

SPLIT WORLDS

A yellow and red rocket ship is shown in a dynamic, angled position, appearing to fly over a dark, rocky, and cratered landscape. The ship has a yellow body with red stripes and accents. It features a cockpit with a transparent canopy and several engine nozzles. Two of the engines are firing, with bright white and yellow flames and smoke trailing behind them. The background is a dark, starry sky with a large, full moon visible in the upper right corner. The overall style is reminiscent of classic pulp magazine illustrations.

TYRONE C. BARR

**They were the
Only Survivors of
a Global Holocaust!**

2/6
Digit

789
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70

SPLIT WORLDS

The red flash disappeared as quickly as it had come and became, as that on the right, a mushroom of coloured cloud. Dick Adams's first thought was that a fire had broken out simultaneously in New York, perhaps, and somewhere near the Baltic. Even as the thought occurred to him, however, there were several similar happenings in Britain, France, Spain, in the Atlantic itself, and between Norway and Sweden. Then Derek came in to report.

'Bombing in progress,' he said in an agitated, frightened voice.

Dick Adams's heart sank. His first impulse was to descend at once, to get down there and find out what the hell it was all about.

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BY

TYRONE C. BARR



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A DIGIT BOOK

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Chapter One

DICK ADAMS saw the Wheorld for the first time from the top of a high hill in the protected area. It lay almost in the exact centre of the valley basin, a long narrow strip of concrete connecting it and pointing as a finger to the nearest human habitation tucked away between the hills. His first impression was of a monster cycle wheel with an outsize hub and an extended axle or step, as sometimes seen on the rear wheel of a bicycle.

Axle extension pointing towards the ground, the wheel was held in a horizontal position by four giant pillars towering skywards, each tapering to a fine point at the top. Giant clamps protruding from the walls of the hub gripped the pillars with powerful jaws. Between the clamps the spokes stretched from hub to rim, leaving four equi-distant V-shaped spaces in which the pillars stood.

"Well, what do you think of her, Dick?" Professor Wellis asked proudly.

"Don't ask damn fool questions, Trevor," his companion answered dispassionately. "I'll tell you what I think of her when I've taken her up and brought her back again." With a smile he added, "That is, if we ever leave the ground in one piece."

Trevor Wellis was surprised.

"I say, you have got a bad hangover, haven't you?" he asked hopefully.

"No, I haven't—I'm quite serious. I visualize those damned spokes—sorry, but it does look like a wheel," Dick Adams apologized with a laugh. "I mean the oxygen feed tubes and wing holders, I visualize them snapping like cotton-thread at the first thrust, leaving the outer rim behind. We'd be in a hell of a mess if that happened, wouldn't we? Couldn't you have designed something more simple and compact? You know the sort of thing I mean, instead of having the oxygen in tanks at the end of slender tubes, you could have invented some arrangement for feeding it from underneath."

"And what would have happened to the wings?" the professor asked, mildly sarcastic.

"Well?"

"They had to be of the retractable, telescopic type and they had to be supported. That meant they had to stretch from and be held at two ends, not one. But your fears are groundless, Dick. The metal those tubes are made of would take the thrust of a dozen three-stage rockets, let alone a mere four."

"Do we lose the rocket heads?" Dick Adams asked.

"Automatically. When they reach burnt out—you should be through the ionosphere and in the exosphere then—force jets will eject them. The clamps themselves will fold back in to the wall of the main satellite and so remove any obstruction when you release the telescopic wings for your helicopter descent through the atmosphere."

"Sounds all right. Let's go and look her over."

They made their way back down the hill, passed two security posts and went out through a heavily-guarded gate to the roadway. Professor Wellis's chauffeur opened the door of the Rolls for them.

"Main entrance," the professor instructed.

Two miles further along the deserted country road they left the car again and passed through another heavily-guarded gate. After a security check they were allowed to proceed.

"I've experienced lots of security measures in my time Trevor, but nothing quite so tight as this," Dick Adams observed.

