ariel, lifted the bird in his arms and unfurled its huge limp wings, letting their tips fall into the water. Ransom had known him for several years, and had watched him grow from a child of twelve or thirteen into a tall, long-boned youth with the quick eyes and nervous grace of an aboriginal.

Five years earlier, when Ransom had hired a cabin cruiser and spent his first solitary weekends out on the lake, rebuilding his own world from scratch from the materials of water, wind, and sunlight, Philip Jordan had been the only person he could incorporate into this new continuum. One night, as he sat in the well of his craft moored to a deserted quay among the marshes, reading under a lantern, he heard a splash of water and saw a slim brown-faced boy paddle a homemade dinghy out of the warm darkness. Circumspectly leaving a few feet of open water between them, the boy made no reply to Ransom's questions, but watched the doctor with his wide eyes, paddle lightly touching the water. He wore a faded khaki shirt and trousers, the sun-bleached remnants of what seemed to be an old scout uniform. To Ransom he was part waif and part water-elf.

Finally, after several long pauses in which Ransom resumed his reading and the boy moved twenty yards away, his blade slipping in the liquid silver of the nightwater, he had come in again and produced from between his feet a small brown owl. Raising it in his childlike hands, he had shown it to Ransom—or more probably, the doctor guessed, had shown Ransom to the owl, the tutelary deity of his

water-world—and then vanished among the reeds on the dark surface of the lake.

He appeared again after a lapse of one or two nights, and this time accepted the remains of a cold chicken from Ransom. At last he replied to some of Ransom's questions, speaking in a small gruff voice. He would only answer questions about the owl, the river, and his boat. Ransom assumed he belonged to one of the families living in a colony of beached houseboats further along the lake.

He saw the boy on and off over the next year. He would share a meal with Ransom in the well of the houseboat, and even help him to sail the craft back to the entrance to the river. Here he always left Ransom, reluctant to leave the open water of the lake. Friend of the waterbirds, he seemed able to tame swans and wild geese, and knew every cove and nest in the banks. He was still shy of telling Ransom where he lived, and invariably referred to himself by his surname, the first clue that he had escaped from some institution and was living in the wild. His strange changes of costume—he would suddenly appear in a man's overcoat or an odd pair of old shoes three sizes too big—confirmed this. During the winters he was often close to starvation, going off alone like an animal to eat the food Ransom gave him.

At these times Ransom wondered whether to report him to the vagrancy authorities, frightened that after a cold weekend he might find the boy's dead body following the fish downstream. But something dissuaded him, partly his own increasing influence over the boy—he lent him paper and crayons, and helped him to read—and partly his fascination at the spectacle of this juvenile Robinson Crusoe of the waterways creating his own world out of the scraps and refuse of the twentieth century.

Fortunately, as he grew older the hazards of Philip Jordan's existence diminished, and from this starveling Crusoe scavenging for every nail and fishhook he turned into a wily young Ulysses of the waterfront. His face lengthened and narrowed, the sharp nose and arrowlike cheekbones giving him an alert, resourceful appearance. He carried out various jobs for Captain Tulloch and the yachtsmen in the basin, which made him less dependent on hunting and fish-trapping. Yet many enigmas still surrounded him. Whether these would finally be revealed with the imminent death of the river remained to be seen.

Ransom collected a bottle of turpentine and some cotton

waste from a locker in the galley. Perhaps his selfishness in not reporting the youth years earlier might make Philip now pay a terrible price. Although he had managed to eke out an existence for several years, the river was no more a natural environment than a handful of pebbles and waterweed in an aquarium. Its extinction would leave Philip Jordan with a repertory of skills as useful as those of a stranded fish. To date his only enemy had been a fairly pliable nature. Man, on the other hand, had left him alone. Although Philip was not a thief—yet from where had come those mysterious "gifts"—clasp knives, a cigarette lighter, even an old gold-plated watch—he had learned the arts of petty pilfering, and one day soon, if no rain fell, he would be shot down for it like a dog.

"Come on, doctor!" Philip Jordan beckoned him through the hatchway and helped him over the rail. The swan lay inertly with wings outstretched, its plumage glistening with oil in the sunlight.

"Easy, Philip." Ransom knelt down and began to clean the swan's bill. The bird roused faintly, more in response to the manual pressure than in recovery. To Ransom it seemed nearly dead, smothered in the great weight of oil.

Impatiently, Philip Jordan shouted: "Doctor, that's no good! I'll take it down to the galley and soak off the oil." He lifted the great bird in his arms, the wings like a black drooping cross.

Ransom shook his head. "No, Philip, I'm sorry. It's too big a job."

"What?" Philip cocked an ear at him, struggling with the swan's flopping head. "What's the matter?"

"I can't spare the water. The bird's almost dead," Ransom said firmly.

"That's wrong, doctor!" Philip steadied himself in the skiff, the bird sliding in a helpless sprawl out of his black gleaming arms. "I know swans—they come back when they're nearly dead." He released the bird and let it flop between his feet. "Look, all I need is one bucket and some soap."

Involuntarily, Ransom glanced up at Catherine Austen's villa. In addition to the water tank in the roof, there was a second tank containing two hundred gallons in the pontoon of the houseboat. Some inner caution had prevented him from revealing its existence to Philip Jordan, for which he now despised himself.

"Philip, I'm sorry." He gestured at the sky. "The

drought may well go on for another two or three months, perhaps forever. There's got to be an order of priorities."

"There is, doctor!" His face stiff, Philip Jordan seized his aft line and jerked it loose. "All right, I'll find some water. This river still has plenty in it."

Ransom watched him as he paddled off, his strong arms sweeping the skiff in deep surges through the water. Standing in the stern with his legs astride, his back bending, the outstretched wings of the dying bird dipping into the water from the bows, he reminded Ransom of some landlocked mariner and his stricken albatross, deserted by the sea.

Chapter 2—The Coming of the Desert

IN THE SUNLIGHT the white carcasses of the fish hung from their hooks in the drying sheds, rotating slowly in the warm air. The boathouses were deserted, and the untended fishing craft were beached side by side in the shallows, their nets dragged across the dust. Below the last of the wharfs a huge quantity of smaller fish had been tipped out on to the bank, and the slope was covered with the putrefying silver bodies.

Turning his face from the stench, Ransom looked up at the quay. In the shadows at the back of the boathouse two silent faces watched him, their eyes hidden below the peaks of their caps. All the other fishermen had gone, but these two seemed content to sit there unmovingly, separated from the draining river by the dusty boat across their knees.

Ransom stepped through the fish, his feet sliding on their jellied skins. Fifty yards ahead he found an old dinghy on the bank that would save him the effort of crossing the motorbridge. Pushing off, he reached the opposite shore without needing to paddle, and then retraced his steps along the north bank toward Larchmont.

The image of the fishermen, sitting with their boat like two widows over a coffin, remained in his mind. Across the surface of the lake the pools of evaporating water stirred in the sunlight. Along its southern margins, where the open water had given way before the drought to the creeks and marshes of Philip Jordan's water-world, the channels of damper mud lay among the white beaches like gray fingers. The tall

columns and gantries of an experimental distillation unit operated by the municipal authorities rose above the dunes. At intervals along the shore the dark plumes of reed fires lifted into the tinted blue sky from the deserted settlements, like the calligraphic signals of some primitive desert folk.

At the outskirts of Larchmont, Ransom climbed the bank and left the river, crossing an empty waterfront garden to the road behind. Unwashed by the rain, the streets were covered with dust and scraps of paper, the sidewalks strewn with garbage. Tarpaulins had been draped over the swimming pools, and the tattered squares lay about on the ground like ruined tents. The trim lawns shaded by willows and plane trees, the avenues of miniature palms and rhododendrons had all vanished, leaving a clutter of ramshackle gardens. Already Larchmont was a desert town, built on an isthmus of sand between a drained lake and a forgotten river, sustained only by a few meager water holes.

Two or three months beforehand, many of the residents had built wooden towers in their gardens, some of them thirty or forty feet high, equipped with small observation platforms from which they had an uninterrupted view of the southern horizon. From this quadrant alone were any clouds expected to appear, generated from moisture evaporated off the surface of the sea. As he made his way down Columbia Drive, Ransom looked up at the towers, but none were occupied. Most of his neighbors had left to join the exodus to the coast.

Halfway down Columbia Drive a passing car swerved in front of Ransom, forcing him on to the sidewalk. It stopped twenty yards ahead. The driver opened his door and hailed him.

"Ransom, is that you? Do you want a lift?"

Ransom crossed the road, recognizing the burly, gray-haired man in a clerical collar—the Reverend Howard Johnstone, minister of the Presbyterian Church at Larchmont.

Johnstone opened the door and moved a heavy shotgun along the seat, peering at Ransom with a sharp eye.

"I nearly ran you down," Johnstone told him, beckoning him to shut the door almost before he had climbed in. "Why the devil are you wearing that beard? There's nothing to hide from here."

"Of course not, Howard," Ransom agreed. "It's purely penitential. Actually, I thought it suited me."

"It doesn't. Let me assure you of that."

A man of vigorous and uncertain temper, the Reverend Johnstone was one of those muscular clerics who intimidate their congregations not so much by the prospect of divine justice at some future date as by the threat of immediate physical retribution in the here and now. Well over six feet tall, his strong head topped by a fierce crown of gray hair, he towered over his parishioners from his pulpit, eying each of them in their pews like a bad-tempered headmaster obliged to take a junior form for one day and determined to inflict the maximum of benefit upon them. His long, slightly twisted jaw gave all his actions an air of unpredictability, but during the previous months he had become almost the last surviving pillar of the lakeside community. Ransom found his bellicose manner hard to take—something about the sharp eyes and lack of charity made him suspicious of the minister's motives—but nonetheless he was glad to see him. At Johnstone's initiative a number of artesian wells had been drilled and a local militia recruited, ostensibly to guard the church and property of his parishioners, but in fact to keep out the transients moving along the highway to the south. Recently a curious streak had emerged in Johnstone's character. He had developed a fierce moral contempt for those who had given up the fight against the drought and retreated to the coast. In a series of fighting sermons preached during the last three or four Sundays he had warned his listeners of the offense they would be committing by opting out of the struggle against the elements. By some strange logic he seemed to believe that the battle against the drought, like that against evil itself, was the local responsibility of every community and private individual throughout the land, and that a strong element of rivalry was to be encouraged between the contestants, brother set against brother, in order to keep the battle joined.

Notwithstanding all this, most of his flock had deserted him, but Johnstone stayed on in his embattled church, preaching his hellfire sermons to a congregation of barely half a dozen people. Although his efforts to preserve the status quo had failed, he was still determined to remain in the town.

"Have you been skulking somewhere for the last week?" he asked Ransom. "I thought you'd gone."

"Not at all, Howard," Ransom assured him. "I went off

on a fishing trip. I had to get back for your sermon this Sunday."

"Don't mock me, Charles. Not yet. A last-minute repentance may be better than nothing, but I expect rather more from you." He reached out and held Ransom's arm in a powerful grip. "But it's good to see you. We need everyone we can muster."

Ransom looked out at the deserted avenue. Most of the houses were empty, windows boarded and nailed up, swimming pools emptied of their last reserves of water. Lines of abandoned cars were parked under the withering plane trees, and the road was littered with discarded cans and cartons. The bright flintlike dust lay in drifts against the blistered fences. Refuse fires smouldered unattended on the burnt-out lawns, their smoke wandering over the roofs.

"I'm glad I stayed out of the way," Ransom said. "Has everything been quiet?"

"Yes and no. We've had a few spots of trouble. I'm on my way to something now, as a matter of fact."

"What about the police rearguard? Has it gone yet?"

Despite the careful offhandedness of the question, Johnstone turned and smiled knowingly. "It leaves today, Charles. You'll have time to say goodbye to Judith. However, I think you ought to make her stay."

"I couldn't if I wanted to." Ransom sat forward and pointed through the windscreen. "What's this? It looks unpleasant."

They turned into Amherst Avenue and stopped by the church at the corner. A group of five or six men, members of Johnstone's parish militia, stood around a dusty green sedan, shouting and arguing with the driver. Tempers flared in the brittle light, and the men rocked the car from side to side, drumming on the roof with their rifles. Fists began to fly, and a sturdy square-shouldered little man wearing a dirty panama hat hurled himself at the men like a berserk terrier. As he disappeared from sight in the mêlée, a woman's voice cried out plaintively.

Seizing his shotgun from the car, Johnstone set off toward them, Ransom behind him. The owner of the sedan was struggling with three men who held him down on his knees. As someone shouted "Here's the Reverend!" he looked up from the ground with fierce determination, like a heretic forced to unwilling prayer. Watching from the front seat of the car was a small moonfaced woman with an expression

of helpless panic in her tired eyes. Behind her, the white faces of three children, one a boy of eight, peered through the side window among the bundles and suitcases.

Johnstone pulled the men apart, the shotgun raised in the air.

"All right, that's enough! I'll deal with him now!" He lifted the driver to his feet with one hand. "Who is he? What's he been up to?"

Edward Gunn, owner of the local hardware store, stepped forward, an accusing finger raised in front of his beaked gray face. "I caught him in the church, Reverend, with a bucket. He was taking water from the font."

"The font?" Johnstone gazed down magisterially at the little driver. "Did you want to be baptized? Is that what you wanted, before all the water in the world was gone?"

The stocky man pushed Gunn aside. "No, I wanted water to drink! We've come three hundred miles today—look at my kids, they're so dry they can't even weep!" He took out his leather wallet and spread out a fan of greasy bills. "I'm not asking for charity, I'll pay good money."

Johnstone brushed aside the money with the barrel of the shotgun. "We take no cash for water here, son. You can't buy off the droughts of this world, you have to fight them. You should have stayed where you were, in your own home."

"That's right!" Edward Gunn cut in. "Get back to your own neighborhood!"

The stocky man spat in disgust. "My own neighborhood is six hundred miles away; it's nothing but dust and dead cattle!"

Ransom stepped over to him. "Quiet down. I'll give you some water." He tore a sheet from an old prescription pad in his pocket and pointed to the address. "Drive around the block and park by the river, then walk down to my house. All right?"

"Well . . . " The man eyed Ransom suspiciously, then relaxed. "Thanks a lot. I'm glad to see there's one here, at least." He picked his panama hat off the ground, straightened the brim, and dusted it off. Nodding pugnaciously to Johnstone, he climbed into the car and drove off.

Gunn and his fellow vigilantes dispersed among the dead trees, sauntering down the lines of cars.

As he settled his large frame behind the wheel, Johnstone said: "Kind of you, Charles, but begging the question. He should have stayed where he was. There are few places

in this country where there aren't small supplies of local water, if you work hard enough for them."

"I know," Ransom said. "But see it from his point of view. Thousands of head of cattle dead in the fields, to these poor farming people it must seem like the end of the world."

"Well, it isn't!" Johnstone drummed a fist on the wheel. "That's not for us to decide! There are too many people now living out their fantasies of death and destruction, that's the secret appeal of this drought. I was going to give the fellow some water, Charles, but I wanted him to show a little more courage first."

"Of course," Ransom said noncommittally. He was relieved when Johnstone let him out at the end of the avenue. On their right, facing the minister's house, was the glass and concrete mansion owned by Richard Foster Lomax. At one end of the outdoor swimming pool, a fountain threw rainbows of light through the brilliant air. Taking his ease at the edge of the pool was the strutting figure of Lomax, hands in the pockets of his white silk suit, his clipped voice calling ironically to someone in the water.

"Magnificent, isn't he?" Johnstone commented. "Much as I detest Lomax, he does prove my point."

Waving to Johnstone, Ransom walked home along the deserted avenue. In the drive outside the house, his car stood by the garage door where he had left it; but for some reason he found it difficult to recognize, as if he were returning home after a lapse not merely of a week but of several years. A light coating of dust covered the bodywork and lay on the seats inside, as if the car were already a distant memory of itself, the lapsed time condensing on it like dew. This softening of outlines could be seen in the garden, the fine silt on the swing-seats and metal table blurring their familiar profiles. The sills and gutters of the house were covered with the same ash, dimming the image of it in his mind. Watching the dust accumulate against the walls, Ransom could almost see it several years ahead, reverting to a primitive tumulus, a mastaba of white ash in which some forgotten nomad had once made his home.

He let himself into the house, noticing the small shoe marks that carried the dust outside across the carpet, fading as they reached the stairs like the footprints of someone returning from the future. For a moment, as he looked around at the furniture in the hall, Ransom was tempted to open the

windows and let the wind inundate everything, obliterating the past; but fortunately, during the previous years, both he and Judith had used the house as little more than a *pied à terre.*

On the hall floor below the mail slot, he found a thick envelope of government circulars. Ransom carried them into the lounge. He sat down in an armchair and stared through the french windows at the bleached dustbowl that had once been his lawn. Beyond the withered hedges his neighbor's watchtower rose into the air, but the smoke from the refuse fires veiled the view of the lake and river.

He glanced at the circulars. These described successively the end of the drought and the success of the rain-seeding operations, the dangers of drinking seawater, and, lastly, the correct procedure for reaching the coast.

He stood up and wandered around the house, uncertain how to begin the task of mobilizing its resources. In the refrigerator, melted butter ran greasily off the edge of its tray and dripped onto the limp salad below. The smells of sour milk and bad meat made him close the door. An ample stock of canned food and cereals stood on the pantry shelves, and a small reserve of water lay in the roof tank, but this was due less to foresight than to the fact that, like himself, Judith took most of her meals out.

The house reflected this domestic and personal vacuum. The neutral furniture and decorations were as anonymous and free of associations as those of a motel—indeed, Ransom realized, they had been unconsciously selected for just this reason. In a sense the house was now a perfect model of a spatio-temporal vacuum, a hole inserted into the continuum of his life by the private alternate universe in the houseboat on the river. Walking about the house, he felt more like a forgotten visitor than its owner, a shadowy and ever more evasive double of himself.

The phonograph sat inertly beside the empty fireplace. Ransom switched it on and off, and then remembered an old transistor radio that Judith had bought. He went upstairs to her bedroom. Most of her cosmetic bric-à-brac had been cleared away from the dressing table, and a single line of empty bottles was reflected in the mirror. In the center of the bed lay a large blue suitcase, crammed to the brim.

Ransom stared down at it. Although its significance was obvious, he found himself, paradoxically, wondering whether Judith was at last coming to stay with him. Ironic inversions

of this type, rather than scenes of bickering frustration, had characterized the slow winding-down of their marriage, like the gradual exhaustion of some enormous clock that at times, relativistically, appeared to be running backwards.

There was a tentative tap on the kitchen door. Ransom went downstairs and found the owner of the green sedan, hat in his hands.

"Come in," Ransom said. With a nod, the little man stepped into the kitchen. He walked about stiffly, as if unused to being inside a house. "Are your family all right?" Ransom asked.

"Just about. Who's that crackpot down by the lake?"

"The concrete house with the swimming pool?—one of the local eccentrics. I shouldn't worry about him."

"He's the one who should be worrying," the little man retorted. "Anyone that crazy is going to be in trouble soon."

He waited patiently as Ransom filled a two-gallon can from the sink tap. There was no pressure and the water dribbled in slowly. When Ransom handed him the can he seemed to switch himself on, as if he had suspended judgment on the possibility of receiving the water until it made physical contact with his hands.

"It's good of you, doctor. Grady's the name, Matthew Grady. This'll keep the kids going to the coast."

"Drink some yourself. You look as if you need it. It's only a hundred miles to the coast."

Grady nodded skeptically. "Maybe. But I figure the last couple of miles will be really hard going. Could take us a whole two days, maybe three. You can't drink seawater. Getting down onto the beach is only the start." At the door he added, as if the water in his hand compelled him to reciprocate at least a modicum of good advice: "Doctor, things are going to be rough soon, believe me. You pull out now while you can."

Ransom smiled. "I already have pulled out. Anyway, keep a place for me on the sand." He watched Grady wrap the can in his coat and then bob off down the drive, his eyes moving quickly from left to right as he slipped away between the cars.

Tired by the empty house, Ransom went out into the drive, deciding to wait for Judith there. The fine ash settled slowly through the air from the unattended fires, and he climbed into the car, dusting the seats and controls. He switched on

the radio and listened to the intermittent news reports of the progress of the drought broadcast from the few radio stations still operating.

The worldwide drought now in its fifth month was the culmination of a series of extended droughts that had taken place with increasing frequency all over the globe during the previous decade. Ten years earlier a critical shortage of world foodstuffs had occurred when the seasonal rainfall expected in a number of important agricultural areas had failed to materialize. One by one, areas as far apart as Saskatchewan and the Loire valley, Kazakhstan and the Madras tea country were turned into arid dust basins. The following months brought little more than a few inches of rain, and after two years these farmlands were totally devastated. Once their populations had resettled themselves elsewhere, these new deserts were abandoned for good.

The continued appearance of more and more such areas on the map, and the added difficulties of making good the world's food supplies, led to the first attempts at some form of organized global weather control. A survey by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization showed that everywhere river levels and water tables were falling. The two-and-a-half million square miles drained by the Amazon had shrunk to less than half this area. Scores of its tributaries had dried up completely, and aerial surveys discovered that much of the former rain forest was already dry and petrified. At Khartoum, in lower Egypt, the White Nile was twenty feet below its mean level ten years earlier, and lower outlets were bored in the concrete barrage of the dam at Aswan.

Despite worldwide attempts at cloud-seeding, the amounts of rainfall continued to diminish. The seeding operations finally ended when it was obvious that not only was there no rain, but there were no clouds. At this point attention switched to the ultimate source of rainfall—the ocean surface from which it should have been evaporating. It needed only the briefest scientific examination to show that here were the origins of the drought.

Covering the offshore waters of the world's oceans, to a distance of about a thousand miles from the coast, was a thin but resilient mono-molecular film formed from a complex of saturated long-chain polymers, generated within the sea from the vast quantities of industrial wastes discharged into the ocean basins during the previous fifty years. This tough, oxygen-permeable membrane lay on the air-water interface

and prevented almost all evaporation of surface water into the air space above. Although the structure of these polymers was quickly identified, no means was found of removing them. The saturated linkages produced in the perfect organic bath of the sea were completely nonreactive, and formed an intact seal broken only when the water was violently disturbed. Fleets of trawlers and naval craft equipped with rotating flails began to ply up and down the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of North America, and along the seaboards of Western Europe, but without any long-term effects. Likewise, the removal of the entire surface water provided only a temporary respite—the film quickly replaced itself by lateral extension from the surrounding surface, recharged by precipitation from the reservoir below.

The mechanism of formation of these polymers remained obscure, but millions of tons of highly reactive industrial wastes—unwanted petroleum fractions, contaminated catalysts and solvents—were still being vented into the sea, where they mingled with the wastes of atomic power stations and sewage schemes. Out of this brew the sea had constructed a skin no thicker than a few atoms, but sufficiently strong to devastate the lands it once irrigated.

This act of retribution by the sea had always impressed Ransom by its grim simple justice. Cetyl alcohol films had long been used as a means of preventing evaporation from water reservoirs, and nature had merely extended the principle, applying a fractional tilt, at first imperceptible, to the balance of the elements. As if further to tantalize mankind, the billowing cumulus clouds, burdened like madonnas with cool rain, which still formed over the central ocean surfaces, would sail steadily toward the blistered shorelines but always deposit their precious cargoes into the dry unsaturated air above the sealed offshore waters, never onto the crying land.

A police car approached along the avenue and stopped fifty yards away. After a discreet interval, stemming more from custom than any sense of propriety, Judith Ransom stepped out. She leaned through the window, talking to Captain Hendry. After checking her watch against his, she hurried up the drive. She failed to notice Ransom sitting in the dust-covered car, and went past into the house.

Ransom waited until she had disappeared upstairs. He stepped from the car and strolled down toward Hendry. Ransom had always liked the police captain, and during the two

years he had known him their relationship had become the most stable side of the triangle, indeed, Ransom sometimes guessed, its main bond. How long Judith and Hendry would survive the rigors of the beach alone remained to be seen.

As Ransom reached the car, Hendry put down the map he was studying. He seemed preoccupied but greeted Ransom with a wave.

"Still here, Charles? Don't you feel like a few days at the beach?"

"I can't swim." Ransom pointed to the camping equipment in the back seat. "All that looks impressive. A side of Judith's character I never managed to explore."

"I haven't either—yet. Perhaps it's just wishful thinking. Do I have your blessing?"

"Of course. And Judith too, you know that."

Hendry gazed up at Ransom. "You sound completely detached, Charles. What are you planning to do—wait here until the place turns into a desert?"

Ransom flicked at the dust that had gathered behind the windscreen wiper. "It seems to be a desert already. Perhaps I'm more at home here. I want to stay on a few days and find out."

He talked to Hendry for a few minutes, and then said good-by to him and went indoors. He found Judith in the kitchen, rooting in the refrigerator. A small stack of cans stood in a carton on the table.

"Charles—" She straightened up, brushing her blonde hair off her angular face. "That beard—I thought you were down at the river."

"I was," Ransom said. "I came back to see if I could do anything for us. It's rather late in the day."

Judith watched him with a neutral expression. "Yes, it is," she said matter-of-factly. She bent down to the refrigerator again, flicking at the greasy salad with her well-tended nails. Again Ransom wondered how the survival course on the beaches would suit her. For a moment he felt a pang of gratitude toward Hendry.

"I've been dividing things up," she explained. "I've left you most of the stuff. And you can have all the water."

Ransom watched her seal the carton, then search for some string in the cupboard, sweeping the tail of her linen summer coat off the floor. Her departure, like his own from the house, involved no personal component whatsoever. Their

relationship was now completely functional, like two technicians who had come to the house to install a complex domestic appliance, but found the wrong voltage.

"I'll get your suitcase," he said. She said nothing, but her gray eyes followed him to the stairs.

When he came down she was waiting in the hall. She picked up the carton. "Charles," she asked, "what are you going to do?"

Despite himself, Ransom smiled. In a sense the question had been prompted by his beachcomber-like appearance and dark beard, but the frequency with which he had been asked it by so many different people made him realize that his continued presence in the deserted town, his very acceptance of the silence and emptiness, in some way exposed the vacuum in their own lives. The mere act of driving to the coast was no answer. By asking him for his own plans they were all hoping for some policy or course of action for themselves.

He wondered whether to try to convey to Judith his involvement with the changing role of the town and river, their whole metamorphosis in time and memory. Catherine Austen would have understood his preoccupations, his quest for that paradigm of detachment that so far he had achieved only in his marriage, and accepted that for Ransom the only final rest from the persistence of memory would come from his absolution in time. But Judith, as he knew, hated all mention of the subject, and for good reason. Woman's role in time was always tenuous and uncertain.

Her pale face regarded his shadow on the wall, as if searching for some last clue in this reflected *persona*. Then he saw that she was watching herself in the mirror. He noticed again the marked lack of symmetry in her face, the dented left temple that she tried to disguise with a fold of hair. It was as if her face already carried the injuries of an appalling motorcar accident that would happen somewhere in the future. Sometimes Ransom felt that Judith was aware of this herself, and moved through life with this grim promise always before her.

She opened the door on to the dusty drive. "Good luck, Charles. Look after that Jordan boy."

"He'll be looking after me."

"I know. You need him, Charles."

As they went out into the drive, enormous black clouds were crossing the sky from the direction of Mount Royal.

"Good God!" Judith started to run down the drive, dropping her bag. "Is that rain?"

Ransom caught up with her. He peered at the great billows of smoke. "Don't worry." He handed her the bag. "It's the city. It's on fire."

After she and Hendry had gone, he went back to the house, the image of Judith's face still in his eyes. She had looked back at him with an expression of horror, as if frightened that she was about to lose everything she had gained.

Chapter 3—The Fire Sermon

FOR THE NEXT three days the fires continued to burn in Mount Royal. Under a sky stained by an immense pall of black smoke, like a curtain drawn over the concluding act of the city, the long plumes rose high into the air, drifting away like the fragments of enormous collapsing messages. Mingled with the fires of incinerators and abandoned garbage, they transformed the open plain beyond the city into an apocalyptic landscape.

From the roof of his house, Ransom watched the motor-bridge across the river, waiting for the last inhabitants of the city to leave for the south. By now Larchmont was empty. With the exception of the Reverend Johnstone and his last parishioners, all of Ransom's neighbors had gone. He strolled among the deserted streets, watching the dust columns rising into the sky from a landscape that seemed to be on fire. The light ashy dust blown across the lakeside town from the hundreds of incinerators on the outskirts of the city covered the streets and gardens like the fallout from a volcano. The silent quays and boathouses were bleached white by the ash.

Much of the time Ransom spent by the river, or walking out across the bed of the lake. Inshore, the slopes of damp mud had already dried into a series of low dunes, their crests yellowing in the heat. Wandering among them, out of sight of the town, Ransom found the hulks of old yachts and barges, their blurred forms raised from the watery limbo to await the judgment of the sun. Ransom built a crude raft out of pieces of driftwood and punted himself across the

small lagoons of brackish water, making his way in a wide circle back toward the river.

Although still narrowing, the channel was too deep to ford. As viscous and oily as black treacle, it leaked slowly between the white banks. Only the elusive figure of Philip Jordan, punting his arrowlike skiff in and out of the thermal pools, gave it any movement. Once or twice Ransom called to him, but the youth waved and vanished with a glimmer of his pole, intent on some private errand. A few craft sat on the surface, reflected in the dark sinking mirror. At intervals throughout the day a siren would give a mournful hoot, and the old steamer, still commanded by Captain Tulloch, would make its way up-river, miraculously navigating the shallow channel. Then, with another hoot, it would move off into the haze over the lake, disappearing among the narrow creeks.

It was during this time that Ransom again became aware of the significance of each day. Perhaps this was because he knew he would be able to stay on in Larchmont for a further two or three weeks at the most. After that, whatever happened, and even if he chose to stay behind, his existence would be determined by a new set of rules, probably those of chase and pursuit. But until then a finite period remained, the dreary sequence of day following day had given way to a sharply defined quantum of existence. Superficially the streets and houses resembled those of the normal world. The lines that once marked its boundaries still formed a discrete but unreal image, like the false object seen in a convex mirror.

As expected, Ransom felt little urge to visit his houseboat. It remained quietly at its mooring, the condensation of a distant private universe.

On Sunday, the last day of this short interregnum, Ransom visited the small Presbyterian church on the corner of Amherst Avenue to hear what he assumed to be the Reverend Johnstone's concluding sermon. During this period the minister had been busy with the few remaining members of his militia, driving about in his jeep with bales of barbed wire and crates of supplies, fortifying their houses for use as strongpoints in the Armageddon to come. Curious to see how Johnstone was responding to the transformation of Larchmont and the city, Ransom walked down to the church and entered the aisle just as the small manually operated organ groaned out its short voluntary.

He took his seat in one of the pews halfway down the

nave. Johnstone left the organ, and began to read the lesson from the lectern. The church was almost empty, and Johnstone's strong voice, as belligerent as ever, reverberated off the empty pews. Below him, in the front row, sat his small dove-haired wife and three unmarried daughters, wearing their floral hats. Behind them were the two or three families who still remained, the men's shotguns discreetly out of view.

After the hymn, Johnstone mounted the pulpit and began his sermon, taking as his text chapter IV, verse 8, of the Book of Jonah: *And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.* After a brief résumé of the previous career of Jonah, whose desire for the early destruction of Nineveh and the gentiles he seemed generally to approve, Johnstone went on to compare the booth the Lord had built for Jonah to the east of Nineveh with the church in whose safety they now sat, waiting for the destruction of Mount Royal and the world beyond.

At this point, as Johnstone warmed to his theme, he glanced down the nave with a slight start. Ransom turned and looked over his shoulder. Standing between the pews at the rear of the church, caps in their hands, was a group of some twenty of the fishermen, their thin faces staring down the aisle at the pulpit. For a few moments they stood together, silently listening to Johnstone as he drew breath and continued his peroration. Then they shuffled together into the pews at the back, exposing the sky behind them through the open doors, the billows of smoke drifting across the rooftops from Mount Royal.

Surprised by their appearance in the church, in their black shabby clothes and old boots, Ransom moved down to the end of the pew, from where he could glance back at the fishermen. Their faces had the closed sullen expressions of a group of strikers or unemployed, biding their time until given the word to act.

Below the pulpit there were whispered exchanges, and a gun barrel moved uneasily, but the Reverend Johnstone took these new arrivals in his stride. His eyes roved along the lines of stony faces. Raising his voice, he recapitulated what he had said so far. Then he went on to expand upon his theme, comparing Jonah's wish for the destruction of Nine-

veh with mankind's unconscious hopes for the end of their present world. Just as the withering of Jonah's gourd by the worm was part of the Lord's design, so they themselves should welcome the destruction of their own homes and livelihoods, and even their very shelter from the drought, knowing that God's grace would come to them only through this final purging fire.

The fishermen watched Johnstone unmovingly, their eyes fixed steadily on his face. One or two leaned forward stiffly, hands clasping the pew in front, but most of them sat upright. Johnstone paused before his homily, and there was a brief shuffle. The entire group of fishermen rose to their feet, and without a backward glance made their way from the church.

The Reverend Johnstone stopped to let them go, quieting the front pews with a raised hand. He eyed the retreating figures with his head to one side, as if trying to sum up their motives for coming to the church. Then, in a lower voice, he called his depleted congregation to prayer, glancing through his raised hands at the open doors.

Ransom waited, and then slipped away down the aisle and stepped out into the sunlight. In the distance he caught a last glimpse of the black-clad figures moving quickly between the cars, the smoke clouds crossing the avenue over their heads.

At his feet, traced in the white dust on the sidewalk outside the porch, was a small fish-shaped sign.

"Doctor."

As he knelt down to examine the sign a hand like a bird's claw sat on his shoulder. He looked up to find the broad, dented face of Quilter gazing at him with his moist eyes.

"Lomax," he said by way of introduction. "He wants you. Now."

Ransom ignored him and followed the loop in the dust with his finger. Quilter leaned against the stump of a tree, listening with a bored expression to the faint sounds of the organ from the church. His ragged clothes were filthy, stained with tar and wine.

Ransom stood up, slowly brushing his hands. "What's the matter with Lomax?"

Quilter looked him up and down. "*You* tell him," he said offensively. When Ransom refused to be provoked, his big

broken face relaxed into a smile, first of grudging respect, which became more and more twisted until all humor had gone and only a bitter parody remained. He tapped his head slyly and said, sotto voce: "Perhaps . . . water on the brain?" With a cryptic laugh he made off down the avenue, beckoning Ransom after him and potting with his forefinger at the observation platforms on the watchtowers.

Ransom followed him at a discreet interval, on the way collecting his valise from his house. Quilter's oblique comment on Lomax, probably a tip of some sort, might well contain more truth than most people would have given him credit for. Lomax was certainly an obsessed character, and the drought had no doubt inflamed his imagination beyond all limits.

At the guardhouse Quilter pulled a bunch of keys from his pocket and opened the gates. He unleashed the two Alsatians fastened to the iron grille. Giving each of them a hard kick in the rump to quiet them down, he led the way up the long drive. Lomax's house, a glass and concrete folly, stood above them on its circular embankment, its jutting balconies and aerial verandas reflecting the sunlight like the casements of a jewelled glacier. The lines of sprinklers had been switched off, and the turf was streaked with yellow, the burnt ochre of the soil showing through at the edges of the colored tile pathways. The swimming pool was silent, and alongside it a large green tanker was pumping the remains of the water out through a convoluted metal hose. The diesel thumped with a low monotonous thirst, and the driver watched the ornamental floor appear with weary eyes.

The hallway, however, was still pleasantly cool, the marble floor crossed by a set of wet footprints.

Lomax was in his suite on the first floor. He sat back against the bolster on the gilt bed, fully dressed in his white silk suit, like a pasha waiting for his court to assemble. Without moving his head, he waved his silvertopped cane at Ransom.

"Do come in, Charles," he called in his clipped creamy voice. "How kind of you, I feel better already." He tapped the wicker rocking chair drawn up beside the bed. "Sit down here where I can see you." Still not moving his head or shoulders, he shook his cane at Quilter, who stood grinning in the doorway. "All right, my boy, away with you! There's work to be done. If you find any of those lackeys of mine, turn the dogs on them!"

When Quilter had gone, the Alsatians pawing frantically at the floor in the hall, Lomax inclined his head and peered down at Ransom. His small face with its arrogant features wore an expression of puckish charm.

"My dear Charles, I do apologize for sending Quilter to you, but the servants have left me. Can you believe it, the ingratitude! But the Gadarene rush is on, nothing will stop them. . . ." He sighed theatrically, then winked at Ransom and confided coarsely: "Bloody fools, aren't they? What are they going to do when they get to the sea—swim?"

He sat back with an affected rictus of pain and gazed limply at the decorated ceiling, like a petulant Nero overwhelmed by the absurdity and ingratitude of the world. Ransom watched the performance with a tolerant smile. The pose, he knew, was misleading. Under the soft, cupidlike exterior, Lomax's face was hard and rapacious, there was something almost reptilian about the gray hooded eyes.

"What's the matter?" Ransom asked him. "You look all right."

"Well, I'm not, Charles." Lomax raised his cane and gestured toward his right ear. "A drop of water from that confounded pool jumped into it, for a day I've been carrying the Atlantic Ocean around in my head. I feel as if I'm turning into an oyster."

He waited patiently as Ransom sat back and laughed at the intended irony of this, eyes half-closed with pleasure. Ransom was one of the few people to appreciate his Fabergé style without any kind of moral reservation—everyone else was faintly shocked, for which Lomax despised them ("Mankind's besetting sin, Charles," he once complained, "is to sit in judgment on its fellows"), or viewed him uneasily from a safe distance. In part this reaction was based on an instinctive revulsion from Lomax's ambiguous physical make-up, and the sense that his whole personality was based on, and even exploited, precisely these areas.

Yet Ransom felt that this was to misjudge him. Just as his own rather stratified personality reflected his preoccupation with the vacuums and drained years of his memory, so Lomax's had been formed by his intense focus upon the immediate present, his crystallization on the razor's edge of the momentary impulse. In a sense, he was a kind of supersaturation of himself, the elegant cartouches of his nostrils and the pomaded waves of his blond hair like the decoration on a baroque pavilion, which seems to contain a greater

ambient time than defined by its own space. Suitably pricked, he would probably begin to deliquesce, fizzing out in a brilliant sparkle of contained light.

Ransom opened his valise. "All right, let's have a look. Perhaps I'll find a pearl."

When Lomax settled himself, he examined the ear and syringed it, then pronounced it sound.

"I'm so relieved, Charles, it's your neutral touch. Hippocrates would have been proud of you." He eyed Ransom for a moment, and then continued, his voice more pointed: "While you're here there's another little matter I wanted to raise with you. I've been so busy recently with one thing and another, I haven't had a chance until now." Steadying himself with the cane, he lowered his short legs to the floor, accepting Ransom's hand with a flourish of thanks.

Despite Lomax's pose as an elderly invalid, Ransom could feel the hard muscles tightening under the smooth silk suiting, the supple ease with which he moved off on his dapper feet across the floor. What exactly had kept him busy Ransom could only guess. The white shoes and spotless suit indicated a fairly insulated existence during the previous weeks. Perhaps Lomax saw an opportunity to settle some old scores—although responsible for a concert hall and part of the university in Mount Royal, examples of his Japanese, pagoda-ridden phase some years earlier, Lomax had long been *persona non grata* with the local authorities. No doubt he had been brooding over his revenge for the way they had allowed a firm of commercial builders to complete the second of these projects after local conservative opinion, outraged by the glass minarets and tiled domes rising over their heads, had marched on the city hall. But the officials concerned would by now be safely at the coast, well out of Lomax's reach.

"What's on your mind?" Ransom asked, as Lomax sprayed the air with a few puffs of scent from a gilt plunger on his dressing table.

"Well, Charles . . ." Lomax gazed out at the obscured skyline of the city, from which the smoke rose more and more thickly. To his right the bleached white bed of the river, the channel down its center little wider than a canal, wound its way between the riverside villas. "What's going on out there? You know more about these things than I do."

Ransom gestured at the windows. "It's plain enough.

You really must have been busy if you haven't noticed. The entire balance of nature has—"

Lomax snapped his fingers irritably. "Charles, don't talk to me about the balance of nature! If it wasn't for people like myself we'd all be living in mud huts." He peered darkly at the city. "A good thing, too, judging by that monstrous heap. I meant what's happening over there, in Mount Royal? I take it most people have left by now?"

"Nine out of ten. Probably more. There can't be much future for them there."

"That's where you're wrong. There's a great deal of future there, believe me." He walked toward Ransom, surveying him with his head on one side, like a couturier inspecting a suspect mannequin, about to remove a single pin and expose the whole shabby pretense. "And what about you, Charles? Why are you still hanging around? I can't understand why you haven't set off for the coast with everyone else."

"Can't you, Richard? I think you probably can. Perhaps we both have some unfinished business to clear up."

Lomax nodded sagely. "Well put, with your usual tact and discretion. Of course I understand. I hate to pry, but I care for you in a strange sort of way. You began with so many advantages in life—advantages of character, I mean—and you've deliberately ignored them. There's true nobility, the Roman virtue. Unlike myself; *I* haven't a moral notion in my head." Thoughtfully, he added: "Until now, that is. I feel I may at last be coming into my own. Still, what are you actually going to do? You can't just sit on the mud in your little houseboat."

"As a matter of fact I haven't been there for three or four days," Ransom said. "The roads are rather crowded, I felt I could better come to terms with certain problems here. I'll have to leave eventually."

"You really think you will?" Lomax drawled. "Perhaps. Certainly everything is going to be very changed here, Charles."

Ransom lifted his valise off the floor. "I've grasped that much." He pointed to the dusty villas along the river. "They look like mud huts already. We're moving straight back into the past."

Lomax shook his head. "You've got your sense of direction wrong, my boy. It's the future each of us has to come to terms with now." He straightened up. "Why don't you come and live here?"

"Thank you, Richard, no."

"Why not?" Lomax pressed. "Let's be honest, you don't intend to leave—I can see that in your face a mile off. The servants will be back soon, for one damn good reason, if no other—" his eyes flashed knowingly at Ransom "—they're going to find the sea isn't quite so full of water as they think. Back to old Father Neptune, yes. They'll look after you, and Quilter's a willing lad, full of strange notions, though a bit tiresome at times. You'll be able to moon around, come to terms with Judith—"

Ransom walked to the door. "Richard, I already have done. A long time ago. It's you who's missing the point now."

"Wait!" Lomax scurried after him. "Those of us who stay behind have got to rally together, Charles. I'm damned if I'm going to the sea. All that water—a material I despise, utterly unmalleable, fit only for fountains. Also, you'll be able to help me with a little project of mine."

"What's that?"

"Well. . . ." Lomax turned his face slyly to the city. "A slight divertissement I've been toying over for some time. Rather spectacular, as a matter of fact. I'd like to tell you, Charles, but it's probably best to wait until we're more committed to each other."

"Very wise." Ransom watched Lomax pivoting on his white shoes, obviously delighted with the idea and only just managing to keep it to himself. The red smoke billows rose from the city, reflected in Lomax's suit and pale puckish face, and for a moment transforming him into a dapper grinning Mephistopheles.

"What are you planning to do?" Ransom asked. "Burn the city down?"

"Charles. . . ." A smile crossed Lomax's face like a slow crack around a vase. "That's a suggestion worth bearing in mind. What a pity Quilter isn't here, he adores ideas like that."

"I daresay." Ransom went over to the door.

This time Lomax made no attempt to stop him. "You know, your idea *does* have a noble sweep, it's touched my imagination! Great fires have always been the prelude to even greater futures. What a phoenix!"

Ransom left him rhapsodizing on this notion. At the bottom of the staircase he began to cross the hall. The last

sucking sounds of the tanker's pump came from the swimming pool.

"Quilty! Is that you, Quilty?" A woman's voice called sleepily from the veranda overlooking the swimming pool.

Ransom hesitated, recognizing the sharp, childlike tone. Trying to disguise his footsteps, he walked on toward the door.

"Quilty! What are you creeping around for—oh, who the hell are you?"

Ransom turned and looked back. Miranda Lomax, the architect's sister, her white hair falling like a shawl around her robe, stood barefoot in the entrance to the hall, scrutinizing Ransom with her small eyes. Although twenty years younger than Lomax—though was she really his sister, Ransom sometimes speculated, or a distant cousin, the cast-off partner in an ambiguous *ménage à deux*—her face was an almost perfect replica of Lomax's, with its puckish cheeks, its hard eyes, and the mouth of a corrupt cupid. Her long hair, white as the ash now settling on the lawn outside, made her look prematurely aged, and she was in fact like a wise, evil child. On their occasional meetings, when she arrived, chauffeur-driven, at the hospital on some unspecified errand, he always felt a sharp unease, although superficially she was attractive enough. Perhaps this physical appeal, the gilding of the diseased lily, was what warned him away from her. Lomax's eccentricities were predictable in their way, but Miranda was less self-immersed, casting her eye on the world like a witch waiting for the casual chance.

"Dr. Ransom. . . ." She seemed visibly let down, and turned to go back to the veranda. Then, out of boredom, she beckoned him across the hall. "You look tired, doctor." She slouched off into the veranda, the soiled beachrobe trailing behind her.

The double windows were sealed to keep out the dust, and obscured the green hull of the tanker at the far end of the pool. Despite its length the veranda was claustrophobic, the air dead and unoccupied. A peculiar scent hung about, coming from the foliage of the halfdead tropical plants suspended from the wall, their limp fronds outstretched as if trying to reach Miranda on their last gasp.

Miranda slumped back on one of the wicker divans. A basket of fruit spilled across a glass-topped table. She munched half a grape, peering critically at the pip, then waved Ransom in.

"Come on, doctor, don't stand there trying to look enigmatic. I won't compromise you or anything. Have you seen Quilter?"

"He's hunting your houseboy with a couple of dogs," Ransom said. "You may need me later. I'll be at home." Miranda flicked the grapeskin across the floor. He tapped his valise. "I've got to go."

"Where?" She waved his objections aside contemptuously. "Don't be damn silly, there's nowhere to go. Tell me, doctor, what exactly are you up to in Larchmont?"

"Up to?" Ransom echoed. "I'm trying to hold what's left of my practice together."

As she poked among the half-eaten fruit, Ransom looked down at the dirty cuffs and collar of the beachrobe, and at the soiled top of the slip she wore loosely around her breasts. Already she was beginning to look as derelict and faded as her plants—once she ceased to serve Lomax's purposes he would lose interest in her. Yet her skin was of an almost albino whiteness, unmarked by any freckle or blemish.

She noticed him gazing down at her and gave him an evil smirk, pushing back her hair with one wrist in an almost comically arch gesture. "What's the matter, doctor? Do you want to examine me or something?"

"Most definitely not," Ransom said evenly. He pointed to the tanker by the pool. The mechanic was winding the hose onto its winch. "Is Lomax selling his water?"

"Like hell. I wanted him to pour it into the ground near the highway!" She glanced up sharply. "Has Lomax told you about his plan? I suppose he couldn't contain himself with laughing like a small boy?"

"Do you mean his bonfire party? He invited me to take part."

"Doctor, you should." Miranda looked around with a flourish, the white hair veiling her face like a medusa's crown. "Let me tell you, though, I have a little plan of my own."

"I'm sure you have," Ransom said. "But I'll be leaving for the coast soon."

With a weary shake of the head, Miranda dismissed him. "The coast," she repeated scornfully. "There isn't any coast now. There's only *here*, you'd better face that." When he reached the door she called after him: "Doctor, have you ever seen an army of ants try to cross a stream?"

From the steps Ransom looked out across the dusty roof-

tops. The smoke pall hung over the distant city, but the air was brighter, reflected off the white ash that covered the chalklike bed of the river.

The mechanic opened the door of the tanker and climbed in. He pulled a rifle from the locker behind the seat and propped it in the window. A small stooped man with a patch over one eye, he glanced suspiciously at Ransom.

Ransom walked over to him. "Are you with the army?" he asked. "Have they started to requisition water now?"

"This is a private gift." The driver glanced up at Lomax's suite, as if unsure of his motives. "For Mount Royal Zoo."

Ransom recognized the green overalls. "Who's in charge now? Dr. Barnes?"

"He's gone. Flown like a bird. Only two of us are left."

"Do you mean that some of the animals are still alive?" Ransom asked. "I thought they'd all been destroyed by now."

"Why?" The driver peered down sharply. "Why should they be?"

Surprised by his aggressive tone, Ransom said: "Well, for their sake, if not for ours. This water won't last forever."

The driver leaned on the sill, pointing a sharp finger at Ransom. Although obviously not a man given to argument, he seemed to have been irritated by Ransom's remarks.

"They're all right," he said. He gestured at the dusty landscape around them. "This is what they like. A few weeks from now and maybe we'll be able to let them *out!*"

His one eye gleamed in his twisted face with a wild misanthropic hope.

Chapter 4—The Drowned Aquarium

FOR HALF AN HOUR they drove on toward Mount Royal Zoo, winding in and out of the deserted streets, making detours across the gardens and tennis courts when their way was blocked. Ransom sat forward on the seat beside Whitman, trying to remember the maze of turnings. The zoo was three miles from the center of the city, in what had once been a neighborhood of pleasant, well-tended homes, but the whole area now had the appearance of a derelict shanty

town. The husks of trees and box hedges divided the houses from one another, and in the gardens the smoldering incinerators added their smoke to the ash-filled air. Abandoned cars lay by the roadside, or had been jerked out of the way onto the sidewalks, their doors open. They passed an empty shopping center. The storefronts had been boarded up or sealed with steel grilles, and a few lean dogs with arched backs picked among the burst cartons.

The abrupt transition from Larchmont, which still carried a faint memory of normal life, surprised Ransom. Here, within the perimeter of the city, the exodus had been violent and sudden. Now and then a solitary figure hurried head down between the lines of cars. Once an ancient truck crammed with an entire family's furniture and possessions, parents crowded into the driving cabin with three or four children, jerked across an intersection a hundred yards in front of them and disappeared into the limbo of sidestreets.

Half a mile from the zoo, the main avenue was blocked by a dozen cars jammed around a large articulated truck that had tried to reverse into a narrow drive. Whitman swore and glanced briefly to left and right, and without hesitating swung the tanker off the road into the drive of a small single-story house. They roared past the kitchen windows, crushing a dustbin with the fender, and Ransom saw the startled faces of a gray-haired old couple, a man and his wife, watching them with terrified eyes.

"Did you see them?" Ransom shouted, casting his mind two or three weeks ahead, when the couple would be alone in the abandoned city. "Is no one helping them?"

Whitman ignored the question. Ransom had persuaded the one-eyed driver, against his better judgment, to take him to the zoo, on the pretext that he would be able to add an anti-rabies vaccine to the water. Obsessed with his animals, Whitman seemed to have lost all interest in anyone else.

A white picket fence separated the end of the alley from the drive of the house on the parallel street. A car had stalled between the gates on the edge of the sidewalk. Barely reducing speed, Whitman drove on and flattened the fence. The brittle sticks splintered like a row of matches. Carrying a section on the bumper, they moved past the windows of the house, then slowed fractionally before the impact with the car. Its doors slamming, it was catapulted out into the road, denting the grille of a small truck, then rolled

across the camber and buried its bonnet in the side of an empty convertible. The windscreen frosted and the windows splintered and fell into the roadway.

Somewhere a dog barked plaintively.

"Look out!" Ransom warned.

Fifty yards away two silent figures watched them from behind the corner of a house. Their black shawls, streaked with white ash, covered their squat, broadcheeked faces. They gazed at Ransom with stony eyes, like the members of some primitive monastic order.

"Fishermen's wives," Ransom said. "They're coming down from the lake."

"Forget them," Whitman said. "You can worry when they start moving in packs."

Ransom sat back, realizing for the first time that even if this grim prospect were ever to materialize he himself would not be there. This change of heart had received its impetus from his meeting with Lomax and his sister. There he had accepted that the role of recluse and solitary, meditating on his past sins of omission like a desert hermit on the fringes of an abandoned city, would not be viable. The blighted landscape and its empty violence, its loss of time, would summon its own motives.

These latent elements in Lomax and Miranda were already appearing. Curiously, Lomax was far less frightening than Miranda. Her white hair and utter lack of pity reminded him of the specter that appeared at all times of extreme exhaustion—the yellow-locked, leprous-skinned lamia who had pursued the Ancient Mariner. Perhaps this phantom embodied certain archaic memories of a time, whether past or future, when fear and pain were the most valuable emotions, and their exploitation into the most perverse forms the sole imperative.

It was this sense of remorseless caprice, with its world of infinite possibilities unrestrained by any moral considerations, which had its expression in the figure of the white-haired witch. As he watched the abandoned houses stretching along the ash-covered streets, and heard the restive cries of the animals in the zoo as they skirted its wall, he saw an image of Miranda squatting in her filthy robe by some hearth among the smoking rubble, her old crone's face like a perverted cherub's.

Yet Lomax's references to the future, and his own confusion of the emerging landscape with the past, tantalized him.

These last days in Larchmont seemed to offer him a choice of direction, but already he sensed that Lomax had been right. If the future, and his whole sense of time, were haunted by images of his own death, by the absence of identity beyond both his birth and grave, why did these chimeras not coincide more closely with the terrifying vision of Miranda Lomax? He listened to the baying of the animals, deep raucous cries like tearing fabric, thinking to himself: they'll wake the dead.

They approached the gates of the zoo. Whitman stopped the tanker at the metal barrier lowered across the service entrance. Ransom climbed out and raised the boom, and the tanker drove on behind the cages to the pumphouse.

Ransom walked across the central promenade of the zoo. Some twenty pink flamingos huddled together in a shallow trough at one end of the rockpool, the water sunk to a pallid slush between their feet. Sheets of matting covered the wire mesh over the pool, but the birds fretted nervously, opening their beaks silently at Ransom.

A monotonous chorus of bellows and grunts sounded around the zoo, the visceral cries reflected off the concrete pens. The smaller cages housing the ornamental birds and monkeys were empty. In one of the stalls a dead camel lay on the floor. Nearby, a large Syrian bear prowled restlessly about its cage, arms and head rolling around the bars. A hyena stared at Ransom like a blind pig, emitting an endless whine. Next to it a pair of cheetahs flicked around their cages, their small killing heads swiveling as Ransom passed.

An attempt had been made to feed and water the animals. Clumps of monkey meat lay on the floors, and there were a few pails of water, but the cages were as dry and arid as desert caves.

Ransom stopped in the entrance to the lion house. A roar of noise greeted him, striking his head like a fist. The five white-haired lions—two pairs and a single older male—were about to be fed, and their roars sounded like the slamming of a steel mill. Striding up and down the narrow aisle between the rail and the bars was Catherine Austen. Her white shirt and riding breeches were stained with dirt and perspiration, but she moved without any sign of fatigue, hoisting a pail of meat under the noses of the lions as she tossed the gobbets through the bars. For a moment Ransom thought she was tormenting them, but the lions bounded up and down, catching the meat in their jaws.

"Come on, Sarah, up, up! You're as slow as a cow! No, Hector, here!" At the end cage, where the single lion, a blind old male with a ragged mane and a hide of dulled yellow, was swinging left and right like a demented bear, hoarse with bellowing, she heaped the meat through the bars almost into his jaws.

As they gulped the meat down Catherine moved back along the cages, rattling her pail against the bars. Recognizing Ransom, she beckoned him toward her, then began to rake out the cages with a long-handled broom, tripping playfully at the lions' legs.

"Who's this?" she called over her shoulder. "The veterinary?"

Ransom put his valise down on a bench and walked over to her. "Your good friend Whitman gave me a lift. He's brought Lomax's water."

Catherine pulled her broom from the cage with a flourish. "Good for him. I wasn't going to trust Lomax until I saw it come. Tell Whitman to pump it into the reserve tank."

Ransom moved along the cages, the smell and energy of the lions quickening his blood. Catherine Austen seemed to have cast away all her lethargy and moodiness.

"I'm glad to see you, doctor. Have you come to help?"

Ransom took the broom from her and leaned it against the wall. "In a sense."

Catherine surveyed the floor, which was strewn with straw and splinters of bone. "It may look a mess, but I think Father would have been proud of me."

"Perhaps he would. How did you persuade Barnes to leave you here?"

"He worked for Father years ago. Whitman and I convinced him that we should stay on and put them down one at a time, so there wouldn't be any panic."

"Are you going to?"

"What? Of course not. I know we can't hope to keep them all alive, but we'll try with the mammals. The lions we'll save right to the end."

"And then?"

Catherine turned on him, controlling her temper. "What are you trying to say, doctor? I'd rather not think about it!"

"I should." Ransom stepped over to her. "Catherine, be sensible for a moment. Lomax hasn't given this water to you out of charity—he obviously intends to use the animals for his own purposes. As for Whitman, the man is out of his

mind. Perhaps zoos need people like him, but he's a menace on his own. It's time to leave, or you'll come here one morning and find all the cages open."

Catherine wrenched her arm away from him. "Doctor, for heaven's sake—! Can't you understand? It might *rain* tomorrow, much as you may hate the prospect. I don't intend to desert these animals, and as long as there's food and water I certainly can't destroy them." Lowering her voice, she added: "Besides, I don't think Whitman would let me."

She turned away and touched the cage of the blind lion.

"He probably wouldn't," Ransom said. "Remember, though, that here, unlike the world outside, you still have bars between you and the animals."

Quietly, Catherine said: "One day you're going to be surprised, doctor. If I was a little less of a coward I'd show you."

Ransom was about to remonstrate with her again when something moved behind him. Silhouetted against the sunlight, his leering face watching them, was the faunlike figure who had already crept up behind him once that day.

Ransom stepped toward the door, but the youth darted away.

"What the devil is he up to here? Has he been hanging around before?"

"Who was that? I didn't see him."

"Lomax's familiar—Quilter." A few feet from Ransom the lions munched at the joints of meat, jaws tearing through the bony shafts. Quilter's appearance had abruptly let another dimension into the uncertain future of the zoo.

Hands in pockets, Catherine followed him into the sunlight. "Tomorrow I'm moving in here, so I won't see you again, doctor. By the way, that houseboat of yours hardly looks as if it's going anywhere."

"I intend to put a stronger motor on it." The sky was still stained by the plumes of red and black smoke billowing upwards from the city. He saw Quilter moving past the entrance to the aviary, a circular wire-topped building that backed on to the pumphouse.

Ransom managed a faint smile. "I'm glad you've found yourself at last," he said.

She slipped her arm through his. "Why don't you join me, doctor? We'll teach the lions to hunt in packs."

Then she waved and walked away among the cages.

Clasping the valise, Ransom set off across the central promenade. He stopped behind the flamingo pool. Around him the animals patrolled their cages in the bright sun. The water tanker stood by the pumphouse, its hose trailing into a manifold. Whitman had gone off to the living quarters near the gates.

A bird's sharp cry pierced the air, ending in a flat squawk. Ransom walked along the wall of the pool, searching the empty passages between the cages. He stepped out into the open and moved quickly toward the pumphouse, darting into the shade below the roofs of the cages. The Syrian bear swayed along the bars after him, trying to embrace him with its ponderous arms. The cheetahs' tails flicked like whips, their cold eyes cutting at Ransom.

He stepped into the entrance to the aquarium. Faint sunlight filtered through the matting laid on the frosted glass overhead, a crack here and there illuminating a corner of one of the tanks. The usual liquid glimmer had been stilled, and there was a sharp tang in the air. Ransom moved between the lines of tanks toward the service door beyond the alligator pit, then paused as his eyes cleared in the darkness. Suspended in the dim air around him, their pearly bodies rotating slowly like the vanes of elaborate mobiles, were the corpses of hundreds of fish. Poisoned by their own wastes, they hung weightlessly in the gloomy water, their blank eyes glowing like phosphors, mouths agape. In the smaller tanks, the tropical fish effloresced like putrid jewels, their colored tissues dissolving into threads of gossamer. Gazing at them, Ransom had a sudden vision of the sea by the coastal beaches, as clouded and corpse-strewn as the water in the tanks, the faces of the drowned eddying past each other.

Quickly he crossed the aquarium and stepped into the service unit. A narrow yard led him into the rear of the pumphouse. The machinery was silent, the large flywheel stationary in its pit. Masking his footsteps, he approached the open double doors, through which he could see the green hull of the water-tanker.

Standing with his back to Ransom, inspecting with interest the damp hose leading into the manifold, was Quilter. He wore the same filthy trousers stained with wine and grease, but he now sported an expensive gold and purple paisley shirt. Suspended from his belt by a piece of coarse string fastened around its severed neck, was the dead carcass

of a peacock, its limp jeweled tail sweeping behind him like a train.

A fly circled the air above his squat head, then alighted on his neck. Absentmindedly, Quilter raised his right hand, and then slapped the insect into a red smudge. He picked thoughtfully at the remains.

Ransom stepped out into the sunlight, and walked up behind him. With his right hand he held Quilter's arm tightly above the elbow.

Startled, Quilter looked around, his liquid eyes rolling beneath his dented brows.

"Doctor—!"

"Hello, Quilter." Gripping the muscular biceps, an immense bulge of muscle, Ransom glanced between the wheels of the tanker for any signs of the Alsatians. "Is this your afternoon off? I didn't know you enjoyed zoos."

"Doctor. . . ." Quilter gazed down at the fingers clenched around his arm, a puzzled frown on his face. "Doctor, I don't like—" He jerked his arm away, then lashed out at Ransom with the edge of his hand. Ready for this, Ransom sidestepped, knocking Quilter offbalance with his elbow. He clouted him across the shoulders with the valise. Quilter sat down heavily on the concrete, the peacock's tail flaring between his legs. For a moment he seemed stunned. Then a rheumy smile struggled fitfully onto his deformed face.

His point made, Ransom leaned against the side of the tanker, washing his hand in the water dribbling from the hose.

"You should be more careful, Quilter. Now what are you up to here?"

Quilter shook his head slowly, apparently mystified by Ransom's behavior. He pointed to the water on Ransom's fingers. "One day, doctor, you'll drown in that much water."

"Keep to the point. What are you doing so far from home?"

Quilter gazed at him guilelessly. He stood up, hitching the peacock onto his hip, then inspected his shirt with great care. "Lomax told me to follow you, tell him everything you did."

"Interesting." Ransom pondered this. The frankness could be discounted. No doubt these were Lomax's instructions, but the real point of Quilter's remark would lie elsewhere. "As a matter of fact Lomax invited me to stay with him,"

he said, adding with deliberate irony: "You'll be working for me then, Quilter."

Quilter regarded him skeptically, his toad's face full of bile. "I'm working for Miss Miranda," he said.

"*That* makes more sense." Ransom watched Quilter's face as it started to quiver, breaking into a mirthless ribald laugh. The scarred lips shook silently, the mole on his left cheek dancing. Repelled by this grimacing parody of a human being, Ransom turned to go, hoping to draw Quilter away from Catherine Austen and the zoo.

"I wish you both luck," he called back over his shoulder. "You have a lot in common."

Quilter stared after him, his eyes suddenly glazed, fingers absently feeling the bloodstreaked neck of the peacock hanging from his belt. Then he came to, and with virulent energy hurled after Ransom: "We'll have more later, doctor! Much more!"

Outside the zoo, Ransom waited before crossing the street. He rested against the trunk of a dead plane tree, watching the deserted houses. Quilter's absurd words, crazier than even he could understand, echoed in Ransom's ears. Normally the youth would have tittered at the grotesque implications of the remark, but his obvious conviction in this new realm of possibility open to him made Ransom suspect that he was at last out of his depth. Perhaps the boy was regaining his sanity —no lunatic would ever dream up such an implausible fantasy.

Retracing the route Whitman had taken, Ransom set off across the street. The houses were empty, the garbage fires drifting from the gardens. The city was silent, the huge billows of the burning oil fires still rising into the air over his head. A door swung open, reflecting the sun with a sharp stab. Somewhere to his left there was a clatter of cans as a lost dog overturned a refuse bin.

Barely filtered by the smoke, the sunlight burned across the ashy dust, the flints of quartz stinging his eyes. After walking for a quarter of an hour, Ransom regretted not bringing a flask of water. The dust filled his mouth and throat with the dry taste of burning garbage. Leaning on the fender of a car, he massaged his neck, and debated whether to break into one of the houses.

A short way ahead he passed an open front door. Pushing back the gate, he walked up the path to the porch.

Hidden by the shade, he glanced up and down the empty street. Through the door he could see into the living room and kitchen. Cardboard cartons were stacked in the hall, and unwanted suitcases lay across the armchairs.

He was about to step through the door when he noticed a small sign drawn in the dust beside the path a few feet from him. The single loop, like a child's caricature of a fish, had been casually traced with a stick lying on the path nearby.

Ransom watched the houses around him. The sign had been made in the last few minutes, but the street was silent. He walked off down the path. His first reaction was to blame Quilter for the sign, but he then remembered the two fishermen's women in black shawls whom he had seen from the tanker, and the strange congregation at the church that morning. The sign outside the church had been the same simple loop, by coincidence the rebus used by the first Christians to identify themselves to one another. The fishermen's sullen expressions as they listened to the Reverend Johnstone's sermon on Jonah and the gourd were probably in many ways like those on the pale obsessed faces of the primitive fishermen who left their nets by the Sea of Galilee.

A hundred yards away a black-suited figure moved behind a wall. Ransom stopped, waiting for the man to come out into the road. Quickening his pace, he set off along the avenue again, ignoring a door that opened somewhere behind him. Deliberately avoiding the route he and Whitman had taken, he turned left at the first intersection, then right again into the next street. Behind him, the ash drifted down across the roads, lightly covering his footprints.

Five minutes later he could hear around him the muted running steps of the men following his path. Hidden behind the intervening walls and houses, they moved along with him, extending in two wide arcs on either side, like a group of small boats tracking a sounding whale. The muffled footsteps padded across the empty porches with the faint creak of dry wood. Ransom crouched down and rested between two cars. Behind him the smoke plumes rising from the gardens were disturbed and broken.

He strode on again, pausing only at the crossroads. Despite his progress, Larchmont still seemed to lie two miles away beyond the dusty rooftops, as if his invisible pursuers were steering him in a circle. Wondering why they should

bother to follow him, he remembered Catherine Austen's gibe—perhaps the fishermen marooned ashore by the dying lake and river were hunting for some kind of scapegoat?