"Understandable, Dick. With the world on the brink of war, enough hydrogen bombs being manufactured to destroy the whole of mankind, and with every intelligence agent in the world looking for something that will put his country on top, just one small slip in our security measures could mean Out for us. This is no ordinary scientific experiment, Dick. The Wheorld is really something big. Few governments have gained any useful knowledge from their experiments in space.

"We have gained infinitely more by our policy of laboriously eliminating all the likely snags. We think we have now done that. We feel we have not only reached the point where we can send a whole team of men and women into space, but we can do so in the almost certain knowledge that they will be able to return to the earth again. We can dispatch them, convinced in our own minds they will feel no ill-effects or discomforts from acceleration force. Therein lies

the greatest need for absolute secrecy. The nation that conquers gravity is the master of the world, and that, Dick, is exactly what we've done."

"If you've conquered gravity, what the hell are we using four three-stage rockets for—just to make a bang?" his companion asked.

"You'll understand better when you see it," was the reply.

They walked past the workshops and entered a tunnel at the foot of a hill.

"Mile long this," the professor said. "Brings us out a few feet from the Wheorld."

"That would be the narrow strip of concrete stretching from the ship to the workshops?"

"Yes, the reinforced roof of the safety tunnel."

They emerged at the entrance to the firing pit. When Dick Adams looked up and beheld the Wheorld, fifty feet above the ground, he gasped in admiration.

"She's a beauty, Trevor!"

"Thanks, I thought you'd say it eventually," was the reply.

"Why'd you call her Wheorld?"

"Short for 'wheel world'. She is in fact just what you thought she was, a giant wheel—you'll have to revolve her to re-enter the atmosphere. After the clamps holding the rockets close back to the wall, having ejected the burnt-out heads, the gaps left will be taken up when you release the wings. Incidentally, they serve a dual purpose—as wings and as a hover. The revolutions of the wheel will control the brake as well as the fall."

"It's ingenious, Trevor."

"Wait till you see inside her, you'll think so then."

A mobile lift drew up beneath the Wheorld. The cage carried them up to a door halfway up the wall of what Dick Adams had likened to an axle extension. They stepped into a room equipped with engines and force-jet equipment.

"The engines come into use during the last stages of your helicopter descent. The force-jets are for various jobs, including getting you back into the outer atmosphere again and driving your oxygen from the feeder tubes among other things. That set in the corner operates independently to oxygenate, and keep alive, your water supply."

"But damn it, Trevor, for a few hours water could be carried in bottles!" Dick Adams said with surprise.

"Another of the little secrets we had to keep, Dick. This

ship can carry enough food—in a concentrated form, of course—supplemented by vitamin capsules and mineral concentrates, to keep fourteen people above the earth for as long as five years, together with sufficient water for their needs. Now perhaps you'll see the significance. Imagine, Dick, a whole army able to strike when and where it liked, from whatever distance it considered safe, without fear of counter-attack. How long do you think the nations would stand up against it?"

"More like five days."

"By force, yes. But the Government's idea is to subdue the world in a peaceful way, demonstrating its power by showing its might only. It's intended to let the people see that our ships can hold out for an indefinite period. We know, of course, that period is five years. But the rest of the world doesn't know that."

"Am I taking fourteen up with me?"

"Including yourself, yes. *And* you'll be equipped for the full five years' trip, together with armoury."

They were about to ascend to the next floor when it occurred to Dick Adams there must be a lower one, since they had stepped into this one halfway up the wall.

"What's down there?" he asked.

Trevor Wellis smiled.

"The trump ace," he said. "but come on up—I'll tell you about that later."

They climbed a spiral staircase and emerged into a large, circular instruments room. In there were the telemetering apparatus, the viewing and earth contact equipment and an assortment of recording gear. Dick Adams nosed around, asking question after question as he examined each piece. Then, seemingly satisfied, he reluctantly allowed himself to be led up to the next floor. All the same, he was wholly unprepared for what met his surprised gaze.

"Holy smoke!" he gasped when he entered the luxuriously-furnished and thickly-carpeted lounge.

"Like it?" the professor asked.

"Like it! It's wonderful. What's this—a general's quarters?"