He slowed down to regain his breath, and then made a last effort. He broke into a run and turned left and right at random, darting in and out of the cars in the hope of throwing off his pursuers. To his relief they seemed to drop behind. He turned again into the next street, and then found that he had blundered into a small cul-de-sac.

Retracing his steps, Ransom saw two black-suited figures scuttle through a gap in a ruined wall. He raced along the white dust covering the sidewalk, but suddenly the road was full of running men, vaulting across the cars like acrobats. A large net lay over the sidewalk. As he approached, it rose into the air, cast at him off the ground. Ransom turned and clambered between two cars. In the center of the road half a dozen men appeared around him, arms outstretched as they feinted with their nets, watching his feet with intent eyes. Their black serge suits were streaked with ash.

Ransom tried to break through them, using his weight to shoulder two of the small men aside. A net was thrown over his face like a heavy shawl. Knocking it away with the valise, he tripped in the tarry skeins underfoot, cast at him like lassoes from all directions. As he fell the fishermen closed around him, and the nets caught him before he could touch the ground. Swept off his feet, he was tumbled onto his back in the huge hammock, then lifted into the air on a dozen arms as if he were about to be tossed to the sun. Pulling at the thick mesh, he shouted at the men, and caught a last confused glimpse of their thin pointed faces below their caps. Then there was a wild scramble across the road, and his shoulders struck the ground. Swept up again, he collided head-on with the fender of a car.

Illuminated by the tinted sky, the curved beams rose above him on either side, reaching inwards to the open space over his head like the ribs of an immense stranded whale. Lying back on the mattress of old rags, Ransom counted the huge girders, for a moment imagining that he was indeed lying within the bowels of some beached leviathan, its half-rotten carcass forgotten on the shore.

Between the beams the lower sections of the hull-plates were intact, and walled him into the hold. Beyond his feet

was the prow of the ship, one of the old herring-trawlers in the breakers' yards somewhere along the river toward Mount Royal. Metal ladders reached up the outer sides of the hull, and the floor was covered with piles of rusty metal sheeting, portholes, and sections of bulkhead. In the turning afternoon light the mournful wreck was filled by a last fleeting glow.

Ransom sat up on one elbow, feeling the grazes on his cheeks and forehead. He remembered the nets closing around him in the hot airless road, like the capes of bullfighters called out to the streets behind their arena to play some huge fish found leaping in the dust. He had been carried half-conscious down to the docks and tipped into the trawler's hold. Through a gap in the port side of the hull he could see the roof of a warehouse, a collection of gantries leaning against it. The smells of paint and tar drifted across the air.

Behind him was the stern bridge of the trawler, reaching up like a cliff into the sky. Two life belts hung like punctured eyes from the rail on either side of the bridge-house. Below, a faint light came from one of the cabins. There were no sounds of the fishermen, but a single figure patrolled the deck, a long gaff in one hand.

Ransom pulled himself on to his knees. He wiped his hands on the tags of cloth sticking from the mattress. The trawler had been beached in a small undredged dock below the former river level, and the wet mud had seeped through the keel plates. The dark cakes lay around him like lumps of lava. He stood up weakly, his head drumming from the mild concussion, and groped slowly across the floor of the hold. He paused behind the mast-brace, listening to a vague noise from the streets ashore. Then he felt his way down the starboard side of the hull, searching for a loose plate. On the bridge, the look-out patrolled the stern, watching the smoke-fires lifting from the city.

The noise drew nearer, the sounds of men running. Ransom went back to the mattress and lay down. The footsteps raced past the warehouse, and the group of ten or so fishermen reached the wharf and one after the other crossed the wooden gangway to the bridge deck. Between them they carried a large bundle in their nets. They leaned over the rail and lowered it down into the hold, steering it over the mattress. Then they released the nets and tipped a half-conscious man onto the mattress.

The bosun in charge of the hunting party came to the

rail and peered down at their latest catch. A stocky broad-shouldered man of about thirty, he was distinguished from the others by the mop of blond hair over his plump face. Ransom let his jaw hang slackly and fixed his eyes on one of the beams. Two feet from him an old gray-haired tramp snuffled and coughed, moaning to himself.

The blond man nodded to his men. They hauled up their nets and slung them over their shoulders.

A door opened in the bridge-house, revealing the light of a lantern. A tall man with a dark wasted face stepped slowly onto the deck, looking around him with a strong gaze. His black suit was buttoned to the neck, emphasizing the length of his arms and chest.

"Jonas—!" The blond man strode across the deck and reached out to the open door.

"Don't fear the light, Saul." The tall man pushed the arm away. After a pause he slowly closed the door, then moved forward among his men. He nodded to each of them in turn, as if approving their presence on his quarterdeck. In turn they glanced up at him with deferential nods, fingering the nets on their shoulders as if aware that they should be about some useful task. Only the blond-haired Saul seemed to resent his authority. He hung about irritably behind Jonas, tapping the rail as if looking for something else to complain about.

Jonas crossed the bridge and stood by the fore-rail. His slow movements along the deck were full of a kind of deliberate authority, as if this were the largest vessel he had ever commanded and he was carefully measuring himself against it, taking no chances that a sudden swell might not topple him from his bridge. His face had the tanned hardness of beaten leather, drained of all moisture by sun and wind. As he looked into the hold, his long arms reaching out to the rail, Ransom immediately recognized the marked slope of his forehead and the sharp arrowlike cheekbones. His eyes had the overintense look of some half-educated migrant preacher constantly distracted by the need to find food and shelter.

He nodded at the supine figures of Ransom and the drunken tramp. "Good. Two more to join us in the search. Now back to your nets and sweep the streets. There'll be good catches for the next two nights."

The men clambered to their feet, but the blond-haired

bosun shouted: "Jonas! We don't need the old men now!" He waved contemptuously at the hold. "They're dead bait, they'll just weigh us down!" He launched into a half-coherent tirade, to which Jonas listened impassively, head bowed as if trying to control some inner compulsive nervousness. The men sat down again, grumbling to each other, some agreeing with Saul's complaints with forceful nods, others shifting about uncertainly. The loyalties of the group swerved from one man to the other, held together only by the unstated elements that they all sensed in Jonas' isolated figure.

"Saul!" The tall captain silenced him. He had huge, long hands, which he used like an actor. Watching him, Ransom noticed the calculation in all his movements, stepping about on the high stage of the bridge. "Saul, we reject no one. They need our help now. Remember, there is nothing here."

"But, Jonas—!"

"Saul!"

The blond bosun gave up, nodding to himself with a ticlike jerk. As the men shuffled along the deck and climbed down the gangway, he gave Jonas a bitter backward glance.

Left alone, Jonas gazed across the darkening streets, watching the men go off, nets over their shoulders, with the narrow compassion of a man born into a hard, restricted world. He paced the bridge of his skeleton ship, looking up at the smoke billows rising from the city as if debating whether to trim his sails before a storm.

The old tramp moaned on the mattress beside Ransom, blood running from one ear. His overcoat was stained by some pink fluid that Ransom guessed to be antifreeze. Now and then he woke for a brief, lucid interval, and then sank off again, gazing at the sky with wild, sad eyes.

Ransom stood up and groped across the hold. Above him Jonas came to the rail and beckoned him forwards, smiling at Ransom as if he had been waiting for him to wake. He called the look-out, and a ladder was lowered into the hold.

Painfully, Ransom managed to climb halfway to the rail. Jonas' strong hands reached down and seized his arms. He lifted Ransom onto the deck, then pressed him to sit down.

Ransom pointed to the tramp. "He's injured. Can you bring him up here? I'm a doctor, I'll do what I can."

"Of course." Jonas waved a long arm at the look-out. "Go down and we'll lift him out." As he held the ladder

he said to Ransom: "A doctor, good. You'll come with us, we need everyone we can find for the search."

Ransom leaned on the rail, feeling his head slowly clear. "Search for where? What are you looking for?"

"For a new river." Jonas gestured with a sweep of his long arms, encompassing the fading skyline and half the land. "Somewhere there. My bosun tells them to laugh at me, but I have *seen* it!" He seemed to half-believe his own boast.

The sounds of running feet came from the distant streets. Ransom listened to them approach. He waited as the lookout climbed down into the hold, a net over one shoulder. Within a minute any chance of escape would have gone. Ten feet away was the gangway. Beside the warehouse a small alley led away into the nearby streets.

Jonas leaned over the rail, his long body bent like a gallows. The tramp lay in the cradle of the net, and Jonas' huge arms lifted him slowly into the air, like a fisherman hauling in an immense catch.

Ransom stood up, as if offering to help, then turned and ran for the gangway. As the boards sprang below his feet Jonas cried out, as if trying to warn him of his error, but Ransom was across the wharf and racing up the alley.

Behind the warehouse he saw the fishermen coming down the street, a struggling man caught in the oustretched nets between them. At their head was the blond-haired bosun. He saw Ransom and broke into a run, his short hooked arms flashing in front of him.

Ransom ran on past the houses, but within thirty yards Saul was at his shoulder, his feet kicking at Ransom's as they swerved in and out of the cars.

Suddenly two brown whirling forms leapt out from behind a wall, with a flash of teeth hurled themselves on the bosun. Out of breath, Ransom ran forward for another fifty yards, then stopped behind a car as the two Alsatians snarled and jumped at Saul's head, tearing at his swinging fists.

"Doctor! This way!"

Ransom turned to see the bright-eyed figure of Quilter, the peacock hanging from his waist, waving at him further along the road. Leaving the yelping dogs, Ransom limped forward after the youth as he ran on, the tail speckling at his heels.

Lost in a maze of dusty streets, he followed Quilter across

the fences and gardens, sometimes losing sight of the faun-like figure as it leapt through the drifting smoke of the refuse fires. Once, searching about in a walled garden into which he had blundered, he found the youth gazing down at the half-burned carcass of a large dog lying across a heap of embers, his face staring at it with childlike seriousness.

Finally they stepped over a low parapet on to the bank of the river, the distant span of the motorbridge on their left. Below them, across the white bed of the channel, Philip Jordan stood in the stern of his skiff, leaning watchfully on his pole. Quilter strode down the bank, sinking to his knees through the dry crust, the peacock's tail brushing the dust up into Ransom's face.

Ransom followed him down the slope, pausing by a stranded lighter. The sun was now half-hidden by the western horizon, and the smoke plumes overhead were darker and more numerous, but the basin of the river gleamed with an almost spectral whiteness.

"Ransom! Come on, doctor! You can rest later."

Surprised by this brusque call, Ransom looked round at Philip Jordan, uneasy at this association between Quilter, the grotesque Caliban of all his nightmares, and the calm-eyed Ariel of the river. He walked down to the skiff, his feet sinking in the damper mud by the water's edge. As the evening light began to fade, the burnt yellow of the old lion's skin shone in Philip Jordan's arrowlike face. Impatient to leave, he watched Ransom with remote eyes.

Quilter sat alone in the stern, a water-borne Buddha, the shadows of the oily surface mottling his face. As Ransom stepped aboard, he let out two piercing whistles. They echoed away across the bank, reflected against the concrete parapet. One of the dogs appeared. Tail high, it sprang down onto the bank, in a flurry of dust raced to the skiff, leaping aboard over Ransom's shoulder. Settling itself between Quilter's feet, it whined at the dusk. Quilter waited, watching the parapet. A frown briefly crossed his face. The Alsation whined again softly. Quilter nodded to Philip Jordan, and the craft surged away across the darkening mirror of the surface, the peacock's tail sweeping above the water like a jeweled sail.

Three miles away, the intervals in its skyline closed by the dusk, the dark bulk of Mount Royal below the smoke plumes like a somber volcano.

Chapter 5—The Burning Altar

THE NEXT MORNING, after a night of uproar and violence, Ransom began his preparations for departure. Shortly before dawn, when the sounds of gunfire finally subsided, he fell asleep on the settee in the sitting room, the last embers of the burnt-out house across the avenue spurting into the air like clouds of fireflies.

He had reached home at seven o'clock, exhausted after his escape from Jonas and the fishermen. The lakeside town was quiet, a few torches glowing as the Reverend Johnstone's militia patrolled the darkened streets, methodically closing the doors of the abandoned cars and putting out the refuse fires in the gardens. Only Lomax's house showed any lights from its windows.

After taking off his suit, Ransom filled the bath, then knelt over the edge and drank slowly from his hands, massaging his face and neck with the tepid water. He thought of Philip Jordan, swinging the long prow of the skiff between the stranded hulks, the reflection of his narrow face carried away in the dark water like the ghosts of all the other illusions that had sustained Ransom during the previous weeks. The unspoken link between Philip Jordan and the ambiguous figure of Quilter, brooding over his lost dog as he fingered the luminous fan of the peacock's tail, seemed to exclude him from Larchmont even more than the approaching fishermen with their quest for a lost river. All this made him wonder what his own role might become, and the real nature of the return of the desert to the land. As Ransom stepped from the boat he had tried to speak to Philip, but the youth avoided his eyes. With a guttural noise in his throat, he had leaned on his pole and pivoted the boat away into the darkness, leaving Ransom with a last image of Quilter smiling at him like a white idol, his ironic call drifting across the oily water.

For an hour Ransom lay in the bath, resolving to leave as soon as he had recovered. Soothed by the warm water, he was almost asleep when there was a muffled explosion in the distance, and an immense geyser of flame shot up into

the night sky. The shaft of glowing air illuminated the tiles in the darkened bathroom, throwing Ransom's shadow across the door as he climbed from the water. For the next few minutes he watched the fire burning strongly like a discharging furnace. As it subsided, the softer light reflected the outbuildings of a small paint factory half a mile from the zoo.

An unsettled silence followed. Dressing himself in a clean suit, Ransom watched from the window. The Reverend Johnstone's house remained quiet, but Lomax's mansion was a hive of activity. Lights flared in the windows and moved up and down the verandas. Someone carried a huge multiple-armed candlestick on to the roof and lifted it high into the air overhead as if inspecting the stars. Torches flickered across the lawn. More and more oil-lamps were lit, until the white rotunda of the house seemed to be bathed by rows of spotlights.

Ransom was preparing a small meal for himself in the kitchen when a brilliant firework display began in Lomax's garden. A score of rockets rose over the house and exploded into colored umbrellas, catherine wheels spun frantically, bursting into cascades of sparks. Roman candles tied to the trees around the garden poured a pink mushy light into the darkness, setting fire to part of the hedge. In the swerving light Ransom could see the white figures of Lomax and his sister moving about on the roof.

After the initial crescendo, the display continued for ten minutes, the rockets falling away into the darkness toward the city. Whatever Lomax's exact motives, the timing and extravagance of the show convinced Ransom that he was trying to draw attention to himself, that the display was some sort of challenge to anyone still hiding in the deserted outskirts of the city.

Listening to the rockets explode and fall, their harsh sighs carried away over the rooftops, Ransom noticed that the retorts were louder, mingled with hard cracking detonations that rocked the windows with the impact of real explosives. Immediately the firework display ended, and the lights in Lomax's house were smothered. A few cannisters burned themselves out on the lawn.

The whine and crack of the gunfire continued. The shots approached Larchmont, coming at ten-second intervals, as if a single weapon were being used. Ransom went out into the drive. A bullet whipped fifty feet overhead with a thin whoop, lost across the river. The Reverend Johnstone's jeep sped past

down the avenue, its lights out, then stopped at the first corner. Three men jumped down and ran between the trees toward the church.

Five minutes later, as he followed them down the road, Ransom could hear the sounds of the organ above the gunfire. The faint chorale droned and echoed, interrupted by the fusillade of shots. Ransom crouched behind the trees, watching as two of Johnstone's men knelt by an overturned car, firing at the porch of the church. As they were driven back, Ransom crossed the road and hid himself in one of the empty houses. The organ continued to play above the sporadic gunfire, and Ransom saw the blond-haired Saul, rifle in hand, looking back uncertainly as he beckoned his men between the cars None of the other fishermen were armed, and they carried staves torn from the fences along the sidewalk.

Ransom waited until they had gone past, and then worked his way between the houses. He slipped through the narrow alleys behind the garages, climbing in and out of open windows until he reached the house facing the church. From the edge of the road he could see through the open doors. The music had stopped, and the tall figure of Jonas leaned from the pulpit, his long arms gesturing to the three men hunched together in the front pew. In the light of the single oil-lamp, his face flickered as if in some high fever, his hoarse voice trying to shout down the gunfire in the streets.

One of the men stood up and left him, and Ransom saw the spire of the church illuminated against the night sky. Smoke raced along the eaves, and thin bright tongues of flame furled themselves around the tower. Jonas looked up, halted in the middle of his sermon, his hands clutching at the flames racing among the vaulting. The two remaining men turned and ran out, ducking their heads below the smoke.

Ransom waited until they had gone, and then left the house and crossed the road. The fire in the church burned along the length of the nave, the timbers falling on to the pews. As he ran down the path to the vestry door, the blond-haired bosun darted from the porch, his face and chest lit by the flames as he stopped in the center of the road to look back at the church. In his right hand, he held the broken shaft of a wooden gaff. Raising it into the air, he gazed up at the collapsing hulk of the church like some triumphant harpooner watching his quarry go down in a burning sea.

With a final derisive shout, his mouth twisted like a scar, he turned and ran off into the darkness.

Shielding his head, Ransom stepped through the chancel. In the nave the falls of red-hot charcoal were setting fire to the prayer books in the pews. Burning gasoline covered the lectern and altar, and flared from a pool around the base of the pulpit.

Slumped inside the pulpit was the broken figure of Jonas, his arms and legs sticking out awkwardly. Propped on to his temples was a strange headpiece, the severed head of a huge fish taken from the tank of dead sturgeons at the zoo. The metal barb of the gaff Ransom had seen in Saul's hand was embedded in its skull. As Ransom pulled Jonas from the burning pulpit, the fish's head, like a grotesque silver miter, toppled forward into his arms.

Ransom dragged the barely conscious man through the vestry and out into the cool air of the churchyard. He laid him down among the gravestones, wiping the fish's blood off his bruised forehead. Jonas started upright from the grave, his long hand seizing Ransom's arm. His mouth worked in a silent gabble, as if he were discharging the whole of his sermon, his eyes staring at Ransom in the light of the consumed church.

Then he subsided into a deep sleep, his lungs seizing at the air. As his men returned along the street, Ransom left him and made his way home.

For the next hour, as Ransom watched from an upstairs window, gunfire sounded intermittently through the streets. At times it would retreat between the houses, then come back almost to his doorstep. Once there were shouts in the avenue, and Ransom saw a man with a rifle running by at full speed, and a group of men in front of the Reverend Johnstone's house driving cars up to barricade the sidewalk. Then the noise subsided again.

It was during one of these intermissions, when Ransom went downstairs to sleep, that the two houses across the road were set on fire. The light illuminated the whole avenue, flaring through the windows of the lounge. Two of Johnstone's men approached as the flames burned through the roofs, and then backed away from the heat.

Watching from the window, Ransom caught a glimpse in the brilliant light of a squat, hunchbacked figure standing by the edge of the lawn between the houses, almost within

the circle of flames. Pacing up and down beside it was a lithe catlike creature on a leash, with a small darting head and the movements of a nervous whip.

At noon, when Ransom woke, the streets were silent again. Diagonally across the avenue were the remains of the two houses burned down during the night, the charred roofbeams jutting from the walls. Ransom went into the kitchen and ate a light breakfast of salad and coffee. When he left the house five minutes later, he saw a large truck standing outside the Reverend Johnstone's drive.

Ransom walked down to it, glancing into the empty houses. Larchmont was now a terminal zone, its deserted watch-towers and rooftops turning white under the cloudless sky. The lines of cars, some with their windows smashed, lay along both sides of the road, covered by the ash settling from the refuse fires. The dried trees and hedges splintered in the hot sky. The smoke from the city was heavier, and a dozen thick billows rose into the air.

The truck by the Johnstones' house was loaded to its roof with camping equipment and crates of supplies. A shotgun rested on the seats by the tailboard. Edward Gunn knelt by the rear bumper, shackling on a small two-wheeled water trailer. He nodded at Ransom and picked up the shotgun, pocketing his keys as he walked back to the drive.

"There goes another one."

He pointed into the haze toward the city. Billows of white smoke mushroomed over the roofs, followed by tips of eager flame, almost colorless in the hot sunlight. There was no sound, but to Ransom the burning house seemed only a few hundred yards away.

"Are you leaving?" Ransom asked.

Gunn nodded. "You'd better come too, doctor." His beaked face was thin and gray, like a tired bird's. "There's nothing to stay for now. Last night they burned down the church."

"Perhaps that was an accident," Ransom said.

"No, doctor. They heard the minister's sermon yesterday. *That's* all they left for us." With a bitter gesture he indicated the second truck being readied for departure further up the drive. Behind it a large motorlaunch sat on a trailer. Fastened amidships was the battered wooden frame of the Reverend Johnstone's pulpit, its partly charred rail rising into the air like the launch's bridge. Frances and Vanessa Johnstone stood beside it.

Their father emerged from the house, a clean surplice over one arm. He wore knee-length leather boots, and a tweed jacket with elbow and shoulder patches, as if he were about to set off on some arduous missionary safari. Over his shoulder he bellowed: "All right, everybody! All aboard!"

Julia, the eldest of the three daughters, stepped up behind Ransom. "Father's becoming the old sea dog already," she said. She took Ransom's arm, smiling at him with her bland gray eyes. "What about you, Charles? Are you coming with us? Father," she called out, "don't you think we should have a ship's doctor with us?"

Preoccupied, Johnstone went off indoors. "Sybil, time to go, dear!" Standing in the hall, he gazed around the house, at the shrouded furniture and the unwanted books stacked on the floor. For a moment an expression of numbness and uncertainty came over his strong face. Then he murmured something to himself.

Ransom stood by the launch, Julia's hand still on his arm. Vanessa Johnstone was watching him with distant eyes, her pale hands hidden in the pockets of her slacks. Despite the sunlight on her face, her skin remained as white as it had been during the most critical days of her long illness four years earlier. Like many victims of polio, she wore her black hair undressed to her shoulders, the single parting emphasizing the oval symmetry of her face. The metal support on her right leg was hidden by her slacks, and she seemed only slightly smaller than her sisters.

Ransom helped her into the truck.

"Goodbye, Charles," she said. "I hope everything is all right with you."

"Don't write me off yet. I may be coming with you."

"Of course."

Gunn and his wife made their way down the drive, carrying a wicker hamper between them. Ransom said good-by to Sybil Johnstone, and then went over to the front door, where the clergyman was searching for his keys.

"Wish us luck, Charles." He locked the door and walked with Ransom to the launch. "Do watch that crazy fellow Lomax."

"I will. I'm sorry about the church."

"Not at all." Johnstone shook his head vigorously, his eyes strong again. "It was painful, Charles, but necessary. Don't blame those men. They did exactly as I bade them —'God prepared a worm and it smote the gourd.' "

He looked up at the charred pulpit in the launch, and then at the drained white basin of the river, winding toward the city and the distant smoke clouds. The wind had turned, and carried them off toward the north, the collapsing ciphers leaning against the sky.

"Which way are you going?" Ransom asked.

"To the coast." Johnstone patted the bows of the launch. "You know, I sometimes think we ought to accept the challenge and set off north.... There's probably a great river waiting for us somewhere out there, brown water and green lands—"

Ransom watched from the center of the pavement as they set off a few minutes later, the women waving from the tailboard. The small convoy, the launch, and water-trailer in tow, moved slowly between the lines of cars, then turned at the first intersection and labored slowly away past the ruined church.

Left alone, Ransom listened to the fading sounds, occasionally carried across to him as the trucks stopped at a road junction. The refuse fires drifted over the avenue, but otherwise the whole of Larchmont was silent, the sunlight reflected off the falling flakes of ash. Looking down the lines of cars, Ransom realized that he was now probably alone in Larchmont, as he had unconsciously intended from the very beginning.

He walked forward along the center of the road, letting his feet fall into the steps printed into the ash in front of him. Somewhere, sharply, a window broke. Hesitating to move from his exposed position, Ransom estimated that the sound came from two or three hundred yards away.

Behind him, he heard a thin spitting noise. Ransom looked around, then stepped backwards across the road. Ten feet away, watching him with the small precise gaze of a moody jeweler, was a fully grown cheetah, standing on the edge of the curb. It moved forward fractionally, its claws extending as it felt delicately for the roadway.

"Doctor...." Partly hidden behind one of the trees, Quilter sprang lightly on his left foot, holding the steel leash attached to the cheetah's collar. He watched Ransom with a kind of amiable patience, stroking the fleece-lined jacket he wore over his shirt. His pose of vague disinterest in his surroundings implied that he now had all the time in the world. In a sense, Ransom realized, this was literally true.

"What do you want?" Ransom asked, keeping his voice level. The cheetah advanced onto the roadway and crouched down on its haunches, eying Ransom steadily. Well within its spring, Ransom stared back at it, wondering what game Quilter was playing with this silent feline killer. "I'm busy, Quilter. I can't waste any more time."

He made an effort to turn. The cheetah flicked an eye at him, like a referee noticing an almost imperceptible infringement of the rules.

"Doctor. . . ." With a wry smile, as if decanting a pearl from his palm, Quilter let the leash slide off his hand into the road.

"Quilter, you bloody fool—!" Controlling his temper, Ransom searched for something to say. "How's your mother these days, Quilter? I've been meaning to call and see her."

"Mother?" Quilter peered at Ransom. Then he tittered softly to himself, apparently amused by this appeal to old sentiments. "Doctor, not now. . . ."

He picked up the leash and jerked the cat backwards with a brisk wrench. "Come on," he said to Ransom, prepared to forgive him this gaffe. "Miss Miranda wants to see you."

Ransom followed him through the gateway. The garden was littered with burnt-out cannisters and the wire skeletons of catherine wheels. Several rockets had exploded against the house, and the black flashes discolored the white paint.

"My dear Charles. . . ." The dapper figure of Richard Lomax greeted Ransom on the steps. He had exchanged his white suit for another of even more brilliant luminosity, the gleaming silk folds, as he raised his little arms in greeting, running like liquid silver. His pomaded hair and cherubic face, and the two jeweled clasps pinning his tie inside his double-breasted waistcoat, made him look like some kind of hallucinatory clown, the master of ceremonies at a lunatic carnival. Although Ransom was a dozen steps from him he raised his pudgy hands as if to embrace him reassuringly. "My dear Charles, they've left you."

"The Johnstones?" Ransom rested a foot on the lowest step. Behind him Quilter released the cheetah. It bounded away across the ashy surface of the lawn. "They were quite right to leave."

"Rubbish!" Lomax beckoned him forward with a crooked finger. "Charles, you look worried about something. You're not yourself today. Didn't you enjoy my firework display last night?"

"Not altogether, Richard. I'm leaving this afternoon."

"But, Charles—" With an expansive shrug, Lomax gave up the attempt to dissuade him, then flashed his most winning smile. "Very well, if you must take part in this madness. Miranda and I have all sorts of things planned. And Quilter's having the time of his life."

"So I've noticed," Ransom commented. "But then I haven't the sort of talents he has."

Lomax threw his head back, his voice rising to a delighted squeal. "Yeesss . . . I know what you mean. But we mustn't underestimate old Quilty." As Ransom walked away he shouted after him: "Don't forget, Charles—we'll keep a place for you here!"

Ransom hurried quickly down the drive. Quilter and the cheetah were playing about in the far corner of the garden, leaping and swerving at each other.

As he passed one of the ornamental fountains, its drained concrete basin half-filled with sticks and refuse, Miranda Lomax stepped out from behind it. She hovered beside the pathway, her white hair falling uncombed around her grimy robe, which trailed along the burnt earth. Streaked with ash and dust, as she gazed into the dried-up pool she reminded Ransom of an imbecile Ophelia looking for her resting-stream.

Her small rosebud mouth chewed emptily as she watched him. "Goodbye, doctor," she said. "You'll be back."

With this, she turned and disappeared among the dusty hedges.

Chapter 6—Journey to the Coast

TO THE SOUTH, the scarred ribbon of the highway wound off across the burnt land, the wrecked vehicles scattered along its verges like the battle debris of a motorized army. Abandoned cars and trucks had been driven off at random into the fields, their seats pulled out into the dust. To Ransom, looking down at the road as he crossed the hump of the motorbridge, it appeared to have been under a heavy artillery bombardment. Loose curbstones lay across the pedestrian walks, and there were large gaps in the stone balustrade where cars had been pushed over the edge into the river be-

low. The roadway was littered with broken glass and torn pieces of chromium trim.

Ransom free-wheeled the car down the slip road to the river. Rather than take the highway, he had decided to sail the houseboat along the river to the sea, and then around the coast to an isolated bay or island. By this means he hoped to avoid the chaos on the overland route and the hazards of fighting for a foothold among the sand-dunes. With luck, enough water would remain in the river to carry him to its mouth. On the seat behind was a large outboard motor he had taken from a looted ship's chandlers on the north bank. He estimated that the journey would take him little more than two or three days.

Ransom stopped on the slip road. Ten feet from the houseboat the burnt-out hulks of two cars lay on their backs in the mud. The smoke from the exploding fuel tanks had blackened the paintwork of the craft, but otherwise it seemed intact. Ransom lifted the outboard motor from the seat, and began to haul it down the embankment to the landing stage. The fine dust rose around him in clouds, and after a dozen steps, sinking to his knees through the brittle crust, he stopped to let it clear. The air was in fever, the angular sections of the concrete embankment below the bridge reflecting the sunlight like Hindu yantras. He pressed on a few steps, pieces of the crust sliding around him in the dust-falls.

Then he saw the houseboat more clearly.

Ten feet from the edge of the channel, the craft was stranded high and dry above the narrow creek, its pontoon set in a trough of baked mud. It leaned on its side near the burnt-out cars, covered with the ash blown down from the banks.

Ransom let the outboard motor subside into the dust, and then ploughed his way down to the houseboat. The sloping bank was covered with old cans and dead birds and fish. Twenty feet to his left the body of a dog lay in the sunlight by the edge of the water.

Ransom climbed up onto the jetty, and for a moment gazed down at the houseboat, stranded with all his hopes on the bleached shore. This miniature universe, a capsule containing whatever future lay before him, had expired with everything else on the floor of the drained river, cutting off all continuity with his past life.

Above him, on the embankment, a car's starting motor whined. Ransom crouched down, watching the line of villas

and the dust-filled aerial canopies. Nothing moved on the opposite bank. The river was motionless, the stranded craft leaning against each other. Along the quays, the white bodies of the drying fish rotated slowly in the sunlight.

The car's engine resumed its plaintive noise, and masked the creaking of the gangway as Ransom made his way up the embankment. He crossed the empty garden next to Catherine Austen's villa, then followed the drive down to the road.

Catherine Austen sat over the wheel in the car, thumb on the starter button. She looked up as Ransom approached, her hand reaching to the pistol on the seat.

"Dr. Ransom?" She dropped the pistol and concentrated on the starter. "What are you doing here?"

Ransom leaned on the windshield, watching her efforts to start the engine. In the back of the car were two large suitcases and a canvas hold-all. She seemed tired and distracted, streaks of dust in her red hair.

"Are you going to the coast?" Ransom asked. He held the window before she could wind it up. "You know that Quilter has one of the cheetahs?"

"What?" The news surprised her. "What do you mean? Where is it?"

"At Lomax's house. You're a little late in the day."

"I couldn't sleep. There was all that shooting." She looked up at him. "Doctor, I must get to the zoo. After last night the animals will be out of their minds."

"If they're still there. By now Quilter and Whitman are probably running around with the entire menagerie. Catherine, it's time to leave."

"I know, but . . ." She drummed abstractedly at the wheel, glancing up at Ransom as if trying to find her compass in his bearded face.

Leaving her, Ransom ran down the road to the next house. A car was parked in the open garage. He lifted the bonnet, and loosened the terminals of the battery. He slid the heavy unit out of its rack and carried it back to Catherine's car. After he had exchanged the batteries he gestured her along the seat. "Let me try."

She made room for him at the wheel. The fresh battery started the engine after a few turns. Ransom set off toward the motorbridge. As they reached the junction he hesitated, wondering whether to accelerate southwards down the highway. Then he felt Catherine's hand on his arm. She was looking out over the bleached bed of the river, and at the brittle

trees along the banks, suspended like ciphers in the warm air.

He crossed the bridge and turned left into a side-road, knowing that sooner or later he would have to abandon the young woman. Her barely conscious determination to stay on reminded him of his own first hopes of isolating himself among the wastes of the new desert, putting an end to time and its erosions. But now a new kind of time was being imposed on the landscape.

"Catherine, I know how you—"

Thirty yards ahead a driverless car rolled across the road. Ransom pressed hard on the brakes, jerking the car to a sudden halt and throwing Catherine forward against the windshield.

He pulled her back onto the seat as a swarm of dark-suited men filled the street around them. He picked up the revolver, and then saw a familiar hard plump face under its blond thatch.

"Get them out! Then clear the road!" A dozen hands seized the bonnet, and jerked it up into the air. A long knife flashed in the bosun's brightly scarred hand and cut through the top hose of the radiator. Behind him the tall figure of Jonas hove into view, long arms raised as if feeling his way through darkness.