"Not exactly—though he's well-catered for. This is equipped to carry and accommodate five women in comfort. The doors lead to their rooms. They've everything they'll need here."

"Are you suggesting that I'm taking up five women?"

The professor laughed.

"Of course, you are, Dick. Every ship will carry them. The jobs they're wanted for are jobs for women—earth contact, secretary, cook, nurse and stewardess."

"Don't tell me our armies of the future are going into battle with a lot of screeching females at their elbows?"

"The only difference between now and the future will be that every unit has its own H.Q. with it all the time. Or perhaps, I should say that, in the future, a unit won't have to leave its headquarters. Women do some good jobs at H.Q., Dick."

His companion grudgingly admitted this as they went up a thickly-carpeted stairway to the next floor. It was almost a replica of the one below except that more doors led to more rooms beyond the lounge.

"You've a suite," said the professor, pointing to a set of double doors. "You can be completely cut off from everyone as you wish. There's your bedroom, office and operations room, an additional rest room—and, of course, all mod cons."

"Thoughtful of you. Thanks," Dick Adams replied without any show of emotion; but he was inwardly as thrilled as a small boy with his first train set. "Finished?" he asked.

"Except for that," said his companion, pointing up at the ceiling.

"What's exceptional about that?"

"Nothing to look at, Dick. But, believe me, it's due to that you will be able to travel in all this luxury. That ceiling is the floor of the gravity dome. We call its contents Gneut—not that that will mean anything to you—but, in simple terms, it neutralizes 'G' force. It doesn't matter what velocity is reached in the Wheorld's upward thrust, you and your crew will feel no ill-effects. Its action commences with the firing of the rockets. When one 'G' is reached, the floor of the dome—or, if you like, your ceiling—will automatically rotate, revealing openings. As the velocity increases, the openings will become larger, exposing you all to the gravitational pull of Gneut. Its effect will be controlled and balanced by the thrust of the rockets through the troposphere and the stratosphere, diminishing towards the limit of the ionosphere and into the exosphere. By the time you are in orbit, the openings will have closed to the neutral position again, or as you see them now."

"All very intriguing, Trevor. But how about the descent,

when I hit the outer atmosphere again?"

"I told you that was the ace card, didn't I? You've Gneut in the bottom compartment of the ship. For obvious reasons, we couldn't allow openings to appear in that floor. There is a false one a foot beneath it and gaps at intervals between the floor of the engine-room and the inner walls. You should have the same easy return journey up to the point where your engines come into use. From then on, the effect of Gneut will fade out completely."

They were back in the professor's Rolls speeding homewards.

"You spoke about water, Trevor. I didn't see any reservoir," Dick Adams remarked.

"You didn't see the refrigeration and anti-freeze plants either, did you? But they're there all right—between the walls you looked at from the inside and those you observed from outside."

"You mean there's water right next the ship's outer skin?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. We tried to get round it, but couldn't. We realize the implications, of course. It would be just too bad if you were hit by a meteor—you'd lose your water. But it could be a means of saving your lives, you know—and there's always the chance you might bring back a beauty of a specimen in your tanks. By George, I wish you could! We don't know enough about the damned things, how far distant they can be seen, their speed of approach, their heat, size, their penetrating power. Such knowledge is of vital importance to a space army."

Dick Adams made no reply. Meteors were, for the moment, the least of the things that worried him.

That great wheel itself, with its massive framework, a five years' water supply, an unstated quantity of arms and ammunition and fourteen people, they were the things that occupied his mind. How could four rockets possibly lift and thrust all that into space? Even though he knew Trevor would have a ready answer, he felt obliged to put his question.

"Tell me, Trevor. Is it *really* possible for four rockets to launch that formidable payload?"

"Wondered when you'd get round to asking that," the professor replied. "And the answer is, it is not only possible but practicable. I'll explain it as simply as I can. I want you to imagine a heavy hollow object at the bottom of a pond—or a tub of water will do. It cannot leave the bottom of its

own accord. But, by the application of the correct amount of pressure, it can be lifted upwards with a smooth, easy movement. Too much pressure would destroy the rhythm of the lift, or add weight to it. Remove the pressure and it will sink like a stone to the bottom again. In other words, so long as it is lifting under the right pressure, it has a buoyancy which it retains—but only just so long as that correct pressure is applied.

“So much for that. Now take the wing of a plane. I don’t have to tell you it’s the top of it that provides lift—or that, so long as the required air speed is maintained, that part of the wing, by virtue of the vacuum created above it, will keep the plane lifted or buoyant.

“Well, as I said before, we’ve conquered gravity—but only conditionally upon two factors being present at, and following, the time of take-off from the earth. One is that there is just the right amount of pressure applied to lift the Wheorld at the right speed. The other is that there has to be the right vacuum over the dome. The second is dependent for its presence on the first, and to a great extent on Gneut.

“As in the case of the object at the bottom of the pond, the pressure must be neither too little nor too great. As far as scientific knowledge can be applied, we have verified that the amount of pressure needed will be supplied by the four rockets.

“The instantaneous action of Gneut on the atmosphere is similar to that of the displaced water on the object leaving the bottom of the pond. It *balances* the applied pressure. But it also assists in creating the vacuum over the Wheorld’s dome necessary to allow sufficient lift for her to become apparently weightless.

“The boost from the second stage of the rockets gives continuity to this state of weightlessness. Meanwhile, the atmospheric pressure rapidly diminishes and the vacuum over the dome grows proportionately bigger, resulting in easier lift—and thus making the work of the third stage very simple indeed.”

His explanation finished, the professor took a long pull at his cigarette.

“By the way, coming to the club?” he asked.

“No thanks,” Dick Adams replied with a smile. “I’m in the dog-house as it is. Promised Jenifer I’d be home at seven-thirty sharp. Some friends coming to dinner and it’s eight o’clock now.”

"Just give her a big kiss for me, Dick, and tell her I send my love to baby Gill. That'll ease the tension."

"That's nice of you, Trevor. But, in case I'm on a chain for the next few days, see you at the launching site," was the reply.

Chapter Two

IT was the eve of the launching of the Wheorld into space. For weeks past, thirteen people, five of them women, had been receiving instruction in their duties. Each had been sent to a different part of the country and, from the time of reporting for training, had not met another living soul other than his or her respective instructor.

Mail was severely censored and examined for hidden codes that could expose the work for which instruction was being given. Not that any of the thirteen could have said with any certainty what the training was for, except that it was connected with a flight into space. That much was revealed to them when they were accepted for the advertised posts—which offered substantial remuneration to volunteers willing to train for and take part in a space flight.

Without prior notice, instruction ceased abruptly. The pupil at each centre was picked up in a car driven by a security officer and, in ignorance of the destination, taken to the launching site of the Wheorld.

Molly Jordan was the first to arrive. After an identity check at the gatehouse she was directed to a reception room at the end of a long wooden hut. There, she was closely questioned by a woman security officer, who wanted to know her age, place of birth, nationality at birth, nationality and place of birth of her father, the schools she attended and her home address.

They were some of the questions she had been asked to answer when she first applied for the position of space ship nurse. She had been asked them again when she went for her interview before being accepted and, again, when she reported to her instructor for training.

"Where were you trained?"

"At B-seven." That was the code number she'd been told to give, if asked.

"When did you leave the training centre?"

"About an hour ago, I suppose," Molly replied, by this time wondering why she had ever let herself in for all this nonsense. Surely after having been shut away from the rest of the world and, like a prisoner in every sense of the word, escorted here, there was no need for further questioning? To her mind, it was a typical example of red tape.

"With the exception of the officer who brought you here, did you have any opportunity whatsoever of speaking to anyone—anyone at all between the time of leaving the centre and your arrival?"

Molly shook her head.

"No."

"Right, thank you. Now if you'll just take off all your clothes——"

"Like hell, I will!" Molly snapped indignantly. "Where do you think we are—Dachau?"

"Oh, but you'll have to," the woman said. "I can assure you, it's purely a precautionary measure. I have to check over the clothes you're wearing and satisfy myself there's nothing injurious concealed in them. Then I must check for marks of identity." She added with a smile, "You see, Molly, I have to make certain that you are you."