Ransom restarted the engine and slipped the gear lever into reverse. Flooring the accelerator, he flung the car backwards. The hood slammed down onto the fingers that were tearing at the engine leads, sending up bellows of pain.

Steering over his shoulder, Ransom reversed down the street, hitting the parked vehicles as he swerved from left to right. Catherine leaned weakly against the door, nursing her bruised head with one hand.

Ransom misjudged the corner, and the car jolted to a halt against the side of a truck. Steadying Catherine with one hand, he watched the gang setting off after them. Jonas stood on the roof of a car, one arm pointing like a specter.

Ransom opened his door and pulled Catherine out into the road. She pushed her hair back with a feeble hand.

"Come on!" Taking her hand, he set off along a gravel-covered lane that ran down to the embankment. Helped by the sloping ground, they reached the slip road. Ransom pointed up to the motorbridge. Two men moved along the balustrade. "We'll have to wade across the river."

As the dust clouds rose into the air behind them, there was a shout from the bridge.

Catherine took Ransom's arm. "Over there! Who's that boy?"

"Philip!" Ransom waved vigorously. Philip Jordan was standing near the houseboat on the other side of the river, looking down at the outboard motor Ransom had abandoned. His skiff, secured by the pole, was propped against the shore. With a quick glance at the men signaling from the motor-bridge, he sidestepped down the bank. Freeing his pole, he jumped aboard, the craft's momentum carrying it across the channel.

He helped Ransom and Catherine Austen into the craft and pushed off again. A shot rang out in warning. Four or five men, led by Jonas, crossed the slip road and made their way down the embankment. The bosun brought up the rear, a long-barreled rifle in his hands.

Jonas' stiff figure strode down the slope, black boots sending up clouds of dust. His men stumbled behind him, Saul cursing as he slipped and fell on his hands, but Jonas pressed on ahead of them.

The skiff stopped short of the bank as Philip Jordan scanned the river and approaches, uncertain which direction to take. Ransom leaned from the prow across the short interval of water. A bullet sang over their heads like a demented insect. "Philip, forget the boat! We've got to leave now!"

Philip crouched behind his pole as Saul reloaded the rifle. "Doctor, I can't. . . . Quilter is—"

"Damn Quilter!" Ransom waved the pistol at Catherine, who was on her knees, holding tightly to the sides of the craft. "Paddle with your hands! Philip, listen to me—"

Jonas and his men had reached the water's edge, little more than a few boat-lengths away. Saul leveled the rifle at Philip, but Jonas stepped forward and knocked the weapon from his hands. His dark eyes gazed at the occupants of the skiff. He stepped onto a spur of rock, and for fully half a minute, oblivious of the pistol in Ransom's hand, stared down at the boat.

"Philip!" he shouted harshly. "Boy, come here!"

As his name echoed away across the drained river, Philip Jordan turned, his hands clenching the pole for support. He looked up at the hawkfaced man glaring down at him.

"Philip . . . !" Jonas' voice tolled like a bell over the oily water.

Philip Jordan shook his head slowly, hands nervously grasping at the pole. Above him, like a hostile jury, a line of dark

faces looked down from the bridge. Philip seized the pole and lifted it horizontally from the water, as if to bar the way to Jonas.

"Doctor . . . ?" he called tensely over his shoulder.

"The bank, Philip!"

"No!" With a cry, looking back for the last time at the dark figure of Jonas, Philip leaned on the pole and punted the boat upstream toward the drained lake. The men on the bank surged forward, shouting for the rifle, but the skiff darted behind the hulk of a lighter, then swung away again, its prow lifting like an arrow. Philip whipped the pole in and out, the water racing between his hands off the wet shaft.

"I'll go with you, doctor. But first . . ." he released the pole, then crouched down as the skiff surged across a patch of open water. ". . . first I must bring my father."

Ransom reached forward to take Catherine's hand. He watched the youth as he maneuvered them swiftly around the bend toward the lake, seeing in his face only the dark arrowlike mask of the black-garbed man standing alone on the shore behind them.

For an hour they followed the residue of the river as it wound across the lake. The channel narrowed, sometimes to little more than fifteen feet in width, at others dividing into thin streams that groped their way among the dunes and mudbanks. Stranded yachts lay on the dry slopes, streaked with the scum-lines of the receding water. The bed of the lake, almost completely drained, was now an inland beach of white dunes covered with pieces of blanched timber and driftwood. Along the bank the dried marshgrass formed a palisade of burnt bristles.

They left the main channel and followed one of the small tributaries. Here and there they passed the remains of an old shack, or a pier jutted out above the remains of grass that had seeded itself the previous summer when the level had already fallen several feet. Working his pole tirelessly, Philip turned the craft like a key through the nexus of creeks, his face hidden behind his shoulder as he avoided Ransom's gaze. Once they stopped, and he ordered them out, then ported the craft across a narrow saddle to the continuation of the stream. They passed the cylinder of an old distillation unit built out on the bed, its leaning towers rising like the barrels of some eccentric artillery in mutiny

against the sky. Everywhere the bodies of voles and waterfowl lay among the dried weeds.

At length the stream wound between a series of scrub-covered dunes, and they emerged into a small drained lagoon. In the center, touched briefly by the stream as it disappeared beyond, was an ancient sailing barge, sitting squarely on the caked mud. All the craft they had passed had been stained and streaked with dirt, but the barge was immaculate, its hull shining in the sunlight in a brilliant patchwork of colors. The brass portholes had been polished that morning. A white-painted landing stage stood by the barge, a trimly roped gangway leading to the deck. The mast, stripped of its rigging and fitted with a cross-tree, had been carefully varnished to the brass annulus at its peak.

"Philip, what on earth—?" Ransom began. He felt Catherine's hand warningly on his arm. Philip beached the craft ten feet from the landing stage and beckoned them aboard. He hesitated at the companion-head. "I'll need your help, doctor," he said, in a low, uncertain voice that reminded Ransom of his gruff waif's croak. He pointed to the cabin and deckwork, and added with a faint note of pride: "It's an old wreck, you understand. Put together from any scraps I could find." He led the way down into the dark cabin.

Sitting upright in a rocking chair in the center of the spartan chamber was a gray-haired old Negro. He wore a faded khaki shirt and corduroy trousers, patiently darned with a patchwork of laborious stitching. At first glance Ransom assumed from his broad shoulders and domed head that he was in late middle-age, but as the light cleared he saw from his sticklike shoulders and legs that he was at least seventy-five years old. Despite his advanced age, he held himself erectly, his lined patrician head turning as Philip came toward him. The faint light through the shuttered portholes was reflected in his opaque, blind eyes.

Philip bent down beside him. "Father, it's time for us to leave. We must go south to the coast."

The old Negro nodded. "I understand, Philip. Perhaps you would introduce me to your friends?"

"They will come with us to help. This is Dr. Ransom and Miss—"

"Austen. Catherine Austen." She stepped forward and touched the Negro's clawlike hand. "It's a pleasure, Mr. Jordan."

Ransom glanced around the cabin. Obviously there was

no bloodlink between Philip and the elderly Negro, but he assumed that this blind old man was the youth's foster-father, the invisible presence he had felt behind Philip for so many years. A thousand puzzles were immediately solved —this was why Philip always took his food away to eat, and why, despite Ransom's generous gifts during the winter, he was often close to starvation.

"Philip has told me of you a great deal, doctor," the old man said in his soft voice. "I have always known you to be a good friend to him."

"That's why I want us to leave now, Mr. Jordan, before the drought begins to break up the land. Are you well enough to travel?"

The merest hint of an implied negative made Philip Jordan bridle. "Of course he is!" He stepped between Ransom and the old man. "Don't worry, Father, I won't leave you."

"Thank you, Philip." The old man's voice was still soft. "Perhaps you would get ready. Take only what water and food you can carry." As Philip moved away to the galley the old Negro said: "Dr. Ransom, may I speak with you?"

When they were alone, he looked up at Ransom with his sightless eyes. "It will be a long journey, doctor, perhaps longer for you than for me. You will understand me when I say it will really begin when we get to the beach."

"I agree," Ransom said. "It should be fairly clear until we reach the coast."

"Of course." The Negro smiled faintly, his great domed head veined like a carved teak globe of the earth. "I shall be a great burden to you, doctor; I would rather stay here than be left by the roadside later. May I ask you to be honest with yourself?"

Ransom stood up. Over his shoulder he could see Catherine Austen standing in the sunlight on the deck, her red hair lifting like some Homeric fleece in the moving air. Something about the old Negro's question irritated him. Partly he resented the old man for having taken advantage of him for so many years, but even more for his assumption that Ransom could still make a simple choice between helping him on the one hand and abandoning him on the other. After the events of the previous days, he already felt that, in the new landscape emerging around them, humanitarian considerations were becoming increasingly irrelevant.

"Doctor?"

"Mr. Jordan, I daren't be honest with myself. Most known

motives are so suspect these days that I doubt whether the hidden ones are any better. All the same, I'll try to get you to the beach."

Shortly before dusk they began their return journey down the river. Ransom and Philip Jordan stood at bow and stern, each working a puntpole, while Catherine and the old man sat amidships under a makeshift awning.

Around them the baked white surface of the lake stretched from horizon to horizon. Half a mile from the town, where they joined the main channel, they heard a siren sound into the hot afternoon air. Philip Jordan pointed two hundred yards to starboard, where Captain Tulloch's river steamer sat in a small landlocked pool of water. Pennants flying and deck canvas trim over the rows of polished seats, the steamer's engines worked at full ahead, its long prow nudging the curve of a huge sandflat. The screws turned tirelessly, churning the black water into a thick foam. Deserted by his crew, Captain Tulloch stood behind the helm, sounding his siren at the dead flank of the dune as he nudged away at it, as if trying to wake a sleeping whale.

Philip called to Ransom, but the latter shook his head. They swept past, the sounds of the siren receding behind them into the haze.

They reached Larchmont at dusk, and rested behind the hull of a rusting dredger moored by the entrance to the lake. In the fading light, the old Negro slept peacefully, sitting upright in the boat with his head against the metal posts of the awning. Beside him, Catherine Austen leaned her elbows on the jerricans of water, head forward on her wrists.

As darkness settled over the river, Ransom went up onto the bridge of the dredger, where Philip Jordan pointed toward the distant city. Huge fires were burning from the skyline, the flames swept off the rooftops as the immense canopies of smoke lifted into the air over their heads.

"They're trying to burn the whole of Mount Royal down," Ransom said. "This must be Lomax." As the light flickered in Philip Jordan's face, he saw the beaked profile of Jonas. He turned back to the fires and began to count them.

An hour later they walked forward along the drained bed, the heat of the waterfront fires driving across the river like a burning sirocco. The entire horizon was ablaze, enormous fires raging on the outskirts of the city. Larchmont burned along the river, the flames sweeping down the streets. The

boathouses along the quays were on fire, the hundreds of fish transfigured in the dancing light. Overhead, myriads of glowing cinders sailed past like fireflies, lying in the distant fields to the south as if the clinkered soil itself was beginning to burn.

"The lions!" Catherine shouted. "Doctor, I can hear them!" She ran forward to the edge of the channel, her face lit by the flames.

"Miss Austen, look!" Philip Jordan took her arm. Above the embankment of the motorbridge, illuminated like an immense screen, stood one of the maned lions. It climbed on to the balustrade and looked down at the inferno below, then leapt away into the darkness. They heard a shout from the slip road, and a man raced past the burning quays, the maned lion hunting him through the shadows.

As they climbed up the bank, a figure moved behind one of the stranded launches. An old crone swathed in a bundle of rags clutched at Ransom before he could push her away.

"Doctor, you wouldn't be leaving an old body like Ma Quilter? To the taggers and the terrible flames, for pity's sake?"

"Mrs. Quilter!" Ransom steadied her, half-afraid that the fumes of whiskey that enveloped her might ignite them both. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for my boy, doctor. . . ." She gestured like a distraught witch at the opposite bank, her wizened face beaked and fearful in the pulsing light. "It's that Lomax and his filthy Miranda, they've stolen my boy!"

Ransom propelled her up the slope. Catherine and Philip, the old Negro carried between them, had scaled the bank and were taking shelter in one of the gardens. The falling cinders flickered around them. As if set off by some prearranged signal, the whole of the lakeside town was burning simultaneously. Only Lomax's house, at the eye of this hurricane, was immune. Searching for his own home among the collapsing roofs, Ransom heard more shouts carried above the roaring timbers, and saw the two cheetahs racing in pursuit down the burning corridors.

"Philip!"

The cry came to them in a familiar demented voice across the river. Mrs. Quilter turned, peering blindly into the flames, and shouted hoarsely: "That's my boy! That's old Quilty come for his Ma!"

"Philip. . . !" The racing figure of Quilter approached the

bank through the burning streets across the river, a huge flapping object in his arms. He reached the open shore, shouting Jordan's name again, and then lifted his arms and released the great bird. The black swan, still stained by the oil, lifted vigorously, its long neck stretched like the shaft of a spear toward Philip Jordan. He watched as it crossed the river, wings working powerfully, the burning cinders falling around it. As it flew over, disappearing in a wide arc on the dark glowing tide of air, Philip waved to Quilter, who stood watching them as they vanished from sight, his pensive face flickering in the firelight like a lost child's.

Chapter 7—The Bitter Sea

BY DAWN the next morning, they had covered some five miles southwards. All night the city had burned behind them, and Ransom pushed the small party along as fast as he could, fearing that Jonas and the fishermen had been driven across the motorbridge. But the road behind them remained empty, receding into the flaring darkness.

At intervals they rested, sitting in the back seats of the cars abandoned along the roadway. As the fires of the burning city flickered in the driving mirrors, Ransom and the others slept intermittently, but Mrs. Quilter spent the night scurrying from one car to another, sitting in the darkness and fiercely manipulating the controls. Once she pressed a horn, and the dull blare sounded away down the empty road.

Her new-found passion for automobiles was unabated the following morning. As Ransom and Philip Jordan limped along through the warm dawn light, the old Negro borne between them in his litter, she accidentally started one of the cars.

"What would my Quilty think of me now, doctor?" she asked as Ransom protected the gear lever from her rapacious hands. The engine roared and raced under her dancing feet.

Five minutes later, when he at last persuaded her to move along the seat, they set off in the car. To Ransom's surprise the engine was in perfect order, and the fuel tank half full. Looking out at the vehicles abandoned along the road,

Ransom assumed that they had been left there during the tremendous traffic jams of the previous week. Stalled in motionless glaciers of metal that reached over the plains as far as the horizon, their occupants must have given up in despair and decided to walk the remaining miles.

Behind them the city disappeared from sight, but twenty-five miles further to the south Ransom could still see the smoke staining the sky. On either side of them, beyond the vehicles driven onto the verges, the fields stretched away into the morning haze, their surfaces like buckled plates of rust. Fencing posts leaned in the air, and isolated farmhouses, the dust drifting against their boarded windows, stood at the end of rutted lanes. Everywhere the bright bones of dead cattle lay around the empty water troughs.

For three hours they drove on, twice stopping to exchange cars when the tires were punctured by the barbs of scrap metal on the road. They passed through a succession of deserted farmtowns, then sped toward the coastal hills hidden below the horizon.

The gradient began to descend as they entered the approaches to the river crossing. The number of abandoned cars increased. Ransom drove slowly along the one lane still open, the distant steel spans of the bridge rising above the stalled cars and trucks, carried over the hump like scrap metal on a huge conveyor.

A quarter of a mile from the bridge they were forced to stop, wedged between the converging traffic lanes. Ransom walked ahead and climbed on to the parapet. Originally some three hundred yards wide at this point, the river was now almost drained. A thin creek wound its way like a tired serpent along the bleached white bed. A few rusty lighters lay along the banks, which jutted into the air like lost cliffs facing each other across a desert. Despite the bridge and the embankment on the opposite shore, the existence of the river was now only notional, the drained bed merging into the dusty surface of the surrounding land.

Turning his attention to the bridge, Ransom could see what had caused the huge traffic jam at its approaches. The central span, a section some one hundred feet long, had been blown up by a demolition team, and the steel cantilevers rested stiffly on the riverbed, the edges of the roadway torn like metal pith. In the entrance to the bridge, three army trucks had been shacked together as block vehicles.

Their hoods and driving cabins were crumpled and blackened.

"What was the point?" Philip Jordan asked as they made their way down onto the riverbed. "Don't they want people to reach the coast?"

"Of course, Philip." Ransom held tightly to the poles of the litter as he found his footing in the powdery crust. "But not too quickly."

Several cars had been driven down off the embankment in an attempt to cross the river. They lay half-buried in the drifts of dust, the slopes of fine powder covering their seats. Mrs. Quilter lingered by them, as if hoping that they might suddenly resurrect themselves, then gathered her silks around her and shuffled off on Catherine Austen's arm.

They reached the flat bed of the main channel and walked past the collapsed midsection of the bridge. The detonation leads looped back to the south shore. Listening for any sounds of traffic ahead, Ransom tripped, nearly dropping Mr. Jordan.

"Dr. Ransom, please rest for a moment," the old Negro apologized. "I am sorry to be this burden to you."

"Not at all. I was star-gazing." Ransom lowered the poles and wiped his face. During their journey to the south he had felt an increasing sense of vacuum, as if he was pointlessly following a vestigial instinct that no longer had any real meaning for him. The four people with him were becoming more and more shadowy, residues of themselves as notional as the empty river. He watched Catherine and Mrs. Quilter climb on to a fallen steel girder that spanned the stream, trying to see them only in terms of the sand and dust, of the eroding slopes and concealed shadows.

"Doctor." Philip touched his arm. "Over there."

He followed Philip's raised hand. Two hundred yards away the solitary figure of a man was walking slowly along the drained white channel. He was moving away from them upstream, a few feet from the narrow trickle of black water at which, now and then, he seemed to cast a vague eye, as if out on some quiet reflective stroll. He was wearing a suit of faded cotton, almost the color of the bleached deck around him, but carried no equipment, apparently unaware of the sunlight on his head and shoulders.

"Where's he going?" Philip asked. "Shall I call to him?"

"No, leave him." Without thinking, Ransom walked forward a few paces, as if following the man. He waited, almost ex-

pecting to see a dog appear and run around the man's heels. The absolute isolation of the chalkwhite promenade, with its empty perspectives, focused an intense light upon the solitary traveler. For some reason, this strange figure, detached from the pressing anxieties of the drought and exodus, seemed a compass of all the unstated motives that Ransom had managed to repress during the previous days.

"Doctor, let's go on."

"Just a moment, Philip."

The elusive significance of this figure, disappearing along the heat-glazed bed, still puzzled Ransom as he sat with the others on the south embankment. Philip lit a small fire, and they ate a meal of warm rice. Ransom swallowed a few spoonfuls of the tasteless gruel, and then gave his plate back to Philip. Even Catherine Austen, leaning one arm on his shoulder as he gazed out over the broad bed of the river, failed to distract him. With an effort, he joined the others as they climbed the embankment, pulling Mr. Jordan up behind them.

The road to the south was clear of cars. The remains of an army post were scattered along the verge. Cooking utensils hung from tripods outside the deserted tents, and a truck lay on its side among the bales of wire and old tires.

Mrs. Quilter snorted in disgust. "Where's all the cars gone off to, doctor? We'll be wanting one for my old legs, you know."

"There may be some soon. You'll simply have to walk until we find one."

Already he was losing interest in her. The poles of the litter pressed into his shoulders. He labored slowly along the road, still thinking of the solitary man on the riverbed.

Two hours later, after they had found a car, they reached the foothills of the coastal range. Slowly they followed the road upwards, winding past burnt-out orchards and groves of brittle trees like the remnants of a petrified forest. Around them in the hills drifted the smoke of small fires, the white plumes wandering down the valleys. Here and there they saw the low roofs of primitive hovels built up on the crests. The wooded slopes below were littered with the shells of cars tipped over the edge of the road. They began to descend through a narrow cutting, and emerged on to one side of a wide canyon. At the bottom, in the bed of a dried-up stream, a timber fire burned briskly. Two men worked beside a

small still, their bare chests blackened by charcoal, ignored the passing car.

The trees receded to give them a view of a distant headland, partly veiled by the long plumes of smoke moving inland. Suddenly the car was filled with the sharp tang of brine. A final bend lay ahead, and then in front of them was the gray hazy disc of the sea. On the edge of the bluff, partly blocking their view, two men sat on the roof of a car, gazing down at the coastal shelf below. They glanced back at the approaching car, their faces thin and drawn in the sunlight. More cars were parked around the bend, and along the road as it wound downwards to the shore. People sat on the roofs and hoods, gazing at the sea.

Ransom stopped the car and switched off the engine. Below them, stretching along the entire extent of the coastal shelf, were tens of thousands of cars and trailers, jammed together like vehicles in an immense parking lot. Tents and wooden shacks were squeezed between them, packed more and more tightly together as they neared the beach, where they overran the dunes and sandflats. A small group of naval craft—gray patrol boats and coast-guard cutters—were moored a quarter of a mile offshore. Long metal piers had been built out into the water toward them, and there was no clear dividing line between the sea and the shore. At intervals along the dunes stood a number of large metal huts, almost the size of aircraft hangers. Around them tall distillation columns steamed into the air, their vapor mingling with the smoke of the fires burning across the whole eight-hundred-yard width of the coastal shelf. The distant sounds of machinery were carried across to the cliff, and for a moment the clanking noise of the pumping gear and the bright galvanized iron roofs along the dunes made the whole area resemble a gigantic beachside funfair, the carparks crammed with millions of would-be participants.

Catherine Austen took Ransom's arm. "Charles, we'll never get down there. All these people!"

Ransom opened his door. The car seemed as overcrowded as the vast concourse below, a meaningless replication of identity in which an infinite number of doubles of himself were being generated by some cancerous division of time. He peered down through the smoke, trying to find even a single free space. Here and there, in the garden of a house or behind a derelict filling station, there was room for a few more vehicles, but the approach lanes were closed. One or two cars crawled about the churned-up roadways, like ants

blindly moving with no notion of their overall direction; but otherwise the whole congested extent of the shore had settled into an immovable jam. Everywhere people sat on the roofs of cars and trailers, staring out through the smoke toward the sea.

The only signs of organized activity came from the beach area. Trucks sped along a road between the dunes, and the lines of cars parked behind the metal huts formed neat patterns. Lines of tents shone in the sunlight, grouped around communal kitchens and service units.

"Wait here." Ransom stepped from the car and walked along to the two men sitting on the roof of the car nearby.

He nodded to them. "We've just arrived. How do we get down to the beach?"

The older of the two, a man of sixty, ignored Ransom. He was staring, not at the congestion below, but at the far horizon, where the sea dissolved in a pale haze. The fixity of his expression reminded Ransom of the obsessed cloudwatchers on their towers in Larchmont.

"We need water," Ransom explained patiently. "We've come a hundred miles today. There's an elderly cripple in the car."

The other man, a trilby pulled down to shade his face, eyed Ransom curiously. He seemed to detect the lack of conviction in Ransom's voice, and gave him a thin smile, almost of encouragement, as if Ransom had successfully passed this first hurdle.

Ransom walked back to the car. The road wound down the side of the cliff, past the people who had retreated to this last vantage point. It leveled out and approached the first of the shanty camps.

Immediately all sense of the sea was lost, the distant dunes hidden from sight by the roofs of trucks and trailers, and by the drifting smoke of garbage fires. Thousands of people squatted among the cars or sat on their doorsteps. Small groups of men moved about silently. The road divided, one section running parallel with the beach along the foot of the hills, the other heading diagonally toward the sea. Ransom stopped at the junction and searched for any signs of police or an army control post. On their right, smashed to pieces at the roadside, were the remains of a large sign, the metal scaffolding stripped of its wooden panels.

Choosing the beachward road, Ransom entered the shanty town. Twenty yards ahead was a crude barricade. As they

stopped, four or five men appeared from the doorways of the trailers. They waved at Ransom, gesturing him back. One of them carried a metal fencing post. He walked up to the car and banged it against the grille.

Ransom held his ground. Ahead the road disappeared within fifty yards into the jungle of shacks and cars. The ground was churned into huge ruts.

A dirty hand spread across the windshield. A man's unshaven face poked through the window like a muzzle. "Come on, mister! Back the hell out of here!"

Ransom started to argue, but then gave up and reversed back to the road junction. They set off along the coast road below the cliffs. The huge motorcamps stretched ahead of them to the right, the backs of trailers jutting out over the empty sidewalk. On the left, where the cliffs had been cut back at intervals to provide small lay-bys, single families squatted under makeshift awnings, out of sight of sea and sky, gazing with drained eyes at the shack camps separating them from the beach.

Half a mile ahead they climbed a small rise, and could see the endless extent of the camps, reaching far into the haze beyond the cape ten miles away. Ransom stopped in a deserted filling station, peering down a narrow lane that ran into the trailer camp. Small children squatted with their mothers, watching the men stand and argue. The smoke of garbage fires drifted across the blank sky, and the air was touched by the sweet, acrid smells of unburied sewage.

A few dust-streaked cars cruised past in the opposite direction, faces pressed to the windows as their occupants searched for some foothold off the road.

Ransom pointed to the license plates. "Some of these people must have been driving along the coast for days." He opened the door. "There's probably little point in going on any further. I'll get out and have another look around."

He walked down the road, glancing between the lines of vehicles. People were lying about in the shade, or had walled in the narrow alleys with squares of canvas. Further in, a crowd of people surrounded a large chromium-sided trailer and began to rock it from side to side, drumming on the doors and windows with spades and pickax handles.

An old cigarette kiosk leaned against a concrete telegraph pole by the side of the road. Ransom managed to lift one foot on to the counter, then climbed up onto it. Far into the distance the silver roofs of the metal hangers along

the shore glistened in the sunlight like some unattainable El Dorado. The sounds of pumping equipment drummed across to him, overlaid by the murmur and babble of the people in the camps.

Below Ransom, in a small niche off the edge of the sidewalk, a middle-aged man in shirtsleeves was working a primus stove below the awning of his trailer, a miniature vehicle little larger than a sedan chair. Sitting inside the doorway was his wife, a sedate roundfaced woman in a floral dress. The primus flared in the heat, warming a metal teapot.

Ransom climbed down and approached the man. He had the intelligent, sensitive eyes of a watchmaker. As Ransom came up, he quietly poured the tea into two cups on a tray.

"Herbert," his wife called warningly.

"It's all right, dear."

Ransom bent down beside him, nodding to the woman. "Do you mind if I talk to you?"

"Go ahead," the man said. "But I've no water to spare."

"That's all right. I've just arrived with some friends," Ransom said. "We intended to reach the beach, but it looks as if we're too late."

The man nodded thoughtfully. "You probably are," he agreed. "Still, I wouldn't worry, we're not much better off." He added: "We've been here two days."

"We were on the road three," his wife interjected. "Tell him about that, Herbert."

"He's been on the road too, dear."

"What chance is there of getting onto the shore?" Ransom asked. "We're going to need some water soon. Aren't there any police around?"

"Let me explain." The man finished sipping his tea. "Perhaps you couldn't see from up there, but all along the beach there's a double wire fence. The army and police are behind there. Every day they let a few people through. Inside those sheds there are some big distillation units; they say there'll be plenty of water soon and everyone should stay where they are." He smiled faintly. "Boiling and condensing water is a long job; you need cooling towers a hundred feet high."

"What happens if you climb through the wire onto the beach?"

"*If* you climb through. The army are all right, but last night the militia units were shooting at the people trying to cross between the fences. Machine-gunned them down in the spotlights."

Ransom noticed Philip Jordan and Catherine standing on the sidewalk. From their faces he could see that they were frightened he might leave them when they were still a few hundred yards short of the beach.

"But what about the government evacuation plans?" he asked. "Those beach cards and so on. . . ." He stood up when the other made no reply. "What do you plan to do?"

The man gazed evenly at Ransom. "Sit here and wait." He gestured around at the camp. "This won't last forever. It can't. Already most of these people have only a day's water left. Sooner or later they'll break out. My guess is that by the time they reach the water they'll be thinned out enough for Ethel and me to have all we want."

His wife nodded in agreement, sipping her tea.

They set off along the road again. Gradually the hills began to recede, the road turning until it moved almost directly inland. They reached the margins of the river estuary. The funnel-shaped area had once been bordered by marshes and sandflats, and the low-lying ground still seemed damp and gloomy, despite the hot sunlight breaking across the dry grass. The hundreds of vehicles parked among the dunes and hillocks had sunk up to their axles in the soft sand, their roofs tilting in all directions. Ransom stopped by the edge of the road, the presence of the riverbed offering him a fleeting security. Three hundred yards away were the stout fencing posts of the perimeter wire, the barbed coils staked to the ground between them. A narrow strip of dunes and drained creeks separated this line from the inner fence. A quarter of a mile beyond they could see a small section of the shore, the waves foaming peacefully on the washed sand. On either side of the empty channel dozens of huts were being erected, and bare-chested men worked quickly in the sunlight. Their energy, and the close proximity of the water behind their backs, contrasted painfully with the thousands of listless people watching from the dunes on the other side of the barbed wire.

Ransom stepped from the car. "We'll try here. We're further from the shore, but there are fewer people. Perhaps they dislike the river for some reason."

"What about the car?" Philip asked.

"Leave it. These people have brought everything with them; they're not going to abandon their cars now that they've got them parked on the sand." He waited for the others to

climb out but they sat inertly, reluctant to move. "Come on, Catherine. Mrs. Quilter, you can sleep on the dunes tonight."

"I don't know for sure, doctor." Screwing up her face, she stepped slowly from the car.

"What about you, Mr. Jordan?" Ransom asked.

"Of course, doctor." The old Negro still sat upright. "Just settle me on the sand."

"We're not on the sand." Controlling his impatience, Ransom said: "Philip, perhaps Mr. Jordan could wait in the car. When we've set up some sort of post by the wire, we'll come back and get him."

"No, doctor." Philip watched Ransom carefully. "If we can't take him in the litter, I'll carry him myself." Before Ransom could remonstrate with him, he bent down and lifted the elderly Negro from the car. His strong arms carried him like a child.

Ransom led the way, followed by Catherine and Mrs. Quilter, who fussed along, muttering at the people sitting in the hollows by their cars and trailers. Philip Jordan followed fifty yards behind them, watching his footing in the churned sand, the old Negro in his arms. Soon the road was lost to sight, and the stench of the encampment filled their lungs. A maze of pathways turned between the vehicles and among the dry, grasstopped dunes. Seeing the jerrican partly hidden inside his jacket, children wheedled at Ransom with empty cups. Small groups of men, unshaven and stained with dust, argued hotly with each other, pointing toward the fence. The nearer to this obstacle, the higher tempers seemed to flare, as if the earlier arrivals—many of whom, to judge by their camping equipment, had been there for a week or more—realized that the great concourse pressing behind them meant that they themselves would never reach the sea.

Fortunately the extension of the perimeter fence into the mouth of the river allowed Ransom to approach the wire without having to advance directly toward the sea. Once or twice he found their way barred by a silent man with a shotgun in his hands, waving them away from some private encampment.

An hour later, Ransom reached a point some twenty yards from the outer fence, in a narrow hollow between two groups of trailers. Partly sheltered from the sunlight by the sticks of coarse grass on the crests of the surrounding hillocks, Catherine and Mrs. Quilter sat down and rested,

waiting for Philip Jordan to appear. Flies and mosquitoes buzzed around them, the stench from the once marshy ground thickening the air. The trailers nearby belonged to two circus families, who had moved down to the coast with part of their traveling fair. The gilt-painted canopies of two merry-go-rounds rose above the dunes, the antique horses on their spiral pinions lending a carnival air to the scene. The dark-eyed womenfolk and their daughters sat like a covey of witches around the ornamental traction engine in the center, watching the distant shore as if expecting some monstrous fish to be cast up out of the water.

"What about Philip and Mr. Jordan?" Catherine asked when they had not appeared. Shouldn't we go back and look for them?"

Lamely, Ransom said: "They'll probably get here later. We can't risk leaving here, Catherine."

Mrs. Quilter sat back against the broken earth, shaking the flies off her dusty silks, muttering vaguely to herself as if unable to comprehend what they were doing in this fly-infested hollow.

Ransom climbed onto the crest of the dune. However depressing, the lack of loyalty toward Philip Jordan did not surprise him. With their return to the drained river, he felt again the sense of isolation in time that he had known when he stood on the deck of his houseboat, looking out at the stranded objects on the dry bed around him. Here, where the estuary widened, the distances separating him from the others had become even greater. In time, the sand drifting across the dunes would reunite them on its own terms, but for the present each of them formed a self-contained and discrete world of his own.

Nearby, a man in a straw hat lay among the dried grass, peering through the wire at the drained channel running toward the beach. A nexus of narrow creeks and small dunes separated them from the inner fence. Beyond this the recently erected huts were already filling. Several trucks stopped outside them, and some fifty or sixty people climbed out and quickly carried their suitcases indoors.

A large truck hove into view past the huts and headed toward the inner fence. It stopped there, and two soldiers jumped out and opened a crude gate. Rolling forward, the truck bumped across the dunes. As its engine raced noisily, Ransom noticed a concerted movement through the camp. People climbed down from the roofs of their trailers, others

stepped from cars and pulled their children after them. Fifty yards away, where the truck stopped by the outer fence, the crowd gathered some three or four hundred strong. The soldiers lowered a fifty-gallon drum off the tailboard and rolled it across the ground.