All the same, Molly wasn't smiling as, reluctantly, she stripped.

"There!" she snapped, throwing the last garment at the security officer. "Satisfied?"

"Yes, thank you, my dear. Now I know that you are Molly Jordan, the person originally engaged for this undertaking. When you've dressed again, if you go through that door," she pointed to the one she meant, "you'll meet the man who is to be the captain of your space flight."

"Does that mean I've got to go through this whole rigmarole again?" Molly demanded.

The security woman laughed.

"I shouldn't think he'd want you to do the strip-tease. He's married, you know," she said.

"Pity."

"It is rather. He's quite handsome—and *you're* very pretty, with a figure to be envied, too."

Molly felt better after that. She was looking forward to

meeting her handsome captain. She dressed and started to walk towards the door through which she had entered the room.

"Not that way, my dear," the security officer said, laying a detaining hand on her shoulder. "There's no going back now."

"But I only want to get my luggage," Molly protested.

"Taken care of. Don't worry about it any more. Just go along in there and meet the captain."

Molly opened the door and went into the room. Unlike the one she had just left, thick carpets covered the floor and a number of inviting armchairs and settees nestled against the walls. At a small table near the wall farthest away from the door, sat the only other occupant of the room. In his hands he held a bundle of white cards. Behind him three tables were arranged end to end, each covered with a white cloth and spread with delicacies and bottles of wine and spirits.

Dick Adams looked at the passport photograph stapled at the right-hand side of the card he had placed on top of the others. He noted the particulars. Name: Molly Jordan. Age: twenty-four years, three months. Single. Height: five feet five inches. Slim build. Hair: dark brown, waved. Eyes, brown. Engaged as nurse.

Ignoring the remainder of the details, he arose to meet her.

"Glad to meet you, Molly. My name's Adams, Dick Adams. So you're to be our nurse? It's a good thing this trip isn't going to last for more than three hours, I can see that."

"Why?" Molly asked. She was thinking that the security officer had made an understatement when she said that he was handsome. He was just about the most handsome man she had ever seen in her life. Six feet tall, he was slim but with a suggestion of litheness and strength. She adored men with steely grey eyes such as his, and his chin was firm beneath a strong, straight mouth.

"Because it's amazing what a sickly lot men can be when they've a lovely nurse to attend to them."

"Don't captains ever get sick?" Molly asked with a laugh.

"I dare say they do. But not in three hours. It's barely sufficient time to develop a malady."

"It isn't always wise to wait till one develops. Treatment of the symptoms sometimes pays off," Molly replied.

Dick Adams walked over to the three tables and poured himself a Scotch before he replied.

"I agree with you. But I find this helps to keep the symptoms at bay," he said. "What will you have?"

"A very large, and a very dry, sherry," was the quiet reply.

"Then come and help yourself, Molly. That's what we'll all be doing from now till the party breaks up."

"Party?"

"That's right. As the others are introduced, they'll join in. The idea is to make this a get-together celebration. Tomorrow morning we shoot off into space—for a matter of three hours, as I said before. After that, we might feel like continuing to celebrate."

Molly sipped her sherry in contemplative silence and Dick Adams returned to his seat at the table. He had just seated himself when the first of the remainder came in. He glanced up at the newcomer, a man, then brought another white card to the top of his bundle.

Steven Ronson, thirty-eight, the man who was to be his second in command. Married with two daughters. After gleaning this information from the record card he introduced himself. The other shook hands warmly and was then introduced to Molly.

"Any beer aboard, Captain?" he asked with a laugh when he saw the drinks in the other glasses.

"On the floor behind the tables there. Just help yourself, Steve."

Next came Doctor John Wilson, thirty-three and single, the Wheorld's medical officer. He was followed by Peter Richards, a twenty-eight years old married man with no children, an electronics expert. Close on his heels came twenty years old Amy Violet Fergusson, single, a blonde with a pretty face and a slender figure, engaged as the stewardess. Heavily-built Elizabeth Maud Mullins followed behind her. Forty years old, married and without children, she was to be the Wheorld's cook.

A few minutes later, Leonard Patrick Kelly was introduced. Engaged as the chief engineer, he was also twenty-eight and married but without children. The navigator came next, William James Spears, thirty-two, a father of three and, after him Lady Pamela Launceston, the private secretary appointed to report to her chiefs all that happened during the flight. Twenty-three, unmarried, five feet seven inches tall,

and inclined to thinness rather than to the description 'slim' shown on her card, she entered into the party spirit immediately.

The next arrival was intercepted before Dick Adams had a chance to introduce himself. As soon as Derek James, the twenty-three years old televiewer operator and observer entered the room, Amy Fergusson, the stewardess ran to him and threw her arms around his neck.

"Derek, darling, I thought you were never coming," she said excitedly.

"So two of my crew are love-birds," Dick Adams commented good-humouredly.

"We're engaged—getting married in a fortnight," Derek informed him.

"Well, don't get necking in the three hours we're up there. You've an important job to do."

"We won't," Amy assured him and led her fiancé off to introduce him to the others.

Gustave Olaf Hardwicke, twenty-nine years ten months. Widower. No children. Guided missile and general gunnery expert. Six feet two inches. Heavily-built. His presence was felt by everyone in the room as soon as he entered it.

"I'm Hardwicke, 'Big Gus,' everybody calls me." He spoke in a loud voice to the whole assembly, waving aside the personal introduction offered by Dick Adams.

"So *you're* taking us up, are you?" he asked, but without waiting for a reply went on, "I'll get to know the rest of them."

Dick Adams shrugged and seated himself to await the last arrivals. He looked at their cards again. Paul Eric Brotherton, six feet. He wondered if it was the same Brotherton, the one he'd known of at the university. Twenty-eight, the same as himself, could well be. *That* Brotherton had been destined for the Church, but it was unlikely that he had taken Holy Orders after what had happened. This one was going to be the Wheorld's chaplain. He hadn't known that other one personally, but he had heard the story.

He looked at the remaining card. Before he had a chance to read it, however, Paul Brotherton entered. If either man knew the other he showed no sign of recognition, acknowledging introduction as strangers.

Lastly came beautiful Martha Jones—the adjective was not on the white card—auburn-haired, hazel-eyed, twenty-

two years old and the possessor of the most perfect figure Dick Adams had ever seen. Her legs were long and shapely. His glance moved slowly upwards to her wasp-like waist and on—then he checked it suddenly as the warning voice inside him framed the unspoken words, "you're a happily married man, remember?"

"Pleased to meet you, Captain Dick," she said.

Her voice was music to his ears. Nor was it affected just for him. Her sweetness and charm captivated them all, including the women—with the possible exception of Mrs. Mullins, who on more than one occasion was seen to scowl when looking at her. She had acted strangely, too, when the pair were brought together for introduction.

"I've met 'er, thanks," she said, turning her back. Martha blushed. She looked more beautiful than ever then.

The incident was soon forgotten, however, and the party proceeded merrily until past midnight—when the whole crew, including Captain Adams himself, were escorted to their quarters aboard the Wheorld.

Chapter Three

OF the fourteen people who retired to bed that night in the Wheorld, only Dick Adams knew the programme that lay ahead to firing time. As on the day just passed, the remainder would be puppets to a time-table, given little chance to dwell in idle thought. Events were scheduled to follow each other in rapid succession and there would be thought only for the job in hand.

The first of them commenced at exactly half-past four in the morning. An alarm clanged in each room with the noisy persistence of a fire-bell, rousing the occupant with a start. When the alarm was silent the voice of the captain came through the speakers fitted above the doors to the rooms:

"Please dress as quickly as you can. We assemble in the lower lounge for breakfast in fifteen minutes."

At precisely a quarter to five the lift cage came to a halt outside the engine room door. Steve Ronson—on the instructions of his captain and accompanied by a partly-dressed and protesting Mrs. Mullins—collected the breakfast from it.

At five o'clock, while the meal was still in progress, Dick Adams made his next announcement.