There were a few shouts as the drum neared the fence, but neither of the soldiers looked up. As they pushed it through the wire the crowd surged forward, drawn as much to these two isolated figures as to their cargo of water. As they climbed into the truck again the crowd fell silent, then came to and burst into a chorus of jeers. The shouts followed the truck as it crossed the open interval and disappeared through the gate. With a whoop, the drum was lifted into the air and borne away, then flung to the ground twenty yards away.

As the spray from the scattered water formed ragged rainbows in the air, Ransom turned away and rejoined the others in the hollow. Mrs. Quilter appeared from the direction of the fun-fair, the straw-hatted man following her. He beckoned Ransom toward him.

"You talk to him, dearie," Mrs. Quilter croaked. "I told them what a marvelous doctor you are."

The straw-hatted man was more precise. He took Ransom aside. "The old romany says you have a gun. Is that right?"

Ransom nodded cautiously. "Fair enough. Why?"

"Can you use the gun? She says you're a doctor."

"I can use it," Ransom said. "When?"

"Soon." The man glanced at Ransom's grimy linen suit and then walked away to the merry-go-round, swinging himself through the antique horses.

Soon after midnight, Ransom lay on the crest of the dune. Around him echoed the nightsounds of the camps, embers of hundreds of fires smoking in the darkness. A dull sullen murmur, punctuated by shouts and gunfire further along the beach, drifted across the sandhills. Below him, Catherine and Mrs. Quilter lay together in the hollow, their eyes closed, but no one else was asleep. The dunes around him were covered with hundreds of watching figures. Listening to the slow uncertain movements, Ransom realized that there was no concerted plan of action, but that some dim instinct was gathering force and would propel everyone simultaneously at the wire.

The lights beyond the fences had been dimmed, and the dark outlines of the huts shone faintly in the light reflected from the waves as they spilled onto the beaches. Only the pumping gear drummed steadily.

Above him somewhere, a wire twanged softly. Peering into the darkness, Ransom saw a man disappear through the fence, crawling down one of the drained channels.

"Catherine!" With his shoe, Ransom kicked some sand onto Catherine's shoulder. She looked up at him and then woke Mrs. Quilter. "Get ready to move!"

On their left, across the channel of the river, more firing broke out. Most of the tracers flew high into the air, their arcs carrying them away across the estuary, but Ransom could see that at least two of the sentries, presumably members of the locally recruited militia, were firing straight into the trailer camp.

Floodlights blazed from a dozen posts along both fences. Crouching down, his white arms motionless in the grass, Ransom waited for them to go out. He looked up as there was a roar from the open interval beyond the fence.

Crossing the dunes and creeks, in full view of the platoon of soldiers on the dunes above the inner fence, were some forty or fifty men. Shouting to each other, they jumped in and out of the shallow creeks, one or two of them stopping to fire at the floodlights. Unscathed, they reached the wire, and everywhere people started to climb to their feet and run forward into the light.

Ransom reached down and took Catherine's arm. "Come on!" he shouted. They scaled the shallow slope up to the fence. A wide section of the wire coil had been removed, and they crawled through, then darted down into a narrow creek. Dozens of other people were moving along with them, some pulling little children, others carrying rifles in their hands.

They were halfway across when a light machine gun began to fire loosely over their heads from an emplacement below the huts, its harsh ripple coming in short bursts of two or three seconds. Partly hidden by the rolling ground, everyone pressed on, climbing through a gap cut in the inner fence. Then, ten yards from Ransom, a man was shot dead and fell backwards into the grass. Another was hit in the leg, and lay shouting on the ground as people ran past him.

Ransom pulled Catherine down into an empty basin. Everywhere men and women were rushing past them in all directions. Several of the floodlights had gone out, and in

the flaring darkness he could see men with carbines retreating to the dunes beyond the huts. To their left the open channel of the river ran to the sea, the beach washed like a silver mirror.

The scattered shooting resumed, the soldiers firing over the heads of the hundreds of people moving straight toward the sea. Taking Catherine by the arm, Ransom pulled her toward the opening in the inner fence. Behind them, the bodies lay among the dunes, tumbled awkwardly in the coarse grass.

Following an empty creek, they moved away from the huts. As they crouched down to rest before their final dash to the sea, a man stood up in the brittle grass ten feet above them. With a raised pistol he began to fire across the dunes, shooting straight at the people driven back by the soldiers.

Looking up at him, Ransom recognized the stocky shoulders and pugnacious face.

"Grady!" he called. "Hold off, man!"

As they stumbled from their hiding place, Grady turned and searched the darkness below him. He leveled his pistol at them. He seemed to recognize Ransom, but gestured at him with the weapon.

"Go back!" he shouted hoarsely. "Keep off, we came here first!"

More people appeared, running head down along the dry bed of the creek. Grady stared at them, his little face for a moment like an insane sparrow's. Raising his pistol, he fired blindly at Ransom's shadow. As Catherine crouched down on her knees, Ransom drew the pistol from his belt. Grady darted forward, his eyes searching the darkness among the clumps of grass, his small figure illuminated in the floodlights. Holding the butt of the revolver in both hands, Ransom stood up and shot him through the chest.

He was kneeling over the little man, his own weapon lost somewhere in the creek, when a platoon of soldiers appeared out of the darkness. Lying down, they began to fire over the heads of the people further down the creek.

A bare-headed lieutenant crawled over to Ransom. He glanced down at the body. "One of ours?" he asked breathlessly.

"Grady," Ransom said. The lieutenant jumped to his feet and ordered his men back up the slope toward the huts. The firing had slackened as the main impetus of the advance

spent itself, and many people were retreating back to the fences. Others had got through, and were running down to the water between the huts, ignored by the soldiers further along the beach, who let them go by.

The lieutenant pushed Catherine behind the edge of the old sea wall. To Ransom he shouted: "Take his gun and keep firing! Over their heads, but if they come at you bring one of them down!"

The soldiers moved off, and Ransom joined Catherine behind the wall. The sea was only fifty yards away, the waves sluicing across the wet sand. Exhausted by the noise, Catherine leaned limply against the wall.

Two or three figures came racing across the flat channel. Ransom raised his pistol, but they ran straight toward him. Then the last of them appeared, Philip Jordan with the old Negro in his arms. He saw Ransom standing in front of him, the pistol raised in his hand, but ran on, limping on his bare feet.

Ransom threw away the pistol. All along the beach small groups of people were lying in the shallows as the waves splashed across them, watched by the soldiers. Running after the others, Ransom saw Philip Jordan on his knees by the water's edge, lowering the old man to the waves. Ransom felt the water sting his legs, and then fell headlong into the shallows, his suit soaked by the receding waves, retching emptily into the cold, bitter stream.

PART II

Chapter 8—Dune Limbo

UNDER THE EMPTY winter sky, the salt-dunes ran on for miles. Seldom varying more than a few feet from trough to crest, they shone damply in the cold air, the pools of brine disturbed by the in-shore wind. Sometimes, in a distant foretaste of the spring to come, their crests would be touched with white streaks as a few crystals evaporated out into the sunlight, but by the early afternoon these began to deliquesce, and the gray flanks of the dunes would run with a pale light.

To the east and west the dunes stretched along the coast to the horizon, occasionally giving way to a small lake of stagnant brine or part of a lost creek cut off from the rest of its channel. To the south, in the direction of the sea, the dunes gradually became more shallow, extending into long saltflats. At high tide they were covered by a few inches of clear water, the narrowing causeways of firmer salt reaching out into the sea.

Nowhere was there a defined margin between the shore and sea, and the endless shallows formed the only dividing zone, land and water both submerged in this gray liquid limbo. At intervals the skeleton of a derelict conveyer emerged from the salt and seemed to point toward the sea, but then, after a few hundred yards, sank from sight again. Gradually the pools of water congregated into larger lakes, small creeks formed into continuous channels, but the water never seemed to move. Even after an hour's walk, knee-deep in the dissolving slush, the sea remained as distant as ever, always present and yet lost beyond the horizon, haunting the cold mists that drifted across the salt-dunes.

To the north, the dunes steadily consolidated themselves, the pools of water between them never more than a few inches deep. Eventually, where they overran the shore, they rose into a series of large white hillocks, like industrial tippings, which partly concealed the coastal hills. The foreshore itself, over the former beaches, was covered by the slopes of dry salt

running down to the dunes. The rusty spires of old distillation columns rose into the air, and the roofs of metal huts carried off their foundations floated like half-submerged wrecks. Further out there were the shells of old pumping gear and the conveyers that once carried the waste salt back into the sea.

A few hundred yards from the shore, the hulks of two or three ships were buried to their upper decks in the salt, their gray superstructures reflected in the brine-pools. Small shacks of waste metal sheltered against their sides and beneath the overhangs of the sterns. Outside their lean-to doors, smoke drifted from the chimneys of crude stills.

Beside each of these dwellings, sometimes protected by a palisade of stakes, was a small pond of brine. The banks had been laboriously beaten into a hard margin, but the water seeping everywhere continually dissolved them. Despite the to-and-fro movements of the inhabitants of the salt wastes, no traces of their footsteps marked the surface, blurred within a few minutes by the leaking water.

Only toward the sea, far across the dunes and creeks, was there any activity.

Shortly after dawn, as the tide extended slowly across the margins of the coastal flats, the narrow creeks and channels began to fill with water. The long salt-dunes darkened with the moisture seeping through them, and sheets of open water spread outwards among the channels, carrying with them a few fish and nautiloids. Reaching toward the firmer shore, the cold water infiltrated among the saddles and culverts like the advance front of an invading army, its approach almost unnoticed. A cold wind blew overhead and dissolved in the dawn mists, lifting a few uneager gulls across the banks.

Almost a mile from the shore, the tide began to spill through a large breach in one of the salt bars. The water sluiced outwards into a lagoon some three hundred yards in diameter, inundating the shallow dunes in the center. As it filled this artificial basin, it smoothed itself into a mirror of the cloudless sky.

The margins of the lagoon had been raised a few feet above the level of the surrounding saltflats, and the wet crystals formed a continuous bank almost half a mile in length. As the water poured into the breach it carried away the nearer sections of the mouth, and then, as the tide began to slacken, swilled quietly away along the banks.

Overhead the gulls dived, picking at the hundreds of fish swimming below the surface. In equilibrium, the water ceased to move, and for a moment the great lagoon, and the long arms of brine seeping away northwards through the gray light, were like immense sheets of polished ice.

At this moment, a shout crossed the air. A dozen men rose from behind the bank surrounding the lagoon and with long paddles of whalebone began to shovel the wet salt into the breach. Sliding up to their waists in the gray slush, they worked furiously as the wet crystals drained backwards toward the sea. Their arms and chests were strung with strips of rag and rubbber. They drove each other on with sharp cries and shouts, their backs bent as they ladled the salt up into the breach, trying to contain the water in the lagoon before the tide turned.

Watching them from the edge of the bank was a tall, thin-faced man wearing a sealskin cape over his left shoulder, his right hand on the shaft of his double-bladed paddle. His dark face, from which all flesh had been drained away, seemed to be made up of a series of flintlike points, the sharp cheekbones and jaw almost piercing the hard skin. He gazed across the captured water, his eyes counting the fish that gleamed and darted. Over his shoulder he watched the tide recede, dissolving the banks as it moved along them. The men in the breach began to shout to him as the wet salt poured across them, sliding and falling as they struggled to hold back the bank. The man in the cape ignored them, jerking the sealskin with his shoulder, his eyes on the falling table of water beyond the banks and the shining deck of the trapped sea within the lagoon.

At the last moment, when the water seemed about to burst from the lagoon at a dozen points, he raised his paddle and swung it vigorously at the opposite bank toward the shore. A cry like a gull's scream tore from his throat. As he raced off along the bank, leaving the exhausted men in the breach to drag themselves from the salt, a dozen men emerged from behind the northern bank. Their paddles whirling, they cut an opening in the wall twenty yards wide, then waded out to their chests in the water and drove it through the breach.

Carried by its own weight, the water poured in a torrent into the surrounding creeks, drawing the rest of the lagoon behind it. By the time the man in the cape had reached this new breach, half the lagoon had drained, rushing out in a

deep channel. Like a demented canal, it poured onwards toward the shore, washing away the smaller dunes in its path. It swerved to the northeast, the foam boiling around the bend, then entered a narrow channel cut between two dunes. Veering to the left, it set off again for the shore, the man in the cape racing along beside it. Now and then he stopped to scan the course ahead, where the artificial channel had been strengthened with banks of drier salt, then turned and shouted to his men. They followed along the banks, their paddles driving the water on as it raced past.

Abruptly, a section of the channel collapsed and water spilled away into the adjacent creeks. Shouting as he ran, the leader raced through the shallows, his two-bladed paddle hurling the water back into the main channel. His men floundered after him, repairing the breach and driving the water back up the slope.

Leaving them, the leader ran on ahead, where the others were paddling the main body of water across the damp dunes. Although still carried along by its own momentum, the channel had widened into a gliding oval lake, the hundreds of fish tumbling over one another in the spinning currents. Every twenty yards, as the lake poured along, a dozen fish would be left stranded behind, and two older men bringing up the rear tossed them back into the receding wake.

Guiding it with their blades, the men took up their positions around the bows of the lake. At their prow, only a few feet from the front wave, the man in the cape piloted them across the varying contours. The lake coursed smoothly in and out of the channels, cruising over the shallow pools in its path. Half a mile from the shore it rilled along, still almost intact.

"Captain!" There was a shout from the two look-outs in the tail. "Captain Jordan!"

Whirling in the damp salt, the leader raised his paddle and drove the oarsmen back along the shores of the lake. Two hundred yards away, a group of five or six men, heads lowered as they worked their short paddles, had broken down the bank on the western side of the lake and were driving the water outwards across the dunes.

Converging around both banks, the trappers raced toward them, their paddles flashing at the water. The pirates ignored them and worked away at the water, propelling it through the breach. Already a large pool some fifty yards wide had formed among the dunes. As the main body of the lake moved

away, they ran down across the bank and began to paddle the pool away among the shallows to the west.

Feet splashed after them through the brine, and the air was filled with whirling paddles and the spray of flying salt. Trying to recover the water they had lured with such effort from the sea, the trappers drove it back toward the lake. Some of them attacked the pirates, splintering their short paddles with their own heavier blades. The dark-faced leader beat one man to his knees, snapping the bony shaft of his paddle with his foot, then clubbed another across the face, knocking him into the shallows. Warding off the flying blades, the pirates stumbled to their feet, pushing the water between their attackers' legs. Their leader, an older man with a red weal on his bearded face, shouted to them and they darted off in all directions, dividing the water into half a dozen pools, which they drove away with their paddles and bare hands.

In the mêlée, the main body of the lake had continued its gliding progress to the shore. The defenders broke off the attempt to recapture the water and ran after the lake, their rubber suits streaming with the cold salt. One or two of them stopped to shout over their shoulders, but the pirates had disappeared among the dunes. As the gray morning light gleamed in the wet slopes, their footfalls were lost in the streaming salt.

Nursing his cheek against the rubber pad on his shoulder, Ransom made his way carefully among the watery dunes, steering the small pool through the hollows. Now and then, as the pool raced along under its own momentum, he stopped to peer over the surrounding crests, listening to the distant cries of Jordan and his men. Sooner or later the stern-faced captain would send a party over to the beaches, where the outcasts lived, on a punitive expedition. At the prospect of smashed cabins and wrecked stills, Ransom rallied himself and pressed on, guiding the pool through the dips. Little more than twenty feet wide, it contained half a dozen small fish. One of them was stranded at his feet, and Ransom bent down and picked it up. Before he tossed it back into the water, his frozen fingers felt its plump belly.

Three hundred yards to his right he caught a glimpse of Jonathan Grady propelling his pool through the winding channels toward his shack below a ruined salt-conveyer. Barely seventeen years old, he had been strong enough to take

almost half the stolen water for himself, and drove it along untiringly.

The other four members of the band had disappeared among the saltflats. Ransom pushed himself ahead, the salty air stinging the weal on his face. By luck Jordan's paddle had caught him with the flat of its blade, or he would have been knocked unconscious and carried off to the summary justice of the Johnstone settlement. There his former friendship with the Reverend Johnstone, long-forgotten after ten years, would have been little help. It was now necessary to go out a full mile from the shore to trap the sea—the salt abandoned during the previous years had begun to slide off the inner beach areas, raising the level of the offshore flats —and the theft of water was becoming the greatest crime for the communities along the coast.

Ransom shivered in the cold light, and tried to squeeze the moisture from the damp rags beneath his suit of rubber strips. Sewn together with pieces of fishgut, the covering leaked at a dozen places. He and the other members of the band had set out three hours before dawn, following Jordan and his team over the gray dunes. They hid themselves in the darkness by the empty channel, waiting for the tide to turn, knowing that they had only a few minutes to steal a small section of the lake. But for the need to steer the main body of water to the reservoir at the settlement, Jordan and his men would have caught them. One night soon, no doubt, they would deliberately sacrifice their catch to rid themselves forever of Ransom.

As Ransom moved along beside the pool, steering it toward the distant tower of the wrecked lightship whose stern jutted from the sand a quarter of a mile away, he automatically counted and recounted the fish swimming in front of him, wondering how long he could continue to prey on Jordan and his men. By now the sea was so far away, the shore so choked with salt, that only the larger and more skillful teams could muster enough strength to trap a sizable body of water and carry it back to the reservoirs. Three years earlier, Ransom and the young Grady had been able to cut permanent channels through the salt, and at high tide enough water flowed down them to carry small catches of fish and crabs. Now, however, as the whole area had softened, the wet sliding salt made it impossible to keep any channel open for more than twenty yards, unless a huge team of men

were used, digging the channel afresh as they moved ahead of the stream.

The remains of one of the metal conveyers jutted from the dunes ahead. Small pools of water gathered around the rusting legs, and Ransom began to run faster, paddle whirling in his hands as he tried to gain enough momentum to sweep some of this along with him. Exhausted by the need to keep up a brisk trot, he tripped on to his knees, then stood up and raced after the pool as it approached the conveyer.

A fish flopped at his feet, twisting on the salt slope. Leaving it, Ransom rushed on after the pool, and caught up with it as it swirled through the metal legs. Lowering his head, he whipped the water with the paddle, and carried the pool over the slope into the next hollow.

Despite this slight gain, less than two-thirds of the original pool remained when he reached the lightship. To his left the sunlight was falling on the slopes of the salt tips, lighting up the faces of the hills behind them, but Ransom ignored these intimations of warmth and color. He steered the pool toward the small basin near the starboard bridge of the ship. This narrow tank, twenty yards long and ten wide, he had managed to preserve over the years by carrying stones and pieces of scrap metal down from the shore, and each day beating the salt around them to a firm crust. The water was barely three inches deep, and a few edible kelp and water anemones, Ransom's sole source of vegetable food, floated limply at one end. Often Ransom had tried to breed fish in the pool, but the water was too saline, and the fish invariably died within a few hours. In the reservoirs at the settlement, with their more dilute solutions, the fish lived for months. Ransom, however, unless he chose to live on dried kelp five days out of six, was obliged to go out almost every morning to trap and steal the sea.

He watched the pool as it slid into the tank like a tired snake, and then worked the wet bank with his paddle, squeezing the last water from the salt. The few fish swam up and down in the steadying current, nibbling at the kelp. Counting them again, Ransom followed the line of old boiler tubes that ran from the tank to the fresh-water still next to his shack. He had roofed it in with pieces of metal plate from the cabins of the lightship, and with squares of old sacking. Opening the door, he listened for the familiar bubbling sounds, and then saw with annoyance that the flame under the boiler was set too low. The wastage of fuel, every ounce

of which had to be scavenged with increasing difficulty from the vehicles buried beneath the shore, made him feel sick with frustration. A can of gasoline sat on the floor. He poured some into the tank, then turned up the flame and adjusted it, careful, despite his annoyance, not to overheat the unit. Using this dangerous and unpredictable fuel, scores of stills had exploded over the years, killing or maiming their owners.

He examined the condenser for any leaks, and then raised the lid of the water receptacle. An inch of clear water lay in the pan. He decanted it carefully into an old whisky bottle, raising the funnel to his lips to catch the last intoxicating drops.

He walked over to the shack, touching his cheek, conscious that the bruised skin would show through his coarse stubble. Overhead the sunlight shone on the curving sternplates of the wrecked lightship, giving the portholes a glassy opaque look like the eyes of dead fish. In fact, this stranded leviathan, submerged beyond sight of the sea in this concentration of its most destructive element, had rotted as much as any whale would have done in ten years. Often Ransom entered the hulk, searching for pieces of piping or valve gear, but the engine room and gangways had rusted into grotesque hanging gardens of corroded metal.

Below the stern, partly sheltered from the prevailing easterly winds by the flat blade of the rudder, was Ransom's shack. He had built it from the rusty motorcar bodies he had hauled down from the shore and piled on top of one another. Its bulging shell, puffed out here and there by a car's bulbous nose or trunk, resembled the carapace of a cancerous turtle.

The central chamber inside, floored with wooden deck planks, was lit by a single fish-oil lamp when Ransom entered. Suspended from a chassis above, it swung slowly in the draughts moving through the cracks between the cars.

A small gasoline stove, fitted with a crude flue, burned in the center of the room. Two metal beds were drawn up against a table beside it. Lying on one of them, a patched blanket across her knees, was Judith Ransom. She looked up at Ransom, her dented temple casting an oblique shadow across the lace-like burn on her cheek. Since the accident she had made no further attempt to disguise the dent in her temple, and her graying hair was tied behind her neck in a simple knot.

"You're late," she said. "Did you catch anything?"

Ransom sat down, and slowly began to peel off the rubber suit. "Five," he told her. He rubbed his cheek painfully, aware that he and Judith now shared the same facial stigma. "Three of them are quite big—there must be a lot to feed on out at sea. I had to leave one behind."

"For heaven's sake, why?" Judith sat up, her face sharpening. "We've got to give three to Grady, and you know he won't take small ones! That leaves us with only two for today!" She glanced about the shack with wavering desperation, as if hoping that in some magical way a small herring might materialize for her in each of the dingy corners. "I can't understand you, Charles. You'll have to go out again tonight."

Giving up the attempt to pull off his thighboots—like his suit, made from the inner tubes of car tires—Ransom leaned back across the bed. "Judith, I can't. I'm exhausted as it is." Adopting the wheedling tone she herself had used, he went on: "We don't want me to be ill again, do we?" He smiled at her encouragingly, turning his face from the lantern so that she would not see the weal. "Anyway, they won't be going out again tonight. They brought in a huge lake of water."

"They always do." Judith gestured with a febrile hand. She had not yet recovered from Ransom's illness. The task of nursing him and begging for food had been bad enough, but faded into the merest trifle compared with the insecurity of being without the breadwinner for two weeks. "Can't you go out to the sea and fish there? Why do you have to steal water all the time?"

Ransom let this reproof pass. He pressed his frozen hands to the stove. "You can never reach the sea, can't you understand? There's nothing but salt all the way. Anyway, I haven't a net."

"Charles, what's the matter with your face? Who did that?"

For a moment her indignant tone rallied Ransom's spirits, a display of that self-willed temper of old that had driven her from the Johnstone settlement five years earlier. It was this thin thread of independence that Ransom clung to, and he was almost glad of the injury for revealing it.

"We had a brief set-to with them. One of the paddle blades caught me."

"My God! Whose, I'd like to know? Was it Jordan's?" When Ransom nodded she said with cold bitterness: "One of these days someone will have his blood."

"He was doing his job."

"Rubbish. He picks on you deliberately." She looked at Ransom critically, and then managed a smile. "Poor Charles."

Pulling his boots down to his ankles, Ransom crossed the hearth and sat down beside her, feeling the pale warmth inside her shawl. Her brittle fingers kneaded his shoulders and then brushed his graying hair from his forehead. Huddled beside her inside the blanket, one hand resting limply on her thin thighs, Ransom gazed around the drab interior of the shack. The decline in his life in the five years since Judith had come to live with him needed no underlining, but he realized that this was part of the continuous decline of all the beach settlements. It was true that he now had the task of feeding them both, and that Judith made little contribution to their survival, but she did at least guard their meager fish and water stocks while he was away. Raids on the isolated outcasts had now become more frequent.

However, it was not this that held them together, but their awareness that only with each other could they keep alive some faint shadow of their former personalities, whatever their defects, and arrest the gradual numbing of sense and identity that was the unseen gradient of the dune limbo. Like all purgatories, the beach was a waiting ground, the endless stretches of wet salt sucking away from them all but the hardest core of themselves. These tiny nodes of identity glimmered faintly in the gray light of the limbo, as this zone of nothingness waited for them to dissolve and deliquesce like the few crystals dried by the sun. During the first years, when Judith had lived with Hendry in the settlement, Ransom had noticed her becoming increasingly shrewish and sharptongued, and assumed this to mark the break-up of her personality. Later, when Hendry became Johnstone's right-hand man, his association with Judith was a handicap. Her bodkin tongue and unpredictable ways made her intolerable to Johnstone's daughters and the other womenfolk.

She left the settlement of her own accord. After living precariously in the old shacks among the salt tips, she one day knocked on the door of Ransom's cabin. It was then that Ransom realized that Judith was one of the few people on the beach to have survived intact. The cold and brine had merely cut away the soft tissues of convention and politeness. However bad-tempered and impatient, she was still herself.

Yet this stopping of the clock had gained them nothing. The beach was a zone without time, suspended in an endless

interval as flaccid and enduring as the wet dunes themselves. Often Ransom remembered the painting by Tanguy that he had once treasured. Its drained beaches, eroded of all associations, of all sense of time, in some ways seemed a photographic portrait of the salt world of the shore. But the similarity was misleading. On the beach, time was not absent but immobilized, what was new in their lives and relationships they could form only from the residues of the past, from the failures and omissions that persisted into the present like the wreckage and scrap metal from which they built their cabins.

Ransom looked down at Judith as she gazed blankly into the stove. Despite the five years together, the five arctic winters and fierce summers when the salt banks gleamed like causeways of chalk, he felt few bonds between them. The success, if such a term could be used, of their present union, like its previous failure, had been decided by wholly impersonal considerations, above all by the zone of time in which they found themselves.

He stood up. "I'll bring one of the fish down. We'll have some breakfast."

"Can we spare it?"

"No. But perhaps there'll be a tidal wave tonight."

Once every three or four years, in response to some distant submarine earthquake, a huge wave would inundate the coast. The third and last of these, some two years earlier, had swept across the saltflats an hour before dawn, reaching to the very margins of the beach. The hundreds of shacks and dwellings among the dunes had been destroyed by the waist-high water, the reservoir pools washed away in a few seconds. Staggering about in the sliding salt, they had watched everything they owned carried away. As the luminous water swilled around the wrecked ships, the exhausted beachdwellers had climbed up onto the salt tips and sat there until dawn.

Then, in the first light, they had seen a fabulous spectacle. The entire stretch of the draining saltflats was covered with the expiring forms of tens of thousands of stranded fish, every pool alive with crabs and shrimps. The ensuing bloodfeast, as the gulls dived and screamed around the flashing spears, had rekindled the remaining survivors. For three weeks, led by the Reverend Johnstone, they had moved from pool to pool, and gorged themselves like beasts performing an obscene eucharist.

However, as Ransom walked over to the fish tank he was thinking, not of this, but of the first great wave, some six months after their arrival. Then the tide had gathered for them a harvest of corpses. The thousands of bodies they had tipped into the sea after the final bloody battles on the beaches had come back to them, their drowned eyes and blanched faces staring from the shallow pools. The washed wounds, cleansed of all blood and hate, haunted them in their dreams. Working at night, they buried the bodies in deep pits below the first salt tips. Sometimes Ransom would wake and go out into the darkness, half-expecting the washed bones to sprout through the salt below his feet.

Recently Ransom's memories of the corpses, repressed for so many years, had come back to him with added force. As he picked up his paddle and flicked one of the herrings onto the sand, he reflected that perhaps his reluctance to join the settlement stemmed from his identification of the fish with the bodies of the dead. However bitter his memories of the half-willing part he had played in the massacres, he now accepted that he would have to leave the solitary shack and join the Reverend Johnstone's small feudal world. At least the institutional relics and taboos would allay his memories in a way that he alone could not.

To Judith, as the fish browned in the frying pan, he said: "Grady is going to join the settlement."

"What? I don't believe it!" Judith brushed her hair down across her temple. "He's always been a lone wolf. Did he tell you himself?"

"Not exactly, but—"

"Then you're imagining it." She divided the fish into two equal portions, steering the knife precisely down the midline with the casual skill of a surgeon. "Jonathan Grady is his own master. He couldn't accept that crazy old clergyman and his mad daughters."

Ransom chewed the flavorless steaks of white meat. "He was talking about it while we waited for the tide. It was obvious what was on his mind—he's sensible enough to know we can't last out on our own much longer."

"That's nonsense. We've managed so far."

"But, Judith . . . we live like animals. The salt is shifting now, every day it carries the sea a few yards further out."

"Then we'll move along the coast. If we want to we can go a hundred miles."

"Not now. There are too many blood feuds. It's an endless

string of little communities, trapping their own small pieces of the sea and frightened of everyone else." He picked at the shreds of meat around the fish's skull. "I have a feeling Grady was warning me."

"What do you mean?"

"If he joins the settlement he'll be one of Jordan's team. He'll lead them straight here. In an obscure way, I think he was telling me he'd enjoy getting his revenge."

"For his father? But that was so far in the past. It was one of those terrible accidents that happen."

"It wasn't really. In fact, the more I think about it the more I'm convinced it was simply a kind of coldblooded experiment, to see how detached from everyone else I was." He shrugged. "If we're going to join the settlement it would be best to get in before Grady does."

Judith slowly shook her head. "Charles, if you go there it will be the end of you. You know that."

An hour later, when she was asleep, Ransom left the cabin and went out into the cold morning light. The sun was overhead, but the dunes remained gray and lifeless, the shallow pools like clouded mirrors. Along the shore the rusting columns of the half-submerged stills rose into the air, their shafts casting striped shadows on the brilliant white slopes of the salt tips. The hills beyond were bright with desert colors, but as usual Ransom turned his eyes from them.

He waited for five minutes to make sure that Judith remained asleep, then picked up his paddle and began to scoop the water from the tank beside the ship. Swept out by the broad blade, the water formed a pool some twenty feet wide, slightly larger than the one he had brought home that morning.

Propelling the pool in front of him, Ransom set off across the dunes, taking advantage of the slight slope that shelved eastwards from the beach. As he moved along he kept a careful watch on the shore. No one would attempt to rob him of so small a pool of water, but his departure might tempt some roving beachcomber to break into the shack. Here and there a set of footprints led up across the firmer salt, but otherwise the surface of the dunes was unmarked. A mile away, toward the sea, a flock of gulls sat on the wet saltflats, but except for the pool of water scurrying along at Ransom's feet, nothing moved across the sky or land.

Chapter 9—The Stranded Neptune

LIKE A HUGE broken-backed lizard, a derelict conveyer crossed the dunes, winding off toward the hidden sea. Ransom changed course as he approached it, and set off over the open table of shallow salt-basins that extended eastwards along the coast. He moved in and out of the swells, following the long gradients that carried the pool under its own momentum. His erratic course also concealed his original point of departure. Half a mile ahead, when he passed below a second conveyer, a stout bearded man watched him from one of the gantries, honing a whalebone spear. Ransom ignored him and continued on his way.

Below him a semicircle of derelict freighters rose from the saltflats. Around them, like the hovels erected against the protective walls of a medieval fortress, was a clutter of small shacks and out-buildings. Some, like Ransom's, were built from the bodies of old cars salvaged from the beach, but others were substantial wood and metal huts, equipped with doors and glass windows, joined together by companionways of galvanized iron. Gray smoke lifted from the chimneys, conveying an impression of quiet warmth and industry. A battery of ten large stills on the fore-shore discharged its steam toward the distant hills.

A wire drift fence enclosed the settlement. As Ransom approached the western gate, he could see the open surfaces of the huge water reservoirs and breeding tanks. Each was some two hundred feet long, buttressed by embankments of sand and shingle. A team of men, heads down in the cold sunlight, were working silently in one of the tanks, watched from the bank by an overseer holding a stave. Although three hundred people lived together in the settlement, no one moved around the central compound. As Ransom knew from his previous visits, its only activity was work.

Ransom steered his pool over to the gateway, where a few huts gathered around the watchtower. Two women sat in a doorway, rocking an anemic child. At various points along the perimeter of the settlement a few subcommunities had detached themselves from the main compound, either because

they were the original occupants of the site or were too lazy or unreliable to fit into the puritan communal life. However, all of them possessed some special skill with which they paid for their places.

Bullen, the gatekeeper, who peered at Ransom from his sentrybox below the watchtower, carved the paddles used by the sea-trappers. In long racks by the huts the narrow blades, wired together from pieces of whalebone, dried in the sunlight. In return, Bullen had been granted proprietary rights to the gateway. A tall, hunchbacked man with a sallow bearded face, he watched Ransom suspiciously, then walked slowly across the waterlogged hollows below the tower.

"Back again?" he said. Despite the infrequency of his visits, Ransom seemed to worry him in some obscure way, part of the general withdrawal of the settlement from the world outside. He pointed down at Ransom's pool with a paddle. "What have you got there?"

"I want to see Captain Hendry," Ransom said.

Grudgingly, Bullen released the gate. As Ransom steered the pool forwards, Bullen held it back with his paddle. Taking the hint, Ransom swept several bladefuls of the water into the basin by the tower. Usually Bullen would have expected a pair of small herring at the least, but from his brief glance at Ransom's appearance he seemed to accept that these few gallons of water were the limit of his wealth.

As the gate closed behind him, Ransom set off toward the compound. The largest of the freighters, its bows buried under the salt, formed the central tower of the settlement. Part of the starboard side, facing the shore, had been dismantled and a series of two- and three-story cabins had been built onto the decks. The stern castle of the ship, jutting high into the air, was topped by a large whalebone cross, and was the settlement's chapel. The portholes and windows had been replaced by primitive stained-glass images of biblical scenes, in which Christ and his disciples were surrounded by leaping fish and sea horses.

The settlement's preoccupation with the sea and its creatures could be seen at a glance. Outside every hut, dozens of small fish dried on trestle tables or hung from the eaves. Larger fish, groupers and sharks that had strayed into the shallow water, were suspended from the rails of the ships, while an immense swordfish, the proudest catch of the settlement and the Reverend Johnstone's choice of a militant symbol to signify its pride, was tied to the whalebone mast

and hung below the cross, its huge blade pointed heavenwards.

On the seaward side of the ships, a second team of men was working in one of the tanks, bending in the cold water as they harvested the edible kelp. Swathed in rubber tubing, they looked like primitive divers experimenting with makeshift suits in the shallow water.

Directly below the gangway of the freighter half a dozen round basins had been cut in the salt dunes, temporary storage tanks for people moving with their water up and down the coast. Ransom steered his pool into the second of them, next to a visiting fisherman selling his wares to one of the foremen. The two men argued together, stepping down into the water and feeling the plump plaice and soles.

Ransom drove his paddle into the sand by his pool. Half the water had been lost on the way, and there was barely enough to cover the floor of the basin.

He called up to the look-out on the bridge: "Is Captain Hendry aboard? Ransom to see him."

The man came down the companionway to the deck, and beckoned Ransom after him. They walked past the boarded-up portholes. Unpainted for ten years, the hulk was held together by little more than the tatters of rust. The scars of shell-fire marked the decks and stanchions—the freighter, loaded with fresh water and supplies, had been stormed by the insurgents breaking out from the rear areas of the beach, and then shelled from the destroyer now reclining among the dunes a hundred yards away. Through one of these tears, gaping like an empty flower in the deck overhead, Ransom could see an old surplice drying in the sun.

"Wait here. I'll see the Captain."

Ransom leaned on the rail, looking down at the yard below. An old woman in a black shawl chopped firewood with an ax, another straightened the kelp drying on a frame in the sunlight. The atmosphere in the settlement was drab and joyless, like that of an early pilgrim community grimly held together on the edge of some northern continent. Partly this was due to the vague sense of remorse still felt by the survivors—the specters of the thousands who had been killed on the beaches, or driven out in herds to die in the sea, haunted the bitter salt. But it also reflected the gradual attrition of life, the slow reduction of variety and movement as the residues of their past lives, the only materials left to them, sank into the sterile dunes. This sense of diminishing

possibility, of the erosion of all time and space beyond the flaccid sand and the draining branches, numbed Ransom's mind.

"The Captain will see you."

Ransom followed the man into the ship. The nautical terminology—there were some dozen captains, including Hendry, Jordan, and the Reverend Johnstone, a kind of ex officio rear-admiral—was a hangover from the first years when the nucleus of the original settlement had lived in the ship. The freighter sat where she had been sunk in the shallow water, the waves breaking her up, until the slopes of salt produced by the distillation units had driven the water back into the sea. At this stage thousands of emigrants were living in the cars and shacks on the beaches, and the distillation units, run by the citizens' cooperatives that had taken over from the military after the break-out battles, were each producing tons of salt every day. The large freighter had soon been inundated.

"Well, Charles, what have you brought now?" Seated at his desk in the purser's cabin, Hendry looked up as Ransom came in. Waving Ransom into a chair, he peered down the columns of an old leatherbound logbook that he used as a combined ledger and diary. In the intervening years the quiet humor had gone, and only the residue of the conscientious policeman remained. Dour and efficient, but so dedicated to securing the minimum subsistence level for the settlement that he could no longer visualize anything above that meager line, he summed up for Ransom all the dangers and confinements of their limbo.

"Judith sends her love, Captain," Ransom began. "How's the baby coming along?"

Hendry gestured vaguely with his pen. "As well as can be expected."

"Would you like some water for it? I have some outside. I was going to hand it over to the settlement, but I'd be delighted to give you and Julia the first cut."

Hendry glanced sharply at Ransom. "What water is this, Charles? I didn't know you had so much now you were giving it away."

"It isn't mine to give. The poachers were out again last night, stealing Jordan's catch as it came in. I found this pool near the channel this morning."

Hendry stood up. "Let's have a look at it." He led the way out onto the deck. "Where is it? *That* one down there?"

Shaking his head, he started back for his cabin. "Charles, what are you playing at?"

Ransom caught up with him. "Judith and I have been talking it over seriously, Captain . . . it's been selfish of us living alone, but now we're prepared to join the settlement. You'll soon need all the help you can get to bring in the sea."

"Charles. . . ." Hendry hesitated. "We're not short of water."

"Perhaps that's true, in the immediate sense, but a year or two from now—we've got to think ahead."

Hendry nodded to himself. "That's good advice." He turned in the door to his cabin. For a moment the old Hendry glimmered faintly in his eyes. "Thanks for the offer of the water, Charles. Look, you wouldn't like it in the settlement, the people have given too much. If you came here, they'd drain you away."

Reflectively he patted the white carcass of a small shark hanging in the sun outside the cabin, the shriveled face gaping sightlessly at Ransom.

Resting on the rail, Ransom pulled himself together. Hendry's refusal meant that he was acting on some decision already reached by the other captains.

The look-out stood by the gangway, watching Ransom's tall gaunt figure move restlessly along the rail. Ransom went over to him. "Where's Captain Jordan? Is he here?"

The man shook his head. "He's over in the cliffs. He won't be back till evening."

Ransom looked back at the distant hills, debating whether to wait for Jordan. Almost every afternoon he went out to the hills above the beach, disappearing among the sand-dunes that spilled through the ravines. Ransom guessed that he was visiting the grave of his foster-father, Mr. Jordan. The old Negro had died a few days after their arrival at the beach, and Philip had buried him somewhere among the dunes.

As he stepped past the look-out, the man said softly: "Miss Vanessa wants to see you."

Nodding to the man, Ransom glanced up and down the silent hulk of the ship, and then crossed to the port side. The look-out's feet rang softly on the metal rails of the bridge, but otherwise this side of the ship was silent.

Ransom walked along the empty deck. A rusty companionway led to the boatdeck above. Most of the lifeboats had been smashed to splinters in the bombardment, but the line

of officers' cabins was still intact. In one of these small cubicles behind the bridge, Vanessa Johnstone lived by herself.

Ransom reached the companionway, then stopped to glance through a damaged ventilator. Below was the central chamber of the ship. This long, high-ceilinged room had been formed when the floor dividing the passenger lounge from the dining room below had rusted out. It was now the Reverend Johnstone's combined vestry and throne-chamber.

A few oil-lamps flared from brackets on the wall, and cast a flickering submarine glow on to the ceiling, the shadows of the torn deck braces dancing like ragged spears. The floor of the chamber was covered with mats of dried kelp to keep out the cold. In the center, almost below Ransom, the Reverend Johnstone sat in an armchair mounted in the bow section of an old lifeboat, the very craft from which Johnstone had led the first assault on the freighter. The conchlike bowl, with its striped white timbers, was fastened to the small dais that had once been the bandstand. On the floor beside him were his daughters, Julia and Frances, with two or three other women, murmuring into their shawls and playing with a baby swaddled in rags of lace.

Looking down at the two daughters, Ransom found it difficult to believe that only ten years had elapsed since their arrival at the beach. Their faces had been puffed up by the endless diet of herring and fish-oil, and they had the thickened cheekbones and moon chins of Eskimo squaws. Sitting beside their father, shawls over their heads, they reminded Ransom of a pair of sleek, watchful madonnas. For some reason he was convinced that he owed his exclusion from the settlement to these two women. The proponents above all of the status quo, guardians and presiding angels of the dead time, perhaps they regarded him as a disruptive influence, someone who had preserved himself against the dunes and saltflats.

Certainly their senile father, the Reverend Johnstone, could now be discounted as an influence. Sitting like a stranded Neptune in the bowels of this saltlocked wreck, far out of sight of the sea, he drooled and wavered on his throne of blankets, clutching at his daughters' arms. He had been injured in the bombardment, and the right side of his face was pink and hairless. The gray beard tufting from his left cheek gave him the appearance of a demented Lear, grasping at the power he had given to his daughters. His head

bobbed about, and Ransom guessed that for two or three years he had been almost blind. The confined world of the settlement was limited by his own narrowing vision, sinking into a rigid matriarchy dominated by his two daughters.

If any escape lay for Ransom, only the third daughter could provide it. As he reached the deserted boatdeck of the freighter, Ransom felt that the climb had carried him in all senses above the drab world of the settlement.

"Charles!" Vanessa Johnstone was lying in her bunk in the cold cabin, gazing at the gulls on the rail through the open door. Her black hair lay in a single coil on her white breast. Her plain face was as smooth and unmarked as when she sat by the window of her attic bedroom in Larchmont. Ransom closed the door and seated himself on the bunk beside her, tentatively taking her hands. She seized them tightly, greeting him with her slow smile. "Charles, you're here—"

"I came to see Hendry, Vanessa." She embraced his shoulders with her cold hands. Her blood always seemed chilled, but it ran with the quicksilver of time, its clear streams darting like the fish he had chased at dawn. The cold air in the cabin and her white skin, like the washed shells gleaming on the beaches in the bright winter sun, made his mind run again.

"Hendry—why?"

"I . . ." Ransom hesitated, frightened of at last committing himself to Vanessa. If she opened his way to the settlement he would be cast with her forever. "I want to bring Judith here and join the settlement. Hendry wasn't very keen."

"But, Charles—" Vanessa shook her head. "You can't come here. It's out of all question."

"Why?" Ransom took her wrists. "You both assume that. It's a matter of survival now. The sea is so far out—"

"The sea! Forget the sea!" Vanessa regarded Ransom with her somber eyes. "If you come here, Charles, it will be the end for you. All day you'll be raking the salt from the boilers."

Ransom turned away, and for a few moments gazed through the porthole. In a tired voice he asked: "What else is there, Vanessa?"

He waited as she lay back against the white pillow, the cold air in the cabin turning the black spirals of her hair. "Do you know, Vanessa?"

Her eyes were on the gulls high above the ship, picking at the body of the swordfish hanging from the mast below the whalebone cross.

Chapter 10—The Sign of the Crab

HIGH ABOVE the dunes, in the tower of the lightship, Ransom watched Philip Jordan walking among the salt tips on the shore. Silhouetted against the white slopes, his tall figure seemed stooped and preoccupied, as he picked his way slowly along the stony path. He passed behind one of the tips, and then climbed the sandslopes that reached down from the ravines between the hills, a cloth bag swinging from his hand.

Sheltered from the wind by the fractured panels of the glass cupola, Ransom for a moment enjoyed the play of sunlight on the sand dunes and on the eroded faces of the cliff. The coastal hills now marked the edges of the desert that stretched in a continuous table across the continent, a wasteland of dust and ruined cities, but there was always more color and variety here than in the drab world of the saltflats. In the morning the seams of quartz would melt with light, pouring like liquid streams down the faces of the cliffs, the sand in the ravines turning into frozen fountains. In the afternoon the colors would mellow again, the shadows searching out the hundreds of caves and aerial grottos, until the evening light, shining from beyond the cliffs to the west, illuminated the whole coastline like an enormous ruby lantern, glowing through the casements of the cave-mouths as if lit by some subterranean fire.

When Philip Jordan had gone Ransom climbed down the stairway and stepped out onto the deck of the lightship. Beyond the rail a single melancholy herring circled the tank —Grady had come to demand his due while Ransom was at the settlement—and the prospect of the dismal meal to be made of the small fish caused Ransom to turn abruptly from the shack. Judith was asleep, exhausted by her altercation with Grady. Below him the deck shelved toward the salt-dunes sliding across the beach. Crossing the rail, Ransom walked off toward the shore, avoiding the shallow pools of brine disturbed by the wind.

The salt slopes became firmer. He climbed up toward the salt tips, rising against the hills like white pyramids. The remains of a large still jutted through the surface of the slope,

the corroded valve-gear decorating the rusty shaft. He stepped across the brown shell of a metal hut, his feet sinking through the lace-like iron, then climbed past a pile of derelict motorcar bodies half-buried in the salt. When he reached the tips he searched the ground for Philip Jordan's footprints, but the dry salt was covered with dozens of tracks left by the sledges pulled by the quarry workers.

Beyond the salt tips stretched what had once been the coastal shelf. The original dunes had been buried under the salt washed up from the beach during the storms, and by the drifts of sand and dust blown down from the hills. The gray sandy soil, in which a few clumps of grass gained a precarious purchase, was strewn with half-buried pieces of ironwork and metal litter. Somewhere beneath Ransom's feet were the wrecks of thousands of cars and trucks. Isolated hoods and windscreens poked through the sand, and sections of barbed wire fencing rose into the air for a few yards. Here and there the roof-timbers of one of the beachside villas sheltered the remains of an old hearth.

Some four hundred yards to his right was the mouth of the drained river, along which he had first reached the shore ten years earlier. Partly hidden by the quarry workings, the banks had been buried under the thousands of tons of sand and loose rock slipping down into the empty bed from the adjacent hills. Ransom skirted the edges of the quarry, making his way carefully through the wasteland of old chassis and smashed fenders thrown to one side.

The entrance to the quarry sloped to his left, the ramp leading down to the original beach. In the sandy face of the quarry were the half-excavated shells of a dozen cars and trailers, their fractured windows and grilles like veins of fossil quartz, embedded in the gritty face like the intact bodies of armored saurians. Here, at the quarry, the men from the settlement were digging out the old car shells, picking through them for tires, seats, and old rags of clothing.

Beyond the quarry the dunes gave way to a small hollow, from which protruded the faded gilt roof of an old fairground booth. The striped wooden awning hung over the silent horses of the merry-go-round, frozen like magical unicorns on their spiral shafts. Next to it was another of the booths, a line of washing strung from its decorated eaves. Ransom followed one of the pathways cut through the dunes into this little dell. Here Mrs. Quilter lived out of sight of the sea

and shore, visited by the quarry-workers and womenfolk of the settlement, for whom she practised her mild necromancy and fortune-telling. Although frowned upon by the Reverend Johnstone and his captains, these visits across the dunes served a useful purpose, introducing into their sterile lives, Ransom believed, those random elements, that awareness of chance and time, without which they would soon have lost all sense of identity.

As he entered the dell, Mrs. Quilter was sitting in the doorway of her booth, darning an old shawl. At the sound of footsteps she put away her needle and closed the lower half of the painted door, then kicked it open again when she identified Ransom. In the ten years among the dunes she had barely aged. If anything her beaked face was softer, giving her the expression of a quaint and amiable owl. Her small round body was swathed in layers of colored fabrics stitched together from the oddments salvaged by the quarry workers—squares of tartan blanket, black velvet, and faded corduroy, ruffed with strips of embroidered damask.

Beside her, outside the door, was a large jar of fish-oil. A dozen herrings, part of her recent take, dried in the sun. On the slopes around her, lines of shells and conches had been laid out in the sand to form a series of pentacles and crescents.

Dusting the sand off the shells as Ransom approached was Catherine Austen. She looked up, greeting him with a nod. Despite the warm sunlight in the hollow, she had turned up the leather collar of her fleece-lined jacket, hiding her lined face. Her self-immersed eyes reminded Ransom of the first hard years she had spent with the old woman, eking out their existence among the shells of the old motorcars. The success of their present relationship—their fading red hair made them seem like mother and daughter—was based on their absolute dependence on each other and the rigorous exclusion of everyone else.

On the sloping sand Catherine had set out the signs of the zodiac, the dotted lines outlining the crab, ram, and scorpion.

"That looks professional," Ransom commented. "What's my horoscope for the day?"

"When were you born? Which month?"

"Cathy!" Mrs. Quilter waved her little fist at Ransom from her booth. "That'll be a herring, doctor. Don't give him charity, dear."

Catherine nodded at the old woman, then turned to Ransom with a faint smile. Her strong, darkly tanned face was hardened by the spray and wind. "Which month? Don't tell me you've forgotten?"

"June," Ransom said. "Aquarius, I assume."

"Cancer," Catherine corrected. "The sign of the crab, doctor, the sign of deserts. I wish I'd known."

"Fair enough," Ransom said. They walked past the merry-go-round. He raised his hand to one of the horses and touched its eyes. "Deserts? Yes, I'll take the rest as read."

"But which desert, doctor? There's a question for you."

Ransom shrugged. "Does it matter? It seems we have a knack of turning everything we touch into sand and dust. We've even sown the sea with its own salt."

"That's a despairing view, doctor. I hope you give your patients a better prognosis."

Ransom looked down into her keen eyes. As she well knew, he had no patients. During the early years at the beach he had tended hundreds of sick and wounded, but almost all of them had died, from exposure and malnutrition, and by now he was regarded as a pariah by the people of the settlement, on the principle that a person who needed a doctor would soon die.

"I haven't got any patients," he said quietly. "They refuse to let me treat them. Perhaps they prefer your brand of reassurance." He looked around at the hills above. "For a doctor there's no greater failure. Have you seen Philip Jordan? About half an hour ago?"

"He went by. I've no idea where."

For half an hour Ransom climbed the dunes, wandering in and out of the foothills below the cliffs. Old caves studded the base, crude glass windows and tin doors let into their mouths, but the dwellings had been abandoned for years. The sand retained something of the sun's warmth, and for ten minutes Ransom lay down and played with the tags of wastepaper caught in its surface. Behind him the slopes rose to a smooth bluff a hundred feet above the dunes, the small headland jutting out over the surrounding hills. Slowly Ransom climbed up its flank, hoping that from here he would see Philip Jordan when he returned to the settlement.

Reaching the perch, he sat down and scanned the beach below. In the distance lay the shore, the endless banks of salt undulating out toward the sea. The wrecked freighters in

the settlement were grouped together like ships in a small port. Ignoring them, Ransom looked out over the wide bed of the river. For more than half a mile it was overrun by dunes and rockslides. Gradually the surface cleared to form a hard white deck, scattered with stones and small rocks, the dust blown between the clumps of dried grass.

Exploring the line of the bank, Ransom noticed that a small valley led off among the rocks and ravines. Like the river, the valley was filled with sand and dust, the isolated walls of ruined houses built on the slopes half-covered by the dunes.

In the slanting light Ransom could clearly see the line of footprints newly cut in the powdery flank. They led straight up to the ruins of a large villa, crossing the edge of a partly excavated road around the valley.

As Ransom made his way down from the bluff he saw Philip Jordan emerge briefly behind a wall, then disappear down a flight of steps.

Five minutes later, as Ransom climbed the slope to what he guessed was the old Negro's secret grave, a rock hurtled through the air past his head. He crouched down and watched the rock, the size of a fist, bound away off the sand.

"Philip!" he shouted into the sunlight. "It's Ransom!"

Philip Jordan's narrow face appeared at the edge of the road. "Go away, Ransom," he called brusquely. "Get back to the beach." He picked up a second stone. "I've already let you off once today."

Ransom held his footing in the shifting sand. He pointed to the ruined villa. "Philip, don't forget who brought him here. But for me he wouldn't be buried at all."

Philip Jordan stepped forward to the edge of the road. Holding the rock loosely in one hand, he watched Ransom begin the climb up to him. He raised the rock above his head. "Ransom . . .!" he called warningly.

Ransom stopped again. Despite Philip Jordan's advantages in strength and years, Ransom found himself seizing at this final confrontation. As he edged up the slope, remembering the knife hidden in his right boot, he knew that Philip Jordan was at last repaying him for all the help Ransom had given to the river-borne waif fifteen years earlier. No one could incur such an obligation without settling it to the full one day in its reverse coin. But above all, perhaps,

Philip saw in Ransom's ascetic face a likeness of his true father, the wandering fisher-captain who had called to him from the riverbank and from whom he had run away for the second time.

Slowly, Ransom climbed upwards, feeling with his feet for spurs of buried rock. His eyes watched the stone in Philip's hand, shining in the sunlight against the open sky.

Standing on a ledge twenty feet above the road, apparently unaware of the scene below, was a thin, long-bodied animal with a ragged mane. Its gray skin was streaked white by the dust, the narrow flanks scarred by thorns, and for a moment Ransom failed to recognize it. Then he raised his hand and pointed, as the beast gazed out entranced at the distant sea and the wet saltflats.

"Philip," he whispered hoarsely. "There, on the ledge."

Philip Jordan glanced over his shoulder, then dropped to one knee and hurled the stone from his hand. As the piece burst into a dozen fragments at its feet, the small lion leapt frantically to one side. With its tail down it bolted away across the rocky slopes, legs carrying it in a blur of dust.

As Ransom clambered up onto the road he felt Philip's hand on his arm. The young man was still watching the lion as it raced along the dry riverbed. His hand was shaking, less with fear than some deep unrestrainable excitement.

"What's that—a white panther?" he asked thickly, his eyes following the distant plume of dust vanishing among the dunes.

"A lion," Ransom said. "A small lion. It looked hungry, but I doubt if it will come back." He pulled Philip's shoulder. "Philip! Do you realize what this means? You remember Quilter and the zoo? The lion must have come all the way from Mount Royal! It means . . ." He broke off, the dust in his throat and mouth. A feeling of immense relief surged through him, washing away all the pain and bitterness of the past ten years.

Philip Jordan nodded, waiting for Ransom to catch his breath. "I know, doctor. It means there's water between here and Mount Royal."

A concrete ramp curved down behind the wall into the basement garage of the house. The dust and rockfalls had been cleared away, and a palisade of wooden stakes carefully wired together held back the drifts of sand.

Still lightheaded, Ransom pointed to the smooth concrete,

and to the fifty yards of clear roadway excavated from the side of the valley. "You've worked hard, Philip. The old man would be proud of you."

Philip Jordan smiled faintly. He took a key from the wallet on his belt and unlocked the door. "Here we are, doctor." He gestured Ransom forward. "What do you think of it?"

Standing in the center of the garage, its chromium grille gleaming in the shadows, was an enormous black hearse. The metal roof and body had been polished to a mirrorlike brilliance, the hubcaps shining like burnished shields. To Ransom, who for years had seen nothing but damp rags and rusting iron, whose only homes had been a succession of dismal hovels, the limousine seemed like an embalmed fragment of an unremembered past.

"Philip," he said slowly. "It's magnificent, of course, but . . ." Cautiously he walked around the great black vehicle. Three of the tires were intact and pumped up, but the fourth wheel had been removed and the axle jacked up onto a set of wooden blocks. Unable to see into the glowing leatherwork and mahogany interior, he wondered if the old Negro's body reposed in a casket in the back. Perhaps Philip, casting his mind back to the most impressive memories of his childhood, had carried with him all these years a grotesque image of the ornate hearses he had seen rolling around on their way to the cemeteries.

Cautiously he peered through the rear window. The wooden bier was empty, the chromium tapers clean and polished.

"Philip, where is he? Old Mr. Jordan?"

Philip gestured offhandedly. "Miles from here. He's buried in a cave above the sea. This is what I wanted to show you, doctor. What do you think of it?"

Collecting himself, Ransom said: "But they told me, everyone thought—all this time you've been coming here, Philip? To this . . . car?"

Philip unlocked the driver's door. "I found it five years ago. You understand I couldn't drive, there wasn't any point then, but it gave me an idea. I started looking after it, a year ago I found a couple of new tires. . . ." He spoke quickly, eager to bring Ransom up-to-date, as if the discovery and renovation of the hearse were the only events of importance to have taken place in the previous ten years.

"What are you going to do with it?" Ransom asked. He opened the driver's door. "Can I get in?"

"Of course." Philip wound down the window when Ransom was seated. "As a matter of fact, doctor, I want you to start it for me."

The ignition keys were in the dashboard. Ransom switched on. He looked around to see Philip watching him intently in the half-light, his dark face, like an intelligent savage's, filled with a strange childlike hope. Wondering how far he was still a dispensable tool, Ransom said: "I'll be glad to, Philip. I understand how you feel about the car. It's been a long ten years, the car takes one back. . . ."

Philip smiled, showing a broken tooth and the white scar below his left eye. "But please carry on. The tank is full of fuel, there's oil in, and the radiator is full."

Nodding, Ransom pressed the starter. As he expected, nothing happened. He pressed the starter several times, then released the handbrake and played with the gear lever. Philip Jordan slowly shook his head, only a faint look of disappointment on his face.

Ransom handed the keys to him. He stepped from the car. "It won't go, Philip, you understand that, don't you? The battery is flat, and all the electrical wiring will have corroded. You'll never start it, not in a hundred years. I'm sorry, it's a beautiful car."

With a shout, Philip Jordan slammed his foot at the half-open door, kicking it into the frame. The muscles of his neck and cheeks were knotted like ropes, as if all the frustration of the past years were tearing his face apart. With a wrench he ripped the windscreen wiper from its pinion, then drummed his fists angrily on the hood, denting the polished metal.

"It's got to go, doctor, if I have to push it myself all the way!" He threw Ransom aside, then bent down and put his shoulder to the door frame. With animal energy he drove the car forward on its wheels. There was a clatter as the blocks toppled to the floor, and the back axle and bumper crashed onto the concrete. The car sagged downwards, its body panels groaning. Philip raced around it, pulling at the doors and fenders with his strong hands.

Ransom stepped out into the sunlight and waited there for Philip. Ten minutes later he came out, head bowed, his right hand bleeding across his wrist.

Ransom took his arm. "We don't need the car, Philip. Mount Royal is only a hundred miles away, we can walk it comfortably in two or three weeks. The river will take us straight there."

PART III

Chapter 11—The Illuminated River

LIKE A BLEACHED white bone, the flat deck of the river stretched away to the north. At its margins, where the remains of the stone embankment formed a ragged windbreak, the dunes had gathered together in high drifts, and these defined the slow-winding course of the drained bed. Beyond the dunes was the desert floor, littered with rocks and stones, and with fragments of dried mud like burnt shards of pottery. Now and then the stump of a tree marked the distance of a concealed ridge from the river, or a metal windmill, its rusty vanes held like a cipher above the empty wastes, stood guard over a dried-up creek. In the coastal hills, the upper slopes of the valley had flowered with a few clumps of hardy gorse sustained by the drifts of spray, but ten miles from the sea the desert was completely arid, the surface crumbling beneath the foot into a fine white powder. The metal refuse scattered about the dunes provided the only floral decoration—twisted bedsteads rose like clumps of desert thorns, water pumps and farm machinery formed angular sculptures, the dust spuming from their vanes in the light breeze.

Revived by the spring sunlight, the small party moved at a steady pace along the drained bed. In the three days since setting out they had covered twenty miles, walking unhurriedly over the lanes of firmer sand that wound along the bed. In part their rate of progress was dictated by Mrs. Quilter, who insisted on walking for a few miles each morning. During the afternoon she agreed to sit on the cart, half asleep under the awning, while Ransom and Catherine Austen took turns with Philip Jordan to push it. With its large wooden wheels and light frame the cart was easy to move. Inside its locker were the few essentials of their expedition—a tent and blankets, a case of smoked herring and edible kelp, and half a dozen large cans of water, enough, Ransom estimated, for three weeks. Unless they found water during the journey to

Mount Royal, they would have to give up and turn back before reaching the city, but they all tacitly accepted that they would not be returning to the coast.

The appearance of the lion convinced Ransom that there was water within twenty or thirty miles of the coast, probably released from a spring or underground river. Without this, the lion would not have survived, and its hasty retreat up the river indicated that the drained bed had been its route to the coast. They came across no spoors of the creature, but each morning their own footprints around the camp were soon smoothed over by the wind. Nonetheless Ransom and Jordan kept a sharp watch for the animal, their hands never far from the spears fastened to the sides of the cart.

From Mrs. Quilter, Ransom gathered that the three of them had been preparing for the journey for the past two years. At no time had there been any formal plan or route, but merely a shared sense of the need to retrace their steps toward the city and the small town by the drained lake. Mrs. Quilter was obviously looking for her son, convinced that he was still alive somewhere in the ruins of the city.

Philip Jordan's motives, like Catherine's, were more concealed. Whether, in fact, he was searching for Jonas or for the painted houseboat he had shared with the old Negro, Ransom could not discover. He guessed that Mrs. Quilter had sensed these undercurrents during Philip's visits to her booth, and then carefully played on them, knowing that she and Catherine could never make the journey on their own. When Philip revealed the whereabouts of the car to her, Mrs. Quilter had needed no further persuasion.

Ironically, the collapse of the plan to drive in style to Mount Royal in the magnificently appointed hearse had returned Ransom to her favor.

"It was a grand car, doctor," she told him sadly for the tenth time, as they finished an early lunch under the shade of the cart. "That would have shown my old Quilty, wouldn't it?" She gazed into the distant haze, this vision of the prodigal mother's return hovering over the dunes. "Now I'll be sitting up in this old cart like a sack of potatoes."

"He'll be just as glad to see you, Mrs. Quilter." Ransom buried the remains of their meal in the sand. "Anyway, the car would have broken down within ten miles."

"Not if you'd been driving, doctor. I remember how you brought us here." Mrs. Quilter leaned back against the

wheel. "You just started those cars with a press of your little finger."

Philip Jordan paced across to her, resenting this swing in her loyalties. "Mrs. Quilter, the battery was flat. It had been there for ten years."

Mrs. Quilter brushed this aside scornfully. "Batteries. . . ! Help me up, would you, doctor? We'd best be pushing this cart on a bit more. Perhaps Philip will find us an old donkey somewhere."

They lifted her up under the awning. Ransom leaned against the shaft next to Catherine, while Philip Jordan patrolled the bank fifty yards ahead, spear in hand. Mrs. Quilter's upgrading of Ransom's status had not yet extended to Catherine Austen. She pushed away steadily at the handle, her leather jacket fastened by its sleeves around her strong shoulders. When the wheel on Ransom's side lodged itself in the cracked surface, she chided him: "Come on, doctor, or do you want to sit up there with Mrs. Quilter?"

Ransom bided his time, thinking of when he had first seen Catherine in the zoo at Mount Royal, exciting the lions in the cages. Since leaving them she had been subdued and guarded, but he could feel her reviving again, drawn to the empty savannahs and the quickening pulse of the desert cats.

Slowly they moved along the river, as Mrs. Quilter drowsed under the awning, her violet silks ruffled like half-furled sails in the warm air. Ahead of them the river continued its serpentine course between the dunes. Its broad surface, nearly three hundred yards wide, reflected the sunlight like a chalk deck. The draining water had grooved the surface, and it resembled the weathered dusty hide of an albino elephant. The wheels broke the crust, and their footsteps churned the dust into soft plumes that drifted away on the air behind them. Everywhere the sand was mingled with the fine bones of small fish, the white flakes of mollusk shells.

Once or twice Ransom glanced over his shoulder toward the coast, glad to see that the dust obscured his view of the hills above the beach. Already he had forgotten the long ten years on the saltflats, the cold winter nights crouched among the draining brine pools, and the running battles with the men of the settlement.

The river turned to the northeast. They passed the remains of a line of wharfs. Stranded lighters, almost buried under the sand, lay beside them, their gray hulks blanched and empty. A group of ruined warehouses stood on the bank,

single walls rising into the air with their upper windows intact. A series of concrete telegraph poles marked the progress of a road running toward the hills across the alluvial plain.

At this point the river had been dredged and widened. They passed more launches and rivercraft, half-submerged under the drifting sandhills. Ransom stopped and let the others move on ahead. He looked at the craft beached around him. Shadowless in the vertical sunlight, their rounded forms seemed to have been eroded of all but a faint residue of their original identities, like ghosts in a distant universe where drained images lay in the shallows of some lost time. The unvarying light and absence of all movement made Ransom feel that he was advancing across an inner landscape where the elements of the future stood around him like the objects in a still life, formless and without association.

They stopped by the hulk of a river steamer, a large graceful craft with a tall white funnel, which had run aground in the center of the channel. The deck was level with the surrounding sand. Ransom walked to the rail and stepped over it, then strolled across the deck to the open doors of the saloon below the bridge. Inside, the dust lay over the floor and tables, its slopes cloaking the seats and corner upholstery.

Catherine and Philip Jordan climbed onto the bridge and looked out over the plain for any signs of movement. Two miles away the aluminum towers of a grain silo shone against the hills.

"Can you see anything?" Ransom called up. "If there are hot springs they should send up steam clouds."

They shook their heads. "Nothing, doctor."

Ransom walked forward to the bow, and sat down on the capstan. Lowering his head, he saw that its shadow lay across his hands. Cupping them together, he altered the outline of his skull, varying its shape and length. He noticed Mrs. Quilter eying him curiously from her seat atop the cart.

"Doctor, that's a trick my Quilty had. You looked like him then. Poor lad, he was trying to straighten his head like everyone else's."

Ransom crossed the rail and went over to her. On an impulse he reached up and held her hand. Small and round, its pulse fluttered faintly, like a trembling sparrow. Mrs. Quilter gazed down at him with her vague eyes, her mind far

away. Suddenly Ransom found himself hoping against all logic that they would discover Quilter somewhere.

"We'll find him, Mrs. Quilter. He'll still be there."

"It's a dream, doctor, just a dream, a woman's fancy. But I couldn't rest until I've tried."

Ahead of them was a sharp bend in the river. A herd of cattle had been driven down the bank toward the last trickle of fluid, and their collapsed skeletons lay in the sand. The huge dented skulls lolled on their sides, each one like Quilter's, the grains of quartz glittering in the empty orbits.

Two miles further on a railway bridge crossed the river. A stationary train stood among the cantilevers, the doors of the carriages open onto the line. Ransom assumed that the route ahead had been blocked, and that the crew and passengers had decided to complete the journey to the coast by steamer.

They stopped in the shade below the bridge, and looked out at the endless expanse of the dry bed framed within its pillars. In the afternoon light the thousands of shadows cast by the metal refuse covered the surface with calligraphic patterns.

"We'll camp here tonight," Philip Jordan said. "We'll make an early start; by this time tomorrow we'll be well on the way."

Each evening it took them at least two hours to prepare their camp. They pushed the cart into the shelter of one of the pillars, then drove the spears into the sand and draped the tent from the frame. Catherine and Ransom dug a deep trench around the tent, piling the warm sand into a windbreak. Philip walked up to the bank and searched the dunes for metal stakes. At night a cold wind blew across the desert, and the few blankets they had brought with them were barely adequate to keep them warm.

By dusk they had built a semicircular embankment three feet high around the tent and cart, held together by the pieces of metal. Inside this small burrow they sat together, cooking their meal at a fire of tinder and driftwood. The smoke wreathed upwards through the girders, drifting away into the cold night air.

While the two women prepared their meal, Ransom and Philip Jordan climbed up onto the bridge. The dried and splitting hulks of the passenger coaches sat between the cantilevers, the stars shining through the rents in their roofs.

Philip began to tear armfuls of the dry wood from the sides of the coaches. Rotted suitcases and haversacks lay in the dust by the tracks. Ransom walked forward along the line to the locomotive. He climbed into the cabin and searched for a water tap among the rusted controls. He leaned his elbows on the sill of the driver's window and for half an hour looked out along the track as it crossed the bridge and wound away over the desert.

At night, as he slept, he was awakened by Philip Jordan. "Doctor! Listen!"

He felt the young man's hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see the glowing embers of the fire reflected in his eyes as he stared across the river. "What is it?"

Far away to the northwest, where the dried trees and husks of the desert merged into the foothills of the night, an animal howled wearily. Its lost cries echoed faintly among the steel pillars of the bridge, reverberating across the white river that lay beside them, as if trying to resurrect this long-dormant skeleton of the dead land.

At dawn the next morning they dismantled the camp and loaded their equipment into the cart. The disturbed night, and the earlier appearance of the sun each morning, delayed their departure. Philip Jordan paced around the cart as he waited for Mrs. Quilter, tapping his spear restlessly against the spokes of the wheel. In the sunlight his dark beaked face gave him the appearance of a nervous desert nomad, scion of some dwindling aristocratic tribe.

"Did you hear the sounds?" he asked Catherine when she appeared. "What was it—a lion or a panther?"

Catherine shook her head. She had loosened her hair, and the long tresses lifted about her head in the cool air. Unlike Philip, the sounds of the night seemed to have calmed her. "Neither. A dog of some sort. Perhaps a wolf. It was far away."

"Not more than five miles." Philip climbed up on to the remains of the camp and peered across the riverbed. "We'll be on it by noon. Keep your eyes open." He glanced sharply at Catherine, and then looked down at Ransom, who was squatting by the fire, warming his hands over the embers. "Doctor?"

"Of course, Philip. But I shouldn't worry. After ten years they'll be more frightened of us than we are of them."

"That's wishful thinking, doctor." To Catherine, he added

tersely as he strode down the embankment: "On the cliff we saw a *lion*."

When Mrs. Quilter was ready, he tried to persuade her to take her seat on the cart. Although she had slept badly and was already becoming overtired by the journey, Mrs. Quilter insisted on walking for the first hour. She moved along at a snail's pace, her tiny booted feet advancing over the cracked sand like timorous mice.

Philip strode beside her, barely controlling his impatience, steering the cart with one hand. Now and then Catherine would take Mrs. Quilter's arm, but she insisted on making her own way, pausing to mumble to herself and shake her head.

Ransom took advantage of her slow pace to stroll away across the surface of the river, picking among the windblown debris that had spilled down onto the bank—windmill blades and the detached doors of cars. The cold morning air refreshed him, and he was glad that Mrs. Quilter was slowing the party's progress. The few minutes alone allowed him to collect the stray thoughts that had preoccupied him more and more during their advance up the river. As he pondered on the real reasons for their journey, he had begun to sense its true inner compass. At first Ransom had assumed that he himself, like Philip Jordan and Mrs. Quilter, was returning to the past, to pick up the frayed ends of his previous life; but he now felt that the white deck of the river was carrying them all into the opposite direction, forward into zones of time future where the unresolved residues of the past would appear smoothed and rounded, muffled by the detritus of time, like images in a clouded mirror. Perhaps these residues were the sole elements contained in the future, and would have the bizarre and fragmented quality of the debris through which he was now walking, but nonetheless they would all be merged and resolved in the soft dust of the drained bed.

"Philip! Dr. Ransom!" Catherine Austen had stopped some twenty yards behind the others and was pointing down the river behind them.

A mile away, where the bridge crossed the river, the empty train was burning briskly in the sunlight, billows of smoke pouring upwards into the air. The flames moved from one coach to the next, the bright embers falling between the tracks onto the site of the camp below. Within a few minutes the entire train had been engulfed. The sky to the south was stained by the dark smoke.

Ransom walked over to the others. "There's a signal, at

least," he said quietly. "If there's anyone here they'll know we've arrived."

Philip Jordan's hands fretted on the shaft of his spear. "It must have been the fire. Didn't you put it out, doctor?"

"Of course. An ember must have blown up onto the track during the night."

They watched the fire burn itself out among the last coaches on the approach lines to the bridge. Collecting himself, Philip turned to Mrs. Quilter and motioned her toward the cart.

Ransom took his place at the shaft. They moved off at a brisk pace, all three pushing the cart along. Over his shoulder, when they reached a bend in the river, Ransom looked back at the burning bridge. The smoke still drifted up from the train, its curtain sealing off the south behind them.

By noon they had covered ten miles more. They stopped to prepare their midday meal. Pleased with their progress, Philip Jordan helped Mrs. Quilter down from the cart and set up the awning for her, trailing it from the hull of an old lighter.

After the meal Ransom strolled away along the bank. Cloaked by the sand, the remains of wharfs and jetties straggled past the hulks of barges. The river widened into a small harbor. Ransom climbed a wooden quay and walked past the leaning cranes through the outer streets of a small town. The façades of half-ruined buildings and warehouses marked out the buried streets. He passed a hardware store and then a small bank, its doors shattered by ax blows. The burnt-out remains of a bus depot lay in a heap of smashed glass plate and dulled chromium.

A large bus stood in the court, its roof and sides smothered under the sand, in which the eyes of the windows were set like mirrors of an interior world. Ransom ploughed his way down the center of the road, passing the submerged forms of abandoned cars. The succession of humps, the barest residue of identity, interrupted the smooth flow of the dunes down the street. He remembered the cars excavated from the quarry on the beach. There they had emerged intact from their ten-year burial, the scratched fenders and bright chrome mined straight from the past. By contrast, the half-covered cars in the street were like idealized images of themselves, the essences of their own geometry, the smooth curvatures like the eddies flowing out of some platonic future.

Submerged by the sand, everything had been transvalued

in the same way. Ransom stopped by one of the stores in the main street. The sand blowing across it had reduced the square glass plate to an elliptical window three feet wide. Peering through it, he saw a dozen faces gazing out at him from the dim light with the waxy expressions of plastic mannequins. Their arms were raised in placid postures, the glacé smiles as drained as the world around them.

Abruptly, Ransom caught his breath. Among the blank faces, partly obscured by the reflections of the buildings behind him, was a grinning head. It swam into focus, like a congealing memory, and Ransom started as a shadow moved in the street behind him.

"Quilt—!" He watched the empty streets and sidewalks, trying to remember if all the footprints in the sand were his own. The wind passed flatly down the street, and a wooden sign swung from the roof of the store opposite.

Ransom walked toward it, and then turned and hurried away through the drifting sand.

They continued their progress up the river. Pausing less frequently to rest, they pushed the cart along the baked white deck. Far behind them the embers of the burnt-out train sent their long plumes into the sky.

Then, during the midafternoon, when the town was five miles behind them, they looked back and saw dark billows of smoke rising from its streets. The flames raced across the rooftops, and within ten minutes an immense pall of smoke cut off the southern horizon.

"Dr. Ransom!" Philip Jordan strode over to him as he leaned against the shaft of the cart. "Did you light a fire while you were there? You went for a walk."

Ransom shook his head. "I don't think so, Philip. I had some matches with me—I suppose I might have done."

"But did you? Can't you remember?" Philip watched him closely.

"No. I'm sure I didn't. Why should I?"

"All right, then. But I'll take those matches, doctor."

From then on, despite Philip's suspicions that he had started the fires—suspicions that for some obscure reason he found himself sharing—Ransom was certain they were being followed. The landscape had changed perceptibly. The placid open reaches of the coastal plain, its perspectives marked by an isolated tree or silo, had vanished. Here the remains of small towns gave the alluvial bench an uneven appearance,

the wrecks of cars were parked among the dunes by the river and along the roads approaching it. Everywhere the shells of metal towers and chimneys rose into the air. Even the channel of the river was more crowded, and they wound their way past scores of derelict craft.

They passed below the spans of the demolished road bridge that had interrupted their drive to the coast ten years earlier. As they stepped through the collapsed arches, and the familiar perspectives reappeared in front of them, Ransom remembered the solitary figure they had seen walking slowly away up the drained bed. He left the cart and went on ahead, searching for the footsteps of this enigmatic figure. In front of him the light was hazy and obscured, and for a moment, as he tried to clear his eyes, he saw a sudden glimpse of someone three hundred yards away, his back touched by the sunlight as he moved off among the empty basins.

Chapter 12—The Smoke Fires

THIS IMAGE remained with him as they completed the final stages of the journey to Mount Royal. Ten days later, when they reached the western outskirts of the city, it had become for Ransom inextricably confused with all the other specters of the landscape they had crossed. The aridity of the central plain, with its desolation and endless deserts stretching across the continent, numbed him by its extent. The unvarying desert light, the absence of all color, and the brilliant whiteness of the stony landscape made him feel that he was advancing across an immense graveyard. Above all, the lack of movement gave to even the slightest disturbance an almost hallucinatory intensity. By night, as they rested in a hollow cut into the dunes along the bank, they would hear the same unseen animal somewhere to the northwest, howling to itself at their approach. Always it was several miles away from them, its cries echoing across the desert, reflected off the isolated walls that loomed like megaliths in the gray light.

By day, when they set out again, they would see the fires burning behind them. The dark plumes rose from the

desert floor, marking the progress of the river bed from the south. Sometimes six or seven fires would burn simultaneously in a long line, their billows leaning against the sky.

Their supplies of water were now almost exhausted, and the failure to find any trace of springs or underground channels had put an end to the original purpose of the expedition. However, none of them mentioned the need to turn back for the coast, or made a serious attempt to dig for water in the sand. Backs bent against the cart, they plodded on toward the rising skyline of the city.

The reduction in their daily water ration made them uneager to talk to each other. Most of the time Mrs. Quilter sat tied to the back-rest atop the cart, swaying and muttering to herself. Philip Jordan, his dust-streaked face more and more lizardlike in the heat, carefully scanned the verges of the river, taking his spear and running on ahead whenever the others rested. Pushing away at the cart, Catherine Austen kept to herself. Only the cries of the animal at night drew any response from her.

On the night before they reached the city, Ransom woke to the distant howling and saw her a hundred yards from the camp. She was walking on the dunes beyond the river's edge, the dark night wind whipping her long hair off her shoulders.

The next morning, as they knelt by the fire, sipping at one of the two remaining canteens, he asked her: "Catherine, we're almost there. What are you looking for?"

She picked up a handful of the dust and clenched it in her fist, then let the white crystals dissolve between her fingers.

Surrounded on all sides by the encroaching desert, the city seemed to have drawn in upon itself, the ridges of brick and stone running off into the sandhills. As they neared the city, the burnt-out roofs rose above the warehouses by the dockyards. Ransom looked up at the wharfs and riverside streets, waiting for any signs of movement, but the roads were deserted, filled with sand like the floors of canyons. The buildings receded in dusty tiers, transforming the whole place into a prehistoric terrace city, a dead metropolis that turned its forbidding stare on them as they passed.

Beyond the outskirts of the city, the riverside towns had vanished. Huge dunes sloped among the ruined walls, pieces of burnt timber sticking from the smooth flanks. Philip Jordan and Ransom climbed onto the bank and looked out

across the causeways of rubble stretching away like the foundation stones of a city still waiting to be laid. Here and there the remains of a shanty leaned against a wall, or a small group of buildings stood alone like a deserted fort. Half a mile away they could see the curve of the motor-bridge, and beyond it an indistinct series of earthworks that marked the remains of Larchmont.

Ransom stared out at the lake. Where the open water had once been, a sea of white dunes stretched away toward the horizon, their rolling crests touched by the sunlight. Ransom waited for them to move, the soft waves sweeping across the shore. The symmetry of the dunes, their drained slopes like polished chalk, illuminated the entire landscape.

Shaking his head at the desolation around him, Philip Jordan muttered: "There's no water here, Ransom. Those fires were an accident. Quilter, everyone, they're all dead."

Ransom looked back at the dark plumes lifting into the sky behind them. The nearest was only half a mile away, burning somewhere by the harbor authority wharf. "Philip, there must be someone. If they're here, there'll be water."

Below them, Catherine Austen leaned against the side of the cart. Under her awning Mrs. Quilter rocked like a child from side to side. Philip began to walk down to them when a harsh barking crossed the air from a two-story building a hundred yards from the bank.

Philip crouched down behind a section of metal fencing, but Ransom beckoned to him. "Philip, come on! Those dogs are given water by someone."

They made their way along the fence, darting from the cover of one ruined house to another. The humps of car roofs and the blackened stumps of old watchtowers broke through the surface. The noise of the dogs rose from the far side of the building. A stairway led to the shopping level on the second floor. Ransom and Philip moved carefully up the steps to the open balcony. Drifts of dust, mingled with old cans and pieces of broken furniture, had been blown against the metal balustrade overlooking the piazza. Holding their spears, they crawled across to the railing. For a moment Philip hesitated, as if frightened by whom he might see below, but Ransom pulled his arm.

In the center of the piazza, some fifty yards to their left, five or six dogs were attacking a group of plastic mannequins taken from one of the stores and set out on the pavement. The lean white forms leapt and snarled, tearing at the faces

of the mannequins and stripping off the rags of clothing draped across their shoulders and waists. One after the other, the mannequins were knocked over, their arms and legs torn off by the snapping mouths.

A whiplike crack came from beyond the far end of the building, and the pack turned and raced off, two of them dragging a headless mannequin across the dust. Rounding the corner of the building, they disappeared among the ruined streets, the sharp cracks of the whip driving them on.

Ransom pointed to a detached head rocking in the gutter, seeing in the savaged faces the waxy images behind the store window in the riverside town. "A warning to travelers, Philip? Or just practice for the dogs?"

They returned to Catherine and Mrs. Quilter, and rested for a few minutes in the shade inside the hull of a wrecked barge. In a breaker's yard across the river was the skeleton of a large fishing trawler, its long hull topped by the high sternbridge that Jonas had paced like some desert Ahab, hunting for his white sea. Ransom glanced at Philip Jordan, and saw that he was staring up at the bridge, his eyes searching the empty portholes.

Mrs. Quilter sat up weakly. "Can you see my old Quilty?" she asked. During the past few days, as they neared Mount Royal, each of them had been generous with their water rations to Mrs. Quilter, as if this in some way would appease the daunting specter of her son. Now, however, with only two canteens left and the city apparently deserted, Ransom noticed that she received barely her own ration.

"He'll be here, doctor," she said, aware of this change of heart. "He'll be somewhere, I can feel it."

Ransom wiped the dust from his beard. The thinning hair was now as white as Miranda Lomax's had ever been. He watched the distant plumes of smoke rising along the course of the river. "Perhaps he is, Mrs. Quilter."

They left the trawler and set off toward the motorbridge, which they reached half an hour later. Outside the entrance to the yacht basin the remains of Mrs. Quilter's barge lay in the sunlight, a few burnt beams dimly outlining its shape. She pottered over them, stirring the charred timbers with a stick, and then let herself be lifted back into the cart.

As they ploughed through the fine dust below the fishermen's quays, Ransom noticed that from here out to the white dunes of the lake the surface was composed almost entirely of the ground skeletons of thousands of small fish. Spurs of

tiny bones and vertebrae shone in the dust at his feet. This coating of bone meal formed the brilliant reflector that illuminated the lake and the surrounding desert.

As they passed below the intact span of the motorbridge, Ransom let go of the shaft. "Philip, the houseboat!" Recognizing the rectangular outline buried in the sand, he ran through the drifts toward it.

He knelt down in the flowing sand, and brushed it away from the windows, then peered through the scored glass as Philip Jordan clambered up beside him.

Some years earlier the cabin had been ransacked. Books were scattered about, the desk drawers pulled out onto the floor; but at a glance Ransom could see that all his mementos, which he had gathered together before leaving Larchmont, were still within the cabin. A window on the port side was broken, and the sand poured across the desk, half-submerging the framed reproduction, Tanguy's image of drained strands. Ransom's paperweight, the fragment of Jurassic limestone, lay just beyond reach of the sand.

"Doctor, what about the water?" Philip Jordan knelt beside him, clearing the sand away from the window. "You had some water in a secret tank."

"Under the galley. Get in round the other side." As Philip stepped over the roof and began to drive the sand away, Ransom peered down again through the window. The care he had given to furnishing the houseboat, the mementos with which he had stocked it like some psychic ark, made him feel that it had been prepared in the future and stranded here ten years earlier in anticipation of his present needs.

"Over here, doctor!" Philip called. Ransom left the window and crossed the dust-covered roof. Catherine Austen was climbing the bank, gazing up at the ruins of her villa.

"Have you found it, Philip?"

Philip pointed down through the window; the floor of the galley had been ripped back to the walls, revealing the rungs of a stairwell into the pontoon.

"Someone else found it first, doctor." Philip stood up. He rubbed his throat, leaving a white streak across his neck. He turned and looked back down the river to the fishing trawler in the breaker's yard.

Ransom left him and began to climb the slope to the embankment of the bridge. The sand shifted, pouring away around his knees. With his feet he touched a bladed metal object, the outboard motor he had abandoned by the house-

boat. For some reason, he now wanted to get away from the others. During the journey from the coast they had relied on one another, but with their arrival at Mount Royal, at the very point from which they had set out ten years earlier, he felt that all his obligations to them had been discharged. As he climbed the embankment he looked down at them, isolated from each other in the unvarying light, held together only by the sand pouring between their feet.

He climbed over the balustrade and limped slowly along the pavement toward the center of the span. The surface was covered with the strips of metal and old tires that he remembered. He rested on the rail, looking out across the dune-covered ruins around the empty towers of the distant city. To the northeast, the white surface of the drained lake rolled onwards to the horizon.

He sat down by a gap in the balustrade, surrounded by the empty cans and litter, like an exhausted mendicant. Below him Philip Jordan made his way down the riverbed, a spear in one hand and one of the two canteens over his shoulder. Catherine Austen was moving diagonally away from him up the bank, searching for something among the splinters of driftwood. Only Mrs. Quilter still sat on the cart below her tattered awning.

For ten minutes Ransom leaned against the balustrade on the deserted bridge, watching the figures below move away. Like an old crab, Mrs. Quilter crawled slowly up the far bank.

Vaguely hoping for a glimpse of his own house, his eye was distracted by a gleam of light. Cradled among the dunes near the site of Lomax's mansion was a small pond of blue water, its smooth surface ruffled into vivid patterns. Watching it, Ransom decided that the pond was a mirage of remarkable intensity. At least a hundred feet in diameter, the water was ringed by a narrow beach of smooth sand shaped like the banks of a miniature reservoir. The dunes and ruined walls surrounded it on all sides.

As he waited for the mirage to fade, a small white bird crossed the ruins and swooped down over the water. Furling its wings, it landed on the surface, gliding along a wake of breaking light.

Ransom clambered to his feet and hurried forward across the bridge. Giving up any attempt to find the others, he climbed the rail at the lower end and slid down the embankment. Pausing to rest every fifty yards, he ran on along the

waterfront streets, stepping on the roofs of the cars buried under the sand.

"Doctor!" As he sidestepped over a low wall, Ransom almost jumped onto the diminutive form of Mrs. Quilter, crouching below him in a crevice. She gazed up at him with timid eyes. Somehow she had managed to dismount from the cart and make her way up the bank. "Doctor," she sighed plaintively, "I can't move myself."

When Ransom began to run on she fished the other canteen from beneath her silks. "I'll share it with you, doctor."

"Come on, then." Ransom took her arm and helped her to her feet. They set off slowly together. Once she tripped over a partly buried cable and sat down panting in the dust. Ransom chafed at the delay. Finally he knelt down and hoisted her onto his back, her small, dry hands clasped around his neck.

Surprisingly, she was as light as a child. Along the open stretches, he was able to run for a few paces. Now and then he put her down and climbed one of the walls to take his bearings. Sitting in a sandfilled swimming pool by a lean-to of burnt timber, the embers of an old fire around her, she watched Ransom like an amiable witch.

As they took their final leave of the river, Mrs. Quilter pinched his ear.

"Doctor, look back for a minute!"

Half a mile away, below the motorbridge, clouds of smoke rose from the houseboat, the flames burning brightly in the shadows below the bridge. A few seconds later the cart began to burn, as if touched by some invisible torch.

"Never mind!" Tightening his grip on her legs, Ransom stumbled away across the rubble, like a lunatic Sinbad bearing the old woman of the desert sea. He turned in and out of the sloping streets, the dust rising behind them. Ahead he saw the ring of higher dunes that surrounded the lake of water. With a last effort he ran up the nearest slope.

When he reached the crest he stopped and let Mrs. Quilter slide from his shoulders. He walked slowly down to the silent disc of blue water. Stirred by the wind, a few wavelets lapped at the beach, a strip of dark sand that merged into the rubble. The lake was a small reservoir, the banks of sand built along a convenient perimeter of ruined walls. To Ransom, however, it seemed to have dropped from the sky, a distillation of all the lost rain of a decade.

Ten feet from the water's edge he broke into a run, and

stumbled across the loose bricks to the firmer sand. The white bird sat in the center, watching him circumspectly. As the water leapt around his feet, the foam was as brilliant as its plumage. Kneeling in the shallow water, he bathed his head and face, then soaked his shirt, letting the cool crystal-like liquid run down his arms. The powdery blue water stretched to the opposite shore, the dunes hiding all sight of the wilderness.

With a short cry, the bird flew off across the surface. Ransom gazed around the bank. Then, over his shoulder, he became aware of a huge figure standing on the sand behind him.

Well over six feet tall, and with its broad shoulders covered by a loose cloak of cheetah skins, an immense feathered cap on its head, the figure towered above him like a grotesque primitive idol bedecked with the unrelated possessions of an entire tribe. Girdled around its waist by a gold cord was a flowing caftan that had once been a blue paisley dressing gown, cut back to reveal a stout leather belt hitching up a pair of trousers. These had apparently been cut from odd lengths of turkish carpeting, and terminated their uneven progress in a set of hefty sea boots. Clamped to them by metal braces were two stout wooden stilts nailed down to a pair of sandshoes. Together they raised their owner two feet further above the ground.

Ransom knelt in the water, watching the figure's scowling face. The expression was one of almost preposterous ferocity. The long russet hair fell to the shoulders, enclosing the face like a curtained exhibit in a fairground freak show. Above the notched cheekbones, the feathered cap sprouted laterally into two black wings, like a Norseman's helmet, and between them a long wavering appendage pointed down at Ransom.

"Quilter—!" he began, recognizing the stuffed body of the black swan. "Quilter, I'm—"

Before he had climbed to his feet the figure was suddenly galvanized into life, and with a shout launched itself through the air at Ransom. Knocked sideways into the water, Ransom felt the heavy knees in the small of his back, strong hands forcing his shoulders into the water. A fist pounded on the back of his head like a drum. Gasping for air, Ransom had a last glimpse through the flailing furs of Mrs. Quilter hobbling down the bank, her beaked face wearing a stunned smile

as she croaked: "It's my Quilty boy . . . come here, lad, it's your old mother come to save you. . . ."

Half an hour later Ransom had partly recovered, stretched out on the beach by the cool water. As he lay half-stunned in the sunlight he was aware of Mrs. Quilter jabbering away on one of the dunes a few yards from him, the silent figure of her son, like an immense cuckoo, squatting beneath his furs in the sand. The old woman, beside herself with delight at having at last found her son, was now inflicting on him a nonstop résumé of everything that had happened to her during the previous decade. To Ransom's good luck, she included a glowing account of the magnificent expedition by automobile to the coast, which Ransom had arranged for her. At the mention of his name, Quilter strode down the dune to inspect Ransom, turning him over with a stilted boot. His broad dented face, with its wandering eyes set above the hollowed cheeks, had changed little during the intervening years, although he seemed twice his former height and gazed about with a more self-composed air. As he listened to his mother he cocked one eye at her thoughtfully, almost as if calculating the culinary possibilities of this small bundle of elderly gristle.

Ransom climbed unsteadily to his feet and walked slowly up the dune to them. Quilter seemed barely to notice him, almost as if Ransom had emerged half-drowned from this pool every morning of the past ten years. His huge eyes were mottled like marbled sandstone. The ambiguous watery smile had vanished, and his wide mouth was firm and thinlipped.

"Doctor—?" Mrs. Quilter broke off her monologue, surprised to see Ransom but delighted that he had been able to join them. "I was just telling him about you, doctor. Quilty, the doctor's a rare one with cars."

Ransom murmured noncommittally, weakly brushing the damp sand from his half-dried clothes.

In a gruff voice, Quilter said: "Don't fish into any cars here, there are people buried in them." With a gleam of his old humor he added: "Hole down to the door, slide them in, up with the window, and that's their lot—eh?"

"Sounds a good idea," Ransom agreed cautiously. He decided not to tell him about Philip Jordan or Catherine. As yet Quilter had given them no indication of where or how he lived.

For five minutes Quilter sat silently on the crest of the

dune, occasionally patting his furs as his mother chattered away, touching him tentatively with her little hands. At one point he reached up to the swan's neck, dangling in front of his right eye, and pulled off the headdress. Beneath it his scalp was bald, and the thick red hair that fell to his shoulders sprang from the margins of a huge tonsure.

Then, without a word, he jumped to his feet. With a brief gesture to them he strode off on his stilts across the sand, the cheetah furs and dressing gown lifting behind him like tattered wings.

Chapter 13—The Oasis

BARELY KEEPING UP with Quilter, they followed him as he strode in and out of the dunes, his stilted sandshoes carrying him across the banks of rubble. Now and then, as Ransom helped Mrs. Quilter over a ruined wall, he saw the river bank and the white bonehills of the lake, but the pattern of the eroded streets was only the faintest residue of Larchmont. Nothing moved among the ruins. In the hollows they passed the remains of small fires and the picked skeletons of birds and desert voles left years beforehand.

They reached a set of wrought-iron gates rooted into the sand, and Ransom recognized the half-buried perspectives of the avenue in which he had once lived. On the other side of the road the Reverend Johnstone's house had vanished below the dust carried up from the lake.

Skirting the gate, Quilter led them through an interval in the wall, then set off up the drive. The shell of Lomax's mansion was hidden among the dunes, its upper floors burned out. They passed the entrance. The cracked glass doors stood open, and the marble floor inside the hall was strewn with rubbish and old cans.

They rounded the house and reached the swimming pool. Here at last there were some signs of habitation. A line of screens made of tanned hide had been erected around the pool, and the eaves of a large tented structure rose from the deep end. The faint smoke of a wood fire lifted from the center of the pool. The sandy verges were littered with old cooking implements, bird traps, and pieces of refrigera-

tor cabinets, salvaged from the nearby ruins. A short distance away the wheel-less bodies of two cars sat side by side among the dunes.

A wooden stairway led down onto the floor of the swimming pool. Protected by the screens, the floor was smooth and clean, the colored tridents and sea horses visible among the worn tiles. Walking down the slope from the shallow end, they approached the inner wall of blankets. Quilter pushed these aside and beckoned them into the central court.

Lying on a low divan beside the fire was a woman whom Ransom recognized with an effort to be Miranda Lomax. Her long white hair now reached to her feet, enclosing her like a threadbare shroud, and her face had the same puckish eyes and mouth. But what startled Ransom was her size. She was now as fat as a pig, with gross arms and hips, immense shoulders and waist. Swaddled in fat, her small eyes gazed at Ransom from above her huge cheeks. With a pudgy hand she brushed her hair off her forehead. She was wearing, almost modishly, a black nightdress that seemed designed expressly to show off her vast corpulence.

"Quilty . . ." she began. "Who's this?" She glanced at Quilter, who kicked off his stilts and gestured his mother to a stool by the fire. Leaving Ransom to sit down on the floor, Quilter reclined into a large fanbacked wicker chair, whose bamboo scrollwork rose above his head in an arch of elaborate trellises. He reached up to the swan's neck and pulled off his hat, dumping it onto the floor.

Miranda stirred, unable to roll her girth more than an inch or two across the divan. "Quilty, isn't this our wandering doctor? What was his name . . . ?" She nodded slowly at Mrs. Quilter, and then turned her attention to Ransom. A smile spread across her face, as if Ransom's arrival had quickened some long dormant and amusing memory. "Doctor, you've come all the way from the coast to see us. Quilty, your mother's arrived."

Mrs. Quilter regarded Miranda blankly with her tired eyes, either unable or unwilling to recognize her.

Quilter sat in his wicker throne. He glanced distantly at his mother, and then said to Miranda, with a quirk of humor: "She likes cars."

"Does she?" Miranda tittered at this. "Well, she looks as if she's just in time for you to fix her up." She turned her pleasant beam on Ransom. "What about you, doctor?"

Ransom brushed his beard. "I've had to make do with other

forms of transport. I'm glad to see you're still here, Miranda."

"Yes . . . I suppose you are. Have you brought any water with you?"

"Water?" Ransom repeated. "I'm afraid we used all ours getting here."

Miranda sighed and looked across at Quilter. "A pity. We're rather short of water, you know."

"But the reservoir—" Ransom gestured in the direction of the pond. "You seem to have the stuff lying around all over the place."

Miranda shook her head. Her rapid attention to the topic made Ransom aware that the water might well turn out to be a mirage after all. Miranda eyed him thoughtfully. "That reservoir, as you call it, is all we've got. Isn't it, Quilter?"

Quilter nodded slowly, taking in Ransom in his gaze. Ransom wondered whether Quilter really remembered him, or even, for that matter, his mother. The old woman sat half-asleep on her stool, exhausted now that the long journey had ended.

Miranda smiled at Ransom. "You see, we were rather hoping you'd brought some water with you. But if you haven't, that's just that. Tell me, doctor, why on earth have you come here?"

Ransom paused before answering, aware that Quilter's sharp eyes were on him. Obviously they assumed that the little party was the advance guard of some official expedition from the coast, perhaps the harbinger of the end of the drought.

"Well," he temporized, "I know it sounds quixotic, Miranda, but I wanted to see Lomax and yourself—and Quilter, of course. Perhaps you don't understand?"

Miranda sat up. "But I *do.* I don't know about Richard, he's rather awkward and unpredictable these days, and Quilter does look a bit fed up with you already, but *I* understand." She patted her huge stomach, looking down with tolerant affection at its giant girth. "If you haven't brought any water, well things won't be quite the same, let's be honest, but you can certainly stay for a few days. Can't he, Quilter?"

Before Quilter could reply Mrs. Quilter began to sway on her stool. Ransom caught her arm. "She needs some rest," he said. "Can she lie down somewhere?"

Quilter carried her away to a small cubicle behind the curtains. In a few minutes he came back and handed Ransom a pail of tepid water. Although his stomach was still

full of the water he had swallowed in the lake, Ransom made a pretense of drinking gratefully, assuming that Quilter now accepted him.

To Miranda he said casually: "I take it you had us followed here?"

"We knew someone was struggling along. Not many people come up from the coast—most of them seem to get tired or disappear." She flashed Ransom a sharp smile. "I think they get eaten on the way—by the lions, I mean."

Ransom nodded. "As a matter of interest, what have you been eating? Apart from a few weary travelers like myself."

Miranda hooted. "Don't worry, doctor, you're much too stringy. Anyway, those days are past, aren't they, Quilty? Now we've got organized there's just about enough to eat—you'd be amazed how many cans you can find under these ruins—but to begin with it was difficult. I know you think everyone went off to the coast, but an awful lot stayed behind. After a while they thinned out." She patted her stomach reflectively. "Ten years is a long time."

Above them, from the dunes by the pool, there was a sharp crackling, and the pumping sounds of a bellows being worked. A fire of sticks and oil rags began to burn, sending up a cloud of smoke. Ransom looked up at the huge black pillar, rising almost from the very ground at his feet. It was identical with all the other smoke columns that had followed them across the desert, and Ransom had the sudden feeling that he had at last arrived at his destination, despite the ambiguous nature of his reception—no one had mentioned Catherine or Philip Jordan, but he assumed that people drifted about the desert without formality, taking their chances with Quilter. Some he drowned in the pool out of habit, while others he might take back to his den.

Miranda snuffled some phlegm up one nostril. "Whitman's here," she said to Quilter, who was gazing through a crack in the screen at his mother's sleeping face.

There was a patter of wooden clogs from behind the curtains, and three small children ran out from another cubicle. Surprised by the fire lifting from the edge of the swimming pool, they toddled out, squeaking softly at their mother.

Their swollen heads and puckish faces were perfect replicas of Miranda and Quilter. Each had the same brachycephalic skull, the same downward eyes and hollow cheeks. Their small necks and bodies seemed barely strong enough to carry their huge rolling heads. To Ransom they first resembled

the children of the congenitally insane, but then he saw their eyes watching him. Still half asleep, their huge pupils were full of strange dreams.

Quilter ignored them as they scrambled around his feet for a better view of the fire. A man's hunchbacked figure was silhouetted against the screens. There seemed no point in lighting the fire, and Ransom decided that its significance was ritual, part of some established desert practice. Like so many defunct and forgotten rituals, it was now more frightening in its mystery than when it had served some real purpose.

Miranda watched the children scurry among the curtains. "My infants, doctor, or the few that lived. Tell me you think they're beautiful."

"They are," Ransom assured her hastily. He took one of the children by the arm and felt the huge bony skull. Its eyes were illuminated by a ceaseless ripple of thoughts. "He looks like a genius."

Miranda nodded sagely. "That's very right, doctor, they all are. What's still locked up inside poor old Quilter I've brought out in them."

There was a shout from above. A one-eyed man with a stooped crablike walk, his left arm ending in a stump above the wrist, the other blackened by charcoal, peered down at them. His face and ragged clothes were covered with dust, as if he had been living in the wild for several months. Ransom recognized the driver of the water tanker who had taken him to the zoo. A scar on the right cheek had deepened during the previous years, twisting his face into a caricature of an angry grimace, so that the man was less frightening than pathetic, a scarred wreck of himself.

Addressing Quilter, he said: "The Jonas boy and the woman went off along the river. The lions will get them tonight."

Quilter stared at the floor of the pool. At intervals he reached up and scratched his tonsure. His preoccupied manner suggested that he was struggling with some insoluble conundrum.

"Have they got any water?" Miranda asked.

"Not a drop," Whitman rejoined with a sharp laugh. His twisted face, which Ransom had seen reflected over his shoulder in the store window, gazed down at him with its fierce eye. Whitman wiped his forehead with his stump, and Ransom remembered the mannequins torn to pieces by the dogs. Perhaps this was how the man took his revenge, hating even

the residuum of human identity in the blurred features of the mannequins, standing quietly in the piazza like the drained images of the vanished people of the city left behind far into the future. Everything around Ransom now seemed as isolated, the idealized residue of a landscape and human figures whose primitive forbears had long since gone. He wondered what Whitman would do if he knew that Ransom too had once amputated the dead. Neither past nor future could change, only the mirror between them.

Whitman was about to move off when the sounds of a distant voice echoed across the dunes. A confused harangue, addressed to itself as much as to the world at large, it was held together by a mournful dirgelike rhythm.

Whitman scuttled about. "Jonas!" He seemed uncertain whether to advance or flee. "I'll catch him this time!"

Quilter stood up. He placed the swan's cap on his head.

"Quilter," Miranda called after him. "Take the doctor. He can have a word with Lomax, and find out what he's up to."

Quilter remounted his stilts. They climbed out of the pool and set off past the remains of the fire burning itself out, following Whitman across the dunes. Tethered to the stump of a watchtower in one of the hollows were the dogs. The small pack, now on leash, tugged at Whitman's hand. He crept along the low walls, peering over the rough terrain. Twenty yards behind him, towering into the air like an idol in his full regalia, came Quilter, Ransom at his heels. From somewhere ahead of them the low monotonous harangue sounded into the air.

Then, as they mounted one of the dunes, they saw the tall solitary figure of Jonas a hundred yards away, moving slowly among the ruins by the edge of the drained lake. His dark face raised to the sunlight, he walked with the same entranced motion, declaiming at the white bone-like dust that reached across the lake to the horizon. His voice droned on, part prophecy, part lamentation, and twice Ransom caught the word "sea." His arms rose at each crescendo, then fell again as he disappeared from sight.

Obliquely behind him, Whitman scurried along, holding back the straining bodies of the dogs. He hesitated behind the base of a ruined tower, waiting for Jonas to emerge on to the more open stretch of the old lakeside road. He placed the leash in his mouth, and with his one hand began to undo the thong.

"Jonas—"

The call came softly from among the dunes out on the lake. Jonas stopped and looked around, searching for the caller, then saw the grotesque capped figure of Quilter behind him and the dogs jerking away from the hapless Whitman.

As the dogs rushed off in a pack, the tall man came to life. Lowering his head, he raced off, his long legs carrying him away across the rubble. The dogs gained on him, snapping at his heels, and he pulled an old fishing net from around his waist and whipped it across their faces. Suddenly the dogs entangled themselves around the stump of a telegraph pole and came to a halt, barking over each other as they tumbled in the dust.

Ransom watched the thin figure of the preacher disappear along the lakeshore. Whitman cursed his way over to the dogs, kicking at their flanks. Quilter, meanwhile, was gazing unperturbed at the hillocks of rubble.

"Is Jonas still looking for this lost sea?" Ransom asked him.

"He's found it," Quilter said.

"Where?"

Quilter pointed to the lake, at the white chalklike dunes, the myriads of fine bones washed to the surface by the wind speckling in the sunlight.

"This is his sea?" Ransom said as they set off. "Then why doesn't he go out onto it?"

Quilter shrugged. "Lions there," he said, and then strode on ahead.

A hundred yards away, across the stretch of open ground separating the Lomax's swimming pool from the eastern edge of the estate, a small pavilion appeared in a hollow among the dunes, its glass and metal cornices shining brilliantly in the sunlight. It had been constructed from assorted pieces of chromium and enameled metal—the radiator grilles of cars, reflectors of electric heaters, radio cabinets, and so on—fitted together with remarkable ingenuity to form what appeared at a distance to be a bejeweled miniature temple. In the sunlight the gilded edifice gleamed among the dust and sand like a huge Fabergé gem.

Quilter stopped fifty yards from it. "Lomax," he said by way of introduction. "You tell him if he doesn't find water soon he's going to *drown*."

Leaving Ransom with this paradox, he strode away toward the pool.

Ransom set off across the sand. As he approached the pavilion he compared it with the crude hovels he had constructed out of the same materials at the coast, but the even desert light and neutral sand encouraged fancy and imagination while the damp saltdunes had drained it.

He reached the ornamented portico and peered inside. The walls of the small anteroom were decorated with strips of curved chromium. Colored discs of glass taken from car headlamps had been fitted into a grille and formed one continuous wall, through which the sun shone in dozens of images of itself. Another wall was constructed from the grilles of radio sets, the lines of gilded knobs forming astrological patterns.

An inner door opened. A plump, scented figure darted out from the shadows and seized his arm.

"Charles, my dear boy! They said you were coming! How delightful to see you again!"

"Richard. . . ." For a moment Ransom gaped at Lomax. The latter circled around him, goggling over Ransom's ragged clothes with the eyes of a delirious goldfish. Lomax was completely bald, and now resembled a handsome but hairless woman. His skin had become smooth and creamy, untouched by the desert wind and sun. He wore a gray silk suit of extravagant cut, the pleated trousers like a close-fitting skirt or the bifurcated tail of a huge fish, the embroidered jacket fitted with ruffs and rows of pearl buttons. To Ransom he resembled a grotesque pantomime dame, part amiable scoundrel and part transvestite, stranded in the middle of the desert with his pavilion of delights.

"Charles, what is it?" Lomax stood back. His eyes, above the short hooked nose, were as sharp as ever. "Don't you remember me?" He chortled to himself, happy to prepare the way for his own retort. "Or is that the trouble—you *do* remember me!"

Tittering to himself, he led Ransom through the pavilion into a small court at the rear, where an ornamental garden decorated with glass and chromium blooms had been laid out around the remains of a fountain.

"Well, Charles, what's going on? You've brought water with you?" He pressed Ransom into a chair, his hand holding Ransom's arm like a claw. "God knows I've waited long enough."

Ransom disengaged the arm. "I'm afraid you'll have to go on waiting, Richard. It must sound like a bad joke after

all these years, but one of the reasons we came here from the coast was to look for water."

"What?" Lomax swung on his heel. "What on earth are you talking about? You must be out of your mind. There isn't a drop of water for a hundred miles!" With sudden irritation he drove his little fists together. "What have you been doing about it?"

"We haven't been doing anything," Ransom said quietly. "It's been all we could manage just to distill enough water to keep alive."

Lomax nodded, controlling himself. "I daresay. Frankly, Charles, you do look a mess. You should have stayed with me. But this drought—they said it would end in ten years. I thought that was why you came!"

On this last word, Lomax's voice rose angrily again, reverberating off the tinsel walls.

"Richard, for heaven's sake...." Ransom tried to pacify him. "You're all obsessed by the subject of water. There seems plenty around. As soon as I arrived I walked straight into a large reservoir."

"That?" Lomax waved a ruffed hand at him, his white woman's face like a powdered mask. Mopping his brow with a soft hand, he noticed his bald pate, then quickly pulled a small peruke from his pocket and slipped it onto his scalp. "That water, Charles, don't you understand—that's all there is left! For ten years I've kept them going, and now that this confounded drought won't end they're turning on me!"

Lomax pulled up another chair. "Charles, the position I'm in is impossible. Quilter is insane, have you seen him, striding about on those stilts?... He's out to destroy me, I know it!"

Cautiously, Ransom said: "He did give me a message—something about drowning, if I remember. There's not much danger of that here?"

"Oh no?" Lomax snapped his fingers. "Drowning—after all I've done for him! If it hadn't been for me they would have died within a week."

He subsided into the chair. Surrounded by all the chromium and tinsel, he looked like a stranded carnival fish, encrusted with pearls and pieces of shell.

"Where did you find all this water?" Ransom asked.

"Here and there, Charles." Lomax gestured vaguely. "I happened to know about one or two old reservoirs, forgotten for years under car parks and football fields, small ones

no one ever thought of, but a hell of a lot of water in them all the same. I showed Quilter where it was, and he and the others piped it in here."

"And that lake is the last? But why should Quilter blame you? Surely they're grateful—"

"They're *not* grateful! You obviously don't understand how their minds work. Look what Quilter's done to my poor Miranda. And those diseased cretinous children! Think what they'll be like if they're allowed to grow up. *Three* Quilters! Sometimes I think the Almighty brought this drought just to make sure they die of thirst."

"Why don't you pack up and leave?"

"I can't! Don't you realize I'm a prisoner here? That terrible one-armed man Whitman is everywhere with his mad animals. I warn you, don't wander about on your own too much. And there are a couple of lions around somewhere."

Ransom stood up. "What shall I tell Quilter then?"

Lomax whipped off his wig and slipped it into one of his pockets. "Tell them to go! I'm tired of playing Father Neptune. This is *my* water, I found it and I'm going to drink it!" With a smirk, he added: "But I'll share it with you, Charles, of course."

"Thank you, Richard, but I think I need to be on my own at present."

"Very well, dear boy." Lomax gazed at him coolly, the smirk on his face puffing out his powdered cheeks. "Don't expect any water, though. Sooner or later it's going to run out, perhaps sooner rather than later."

"I daresay." Ransom gazed down at Lomax, realizing how far he had decayed during the previous ten years. The serpent in this dusty Eden, he was now trying to grasp back his apple, and preserve intact, if only for a few weeks, the world before the drought. By contrast, for Ransom the long journey up the river had been an expedition into his own future, into a world of volitional time where the images of the past were reflected free of the demands of memory and nostalgia, free of the pressures even of thirst and hunger.

"Charles, wait!" As Ransom reached the entrance to the pavilion, Lomax hurried after him. "Don't leave yet, you're the only one I can trust!" Lomax plucked at his sleeve. His voice sank to a plaintive whisper. "They'll kill me, Charles, or turn me into a beast. Look what he's done to Miranda."

Ransom shook his head. "I don't agree, Richard," he said. "I think she's beautiful."

Lomax gazed after him, appalled. Ransom set off across the sand. Watching him in the distance from a dune above the swimming pool, the last smoke of the signal fire rising beside him, was the stilted figure of Quilter, the swan's head wavering against the evening sky.

Chapter 14—The White Lions

FOR THE NEXT WEEK Ransom remained with Quilter and Miranda, watching the disintegration of Richard Lomax. Ransom decided that as soon as possible he would continue his journey across the drained lake, but at night he could hear the sounds of the lions baying among the white dunes. The tall figure of Jonas would move along the lakeside road through the darkness, calling in his deep voice to the lions, which grumbled back at him. Their survival, confirming the fisher-captain's obsession with a lost river or lake, convinced Ransom that as soon as he had recovered he should carry on his search.

During the day he sat in the shade of the ruined loggia beside the swimming pool. In the morning he went off toward the city with Whitman and Quilter to forage for food. At intervals among the dunes, deep shafts had been sunk into the basements. They would slide down them and crawl among the old freezer plant, mining out a few cans from the annealed sand. Most of them had perished, and the rancid contents were flung to the dogs or left among the rubble, where the few birds pecked at them. Ransom was not surprised to find that Quilter's food stores consisted of barely a day's supplies, nor that Quilter was becoming progressively less interested in replenishing them. He seemed to accept that the coming end of the water in the reservoir would commit him finally to the desert, and that the drained river would now take him on its own terms.

Quilter built a small hutch for his mother in the entrance hall of the house, and she retired here in the evenings after spending the day with Miranda and the children.

Ransom slept in one of the wrecked cars near the pool. Whitman lived in the next vehicle, but after Ransom's arrival he moved off with his dogs and took up residence in-

side a drained fountain fifty yards from Lomax's pavilion. Keeping to himself, he resented Ransom's approaches.

Quilter, however, spent much of his time wandering around the edges of the pool, apparently trying to form some sort of relationship with Ransom, though unable to find a point of contact. Sometimes he would sit down in the dust a few feet from Ransom, letting the children climb over his shoulders, pulling at his furs and swan's cap.

At intervals this placid domestic scene would be interrupted by the appearance of Richard Lomax.

His performances, as Ransom regarded them, usually took the same form. Shortly before noon there was a sudden commotion from the pavilion, and the sounds of gongs ringing from the gilded spires. Quilter listened to this impassively, drawing obscure patterns in the dust with a finger for his children to puzzle and laugh over. Then there was a sudden shout and crackle as Lomax let off a firework. It fizzed away across the dunes, the bright trail dissolving crisply in the warm air. At last Lomax himself emerged, fully accoutered and pomaded, mincing out in his preposterous gray silk suit. Frowning angrily, he waved his arms, shouting insults at Quilter, and pointing repeatedly toward the reservoir. As Quilter leaned back on one elbow, Whitman crept up on Lomax with his dogs.

Lomax's tirade then mounted to a frenzied babble, his face working itself into a grotesque mask. Watching this tottering desert androgyne, Ransom felt that Lomax was reverting to some primitive level where the differentiation into male and female no longer occurred. Lomax was now a neuter, as sterile physically as he had become mentally.

At last, when the children became frightened, Quilter signaled to Whitman and a dog was let off at Lomax. In a flash of white fur the beast hurled itself at the architect, who turned and fled, slamming the jeweled doors into the dog's face as it flung itself at the decorated grilles.

For the rest of the day there was silence, until the performance the following morning. Although such displays of firecrackers and grimacing had presumably been effective during the previous years in dispersing other desert nomads who stumbled upon the oasis, Quilter seemed immune. Brooding quietly most of the time, and aware of the coming crisis in their lives, he sat among the dunes by the pool, playing with his children and with the birds who ventured up to his hands to collect the pieces of rancid meat. He fondled them all

with a strange pity, as if he knew that this temporary period of calm would soon give way and was trying to free them from the need for water and food. Once or twice, as Quilter played with the birds, Ransom heard a sharp strangled croak, and saw the crushed plumage twisting slowly in Quilter's hands. Ransom watched the children as they waddled about under their swollen heads, playing with the dead birds, half-expecting Quilter to snap their necks in a sudden access of violence.

More and more Quilter treated Whitman and Ransom in the same way, switching them out of his path with a long fur-topped staff. For the time being, Ransom accepted these blows, as a bond between himself and the further possibilities of his life into which Quilter was leading him. Only with Miranda did Quilter retain his equable temper. The two of them would sit together in the concrete pool, as the water evaporated in the reservoir and the dunes outside drew nearer, like a last Adam and Eve waiting for the end of time.

Ransom saw nothing of Philip Jordan and Catherine. One morning when they climbed the dunes by the reservoir a familiar dark-faced figure was filling a canteen by the water. Quilter barely noticed him as he strode stiffly across the wet sand on his stilts, and by the time Whitman had released the dogs the youth had vanished.

Catherine Austen never appeared, but at night they heard the lions coming nearer, crying from the dunes by the lake-side.

"Quilter, you depraved beast! Come here, my Caliban, show yourself to your master!"

Sitting among the metal litter by the pool, Ransom ignored the shouts from Lomax's pavilion and continued to play with the eldest of Quilter's children. The five-year-old boy was his favorite companion. A large birthscar disfigured his right cheek and illuminated his face like a star, and his liquid eyes hovered below his swollen forehead like shy dragonflies. Each time Ransom held out his hands he peered brightly into Ransom's eyes, and with unerring insight touched the hand containing the stone. At times, he would reverse his choice, picking the empty hand as if out of sympathy.

"Caliban! For the last time. . . . !"

Ransom looked up at the distant figure of Lomax, who had advanced twenty yards from his pavilion, the sunlight shim-

mering off his silk suit. He postured among the low dunes, his small powdered face puckered like an obscene shriveled fig. In one hand he waved a small silvertopped cane like a wand.

"Quilter. . . !" Lomax's voice rose to a shriek. Quilter had gone off somewhere, and he could only see Ransom sitting among the fallen columns of the loggia, like a mendicant attached to the fringes of a tribal court.

Ransom nodded encouragingly to the child, and said: "Go on. Which one?" The child watched him with his drifting smile, eyes wide and bright as if about to divulge some delightful secret. He shook his head, arms held firmly behind his back. Reluctantly Ransom opened his empty hands, and the child eyed him with a pleased nod.

"Pretty good," Ransom commented. He pointed at the shouting figure of Lomax. "It looks as if your father is trying the same technique. I'm afraid Mr. Lomax isn't as clever as you." He pulled a tin from his pocket and took off the lid. Inside were two pieces of dried meat. First wiping his fingers, he gave one to the child. Holding it tightly, he toddled away among the ruins.

Ransom leaned back against the column. He was debating when to leave the oasis and take his chances with the lions when a stinging blow struck his left arm above the elbow.

He looked up into the grimacing, powdered mask of Richard Lomax, silvertopped cane in one hand.

"Ransom. . . !" he hissed. "Get out. . . !" His suit was puffed up, the lapels flaring like the gills of an angry fish. "Stealing my water! Get *out!*"

"Richard, for God's sake—" Ransom stood up. There was a soft clatter among the stones, and the child reappeared. In his hands he carried a small white gull, apparently dead, its wings neatly furled.

Lomax gazed down at the child, a demented Prospero examining the offspring of his violated daughter. He looked around at the dusty garbage-strewn oasis, as if stunned by the horror of this island infested by nightmares. He raised his cane to strike the child. It stepped back, eyes suddenly still, and opened its hands. With a squawk the bird rose into the air and flashed past Lomax's face.

There was a shout across the dunes. The stilted figure of Quilter came striding over the rubble a hundred yards away, furs lifting in the hot sunlight. Beside him with the dogs was

Whitman, pushing along the broken figure of Jonas, the dogs tearing at the rags of his trousers.

Ignoring Ransom, Lomax spun on his white shoes and raced off across the sand. The dogs broke leash and ran after him, Quilter at their heels, the stilts carrying him in six-foot strides. Whitman fumbled with the leash, and the bending figure of Jonas straightened up and swung a fist at the back of his neck, felling him to the ground. Whitman scrambled to his feet, and Jonas unfurled a net from his waist and with a twist of his hands rolled Whitman into the dust again. Retrieving the net, he leapt away on his long legs.

Halfway to the pavilion, Lomax turned to face the dogs. From his pockets he pulled out handfuls of firecrackers, and hurled them down at their feet. The thunderflashes burst and flared, and the dogs broke off as Quilter charged through them.

He reached one hand toward Lomax. There was a gleam of silver in the air and a long blade appeared from the shaft of Lomax's cane. He darted forwards on one foot and pierced Quilter's shoulder. Before Quilter could recover, he danced off behind the safety of the doors.

Gazing at the blood on his hand, Quilter walked slowly back to the swimming pool, the gongs beating from the pavilion behind him. Glancing at Ransom, who was holding his child, he shouted to Whitman. The two men called the dogs together, and set off along the river in pursuit of Jonas.

An hour later, when they had not returned, Ransom carried the child down into the pool.

"Doctor, do come in," Miranda greeted him, as he pushed back the flaps of the inner courtyard. "Have I missed another of Richard's firework displays?"

"Probably the last," Ransom said. "It wasn't meant to amuse."

Miranda gestured him into a chair. In a cubicle beyond the curtain the old woman was crooning herself to sleep over the children. Miranda sat up on one elbow. Her sleek face and giant body covered by its black negligee made her look like a large seal reclining on the floor of its pool. Each day her features seemed to get smaller, the minute mouth with its cupid's lips subsiding into the overlaying flesh in the same way that the objects in the drained river had become submerged and smoothed by the enveloping sand.

"Your brother is obsessed by the water in the reservoir,"

Ransom said. "Have you any influence with Quilter? If Richard goes on provoking him there may be a bloodbath."

"Don't worry." Miranda fanned herself with a plump hand. "Quilter is still a child. He wouldn't hurt a thing."

"Miranda, I've seen him crush a sea gull to death in one hand."

Miranda waved this aside. "That's just to show he understands it. In a way, it's a sign he loves the bird."

"That's a fierce love," Ransom commented.

"What love isn't?"

Ransom looked up, noticing the barely concealed question in her voice. Miranda lay on the divan, watching him with her bland eyes, her face composed. She seemed unaware of the dunes and dust around her. Ransom stood up and went over to her. Taking her hands, he sat down on the divan. "Miranda . . ." he began. Looking at her great seal-like waist, he thought of the dead fishermen whose bodies had helped to swell its girth, drowned here in its warm seas, unnamed Jonahs reborn in the strange idiot-children. He remembered Quilter and the long knives in the crossed shoulder-straps under his furs, but the danger seemed to recede. The blurring of everything during his journey from the coast carried with it the equation of all emotions and relationships. Simultaneously he would become the children's father and Quilter's brother, Mrs. Quilter's son, and Miranda's husband. Only Lomax, the androgyne, remained isolated.

As he watched Miranda's smile form itself, the image of a river flowed through his mind, a clear stream that broke and illuminated the sunlight.

"Doctor!" He looked up to see Mrs. Quilter's frightened face through the tenting. "There's water leaking!"

Ransom pulled back the canopy. Spilling on to the floor of the pool was a steady stream of water, pouring off the concrete verge above. The water swilled along the floor, soaking the piles of bedding, and then ran to the fireplace in the center where the tiles had been removed.

"Mrs. Quilter, take the children!" Ransom turned to Miranda, who was sitting upright on the divan. "There's water running past the house, it must come from the reservoir! I'll see if I can head Lomax off."

As he climbed the stairway out of the pool the figures of Quilter and Whitman raced past, the dogs at their heels.

Winding between the dunes were a dozen arms of silver water, pouring across the bleached earth from the direction of

the reservoir. Ransom splashed across the streams, feeling the pressure of the water as it broke and spurted. Beyond the next line of dunes there was a deeper channel. Three feet deep, the water slid away among the ruined walls, spilling into the cracks and mine-holes, sucked down by the porous earth.

Quilter flung himself along on his stilts. Whitman was pulled by the dogs, hunting bayonet clasped in his teeth. They splashed through the water, barely pausing to watch its progress, and then reached the embankment. Quilter shouted as the long-legged figure of Jonas, kneeling by the water with his net, took off like a startled hare around the verges of the reservoir. The dogs bounded after him, kicking the wet sand into a damp spray.

Ransom leaned against a chimney stump. The reservoir was almost drained, the shallow pool in the center leaking out in a last quiet glide. At four or five points around the reservoir large breaches had been cut in the bank, and the water had poured out through these. The edges of the damp basin were already drying in the sunlight.

Quilter stopped by the bank and gazed down blankly at the vanishing mirror of blue light. His swan's hat hung over one ear. Absentmindedly he pulled it off and let it fall onto the wet sand.

Ransom watched the chase around the opposite bank. Jonas was halfway around the reservoir, arms held out at his sides as he raced up and down the dunes. The dogs gained on him, and began to leap up at his back. Once he stumbled, and a dog tore the black shirt from his shoulders. Knocking the animal away, he ran on, the dogs all around him.

Then two more figures appeared, running out of the dunes across the dog's path, and Ransom heard the roaring of the white lions.

"Catherine!" As he shouted, she was running beside the lions, driving them on with her whip. Behind her was Philip Jordan, a canteen strapped to his back, spear in one hand. He feinted with it at Whitman as the dogs veered and scuttled away from the lions, scrambling frantically across the empty basin of the reservoir. Catherine and the lions ran on, disappearing across the dunes as suddenly as they had come. Still running, Philip Jordan took Jonas' arm, but the older man broke free and darted left and right between the dunes.

A dog crossed the empty pool, tail between its legs, and sped past Ransom. As he and Quilter turned to follow it

they saw the tottering figure of Richard Lomax on the bank fifty yards away. The sounds of flight and pursuit faded, and Lomax's helpless laughter crossed the settling air.

"Quilter, you bloody fool. . . !" he managed to get out, choking in a paroxysm of mirth. The pleated trousers of his gray silk suit were soaked to the knees, and the ruffs of his jacket were spattered with wet sand. A long-handled spade lay on the bank behind him.

Ransom looked back toward the house. Beyond the bank, where only a few minutes earlier deep streams of water had raced along, the wet channels were drained and empty. The water had sunk without trace into the cracks and holes, and the air was blank and without sparkle.

"I did warn you, didn't I, Quilter?" Lomax called.

Quilter strode slowly along the bank, his eyes on Lomax.

"Now, Quilter, don't get any ideas." Lomax flashed a warning smile at Quilter, then backed away up the slope. On his left, Whitman moved along the far side of the bank to cut him off. "Quilter!" Lomax stopped, putting on a show of dignity. "This is my water, and I do what I choose with it!"

They cornered him among the ruins thirty yards from the reservoir. Behind him, among the dunes, Miranda had appeared with Mrs. Quilter and the children. They sat down on one of the crests to watch.

Lomax began to straighten his sleeves, pulling out the ruffs. Quilter waited ten yards from him, while Whitman crept up slowly with the bayonet, his stump raised. Lomax sidestepped awkwardly, and then the sword-stick flashed in Whitman's face.

"Richard!"

Lomax turned at his sister's voice. Before he could recover, Whitman lunged forward and slashed the blade from his hand, then stabbed him in the midriff like a drover piercing a pig. With a squeal of pain, Lomax tottered backwards against a low wall, and Whitman dropped the bayonet and bent down. With a shout he jerked Lomax's heels into the air and tossed him backwards into an old mineshaft filled with dust. A huge cloud of white talcum shot into the air, churned up by the flailing Lomax, stuck upside-down in the narrow shaft.

Ransom listened as the shouts became more and more muffled. For five minutes the dust continued to rise in small spurts, like the gentle boiling of a lava vent in an almost

dormant volcano. Then the movement subsided almost completely, now and then sending up a faint spume.

Ransom started to walk back to the house, and then noticed that neither Miranda nor the children had moved from the crest. He looked back along the river, hoping for some sign of Philip Jordan or Catherine, but they had vanished along the bank. The long lines of ruins lay quietly in the sunlight. Far away, against the motionless horizon, he could see the rolling waves of the dunes on the lake.

He waited as Whitman approached him, head bowed as he panted between his teeth, the bayonet held in his hand like a chisel. Quilter was looking down at the drained basin of the reservoir, already whitening in the sun, and at the arms of darker sand running away across the dunes.

Whitman feinted with the bayonet, slightly put off when Ransom offered no resistance. "Quilt—?" he called.

Quilter turned and walked back to the house. He glanced at Whitman and waved briefly, his swan's hat carried in his hand by the neck. "Leave him," he said. For the first time since Ransom had known him, his face was completely calm.

Chapter 15—"Jours de Lenteur"

THE BIRDS had gone. Everywhere light and shade crept on slowly. No longer cooled by the evaporating water, the dunes around the oasis reflected the heat like banks of ash. Ransom rested quietly in the ruined loggia beside the swimming pool. His complete surrender to Quilter had left him with a feeling almost of euphoria. The timeless world in which Quilter lived now formed his own universe, and only the shadow of the broken roof above, adjusting its length and perimeter, reminded him of the progress of the sun.

The next day, when Mrs. Quilter died, Ransom helped to bury her. Miranda was too tired to come with them, but Whitman and Ransom carried the old woman on a plank over their heads. They followed Quilter toward the burial ground near the city, waiting as he searched among the rubble, sinking his staff through the sand to the roofs of the cars below. As he had told Ransom, most of the vehicles were already occupied, but at last they found an empty one and

buried Mrs. Quilter in a great old limousine. Afterwards, when they had filled in the sand over the roof, the children scattered pieces of paper drawings over it.

Soon afterwards, Philip Jordan went off to search for his father. He came to the oasis to say goodbye to Ransom. Kneeling beside him, he pressed the canteen of water to his lips.

"It's the last I have, but there's a river here somewhere. Quilter told me my father had seen it. When I find him, we'll go off and look for it together. Perhaps we'll see you there one day, doctor."

When he stood up Ransom saw Catherine Austen waving to him from a dune in the distance, hands on hips, her leather boots white with the chalklike sand of the desert. As Philip rejoined her she lifted her whip and the white-flanked lions loped off by her side.

That night, when a sandstorm blew up, Ransom went down to the lake and watched the drifts whirling across the dunes. Far out toward the center of the lake he could see the hull of the old river steamer once commanded by Captain Tulloch. Standing at the helm as the waves of white sand broke across the bow; its fine spray lifting over the funnel, was the tall figure of Jonas.

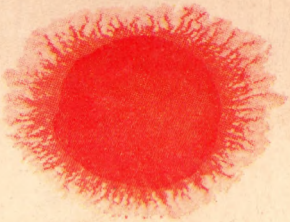
The storm had subsided the next morning, and Ransom made his farewells to Quilter and Miranda. Leaving the house, he waved to the children who had followed him to the gate, and then walked down the avenue to his old home. Nothing remained except the stumps of the chimneys, but he rested here for a few hours before continuing on his way.

He crossed the rubble and went down to the river, then began to walk along the widening mouth toward the lake. Smoothed by the wind, the white dunes covered the bed like motionless waves. He stepped among them, following the hollows that carried him out of sight of the shore. The sand was smooth and unmarked, gleaming with the bones of untold numbers of fish. The height of the dunes steadily increased, and an hour later the crests were almost twenty feet above his head.

Although it was not yet noon, the sun seemed to be receding into the sky, and the air was gradually becoming colder. To his surprise he noticed that he no longer cast any shadow onto the sand, as if he had at last completed his

journey across the margins of the inner landscape he had carried in his mind for so many years. As the light failed, the air grew darker. The dust was dull and opaque, the crystals in its surface dead and clouded. An immense pall of darkness lay over the dunes, as if the whole of the exterior world were losing its existence.

It was some time later that he failed to notice it had started to rain.



WORLD WITHOUT WATER

"The drought" everyone called it, as day after day after day went by with no rain. All over the world it was still "the drought," though the rivers had turned to trickles, and the trickles to mud as the earth dried, cracked open, and crumbled into dust. Dust that was at first ankle-deep, then calf-deep, then knee-deep . . .

Most of the world's population streamed oceanwards, choking the highways by the millions as they all sought the same thing: the last of the water.

And the sun beat down remorselessly on a world no longer capable of sustaining life . . .

ASK FOR THE BERKLEY EDITIONS OF THESE BOOKS BY J. G. BALLARD:

THE DROWNED WORLD **THE WIND FROM NOWHERE**