"We assemble in the upper lounge in ten minutes time, for an address by a V.I.P."

The announcement was accepted in silence and, when the first to finish breakfast left the table, the others followed quickly, as though none wished to be the last left eating. Some went straight up to the lounge, others to their rooms to finish dressing. However, all were assembled by 05.10 hours. Less than a minute later, Professor Wellis, accompanied by the Prime Minister, the Defence Minister and the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, boarded the Wheorld.

The professor introduced the captain, to whom he referred as his old friend and fellow-graduate Dick Adams. There followed a few moments of informal exchanges. Then Dick Adams in turn introduced the visitors to the members of his crew. He referred to each by his or her Christian name, or the one by which each had become known to the others at the previous night's celebration.

In the case of the women it was Martha, Molly, Amy, "The Countess" for Lady Pamela and "Maudie" for Mrs. Mullins. The men in turn as the Padre, the Doc, Steve, Bill, Len, "Slim" for Peter Richards, "Big Gus"—which brought a smile to the thin face of the tiny Defence Minister—and, lastly, Derek. Whilst the shaking of hands was in progress, a brief description of the duties for which each had been engaged was given by the captain.

The introductions complete, in the same delightfully informal atmosphere the Prime Minister said he wished to thank them all for offering to risk their lives with such unselfish devotion to the advancement of their country and to mankind as a whole.

"If this test is a success," he went on, "you will have revolutionized the future of mankind. You will have enhanced the status of our country. You will be directly responsible for the prevention of wars for all time to come. No words of mine can adequately express the esteem in which your fellow-man will hold you, or his indebtedness to you. And, in the literary sense, no title exists that will sufficiently honour your names.

"Your action makes so light those of heroes and pioneers that I will not deign to refer to you as such, but rather as the mighty spearhead of man's thrust into outerspace." He

smiled as he added, "we may have to pass a Bill to invent a befitting one-word title for you on your return. But I gabble on who only came to shake fourteen very gallant people by the hand. Now it's time to go, before my colleagues have had an opportunity of making themselves heard. No doubt they'll have plenty to say to me about that."

Everyone laughed and the visitors again shook hands with the crew wishing them farewell as they did so. At the door, the Prime Minister turned.

"God speed and protect you and, for the sake of mankind return you safely in three hours," he said.

"Amen," murmured Padre Brotherton.

Dropping in at the rear of the visitors, Dick Adams followed them to the exit in the engine room.

"What's it feel like knowing you'll be the most important man in the world in just three hours, Dick?" the professor asked, a twinkle in his eyes.

"You tell me, Trevor. You'll come in for a far greater share of the praise and publicity than we will. Quite rightly so, too. After all, it's your brain-child—we're only going to see if the damned thing works."

The professor thought he detected a note of doubt.

"Any misgivings, Dick?" he asked.

Dick Adams shook his head and smiled.

"No, none whatsoever. Tell Jenifer I'll be home for lunch."

As he spoke, a buzzer sounded in the engine room. The two said good-bye hurriedly and the professor stepped into the lift cage. A second later, the Wheorld's only exit door slid shut. By that time, however, Dick Adams was racing to his ops room and the crew were making for their various action stations.

In front of each member of the crew, a television-like screen flashed a picture of the Wheorld's captain. It showed him in close-up and giving instructions to the station operator. After each instruction was carried out, the face of the operator appeared in a similar screen in front of Dick Adams and reported. When all had duly reported to him that everything was ready, he glanced at the clock.

Ten seconds later he pressed a knob at the side of his table. Inside the Wheorld, nothing happened; but its captain knew that on the ground, fifty feet below, a siren shrieked a warning and men were running swiftly for the

safety of the tunnel. The Prime Minister, who was to press the plunger that would fire the four monster rockets, and send them soaring up towards the heavens, would be making his way to the firing-point.

Dick Adams spoke to his crew again. He instructed them to test inter-com with each other. Satisfied with the results, he called earth contact and Martha's face appeared. He thought once again how beautiful she was.

"Make contact," he ordered.

"Contact," she replied, a few seconds later.

"Relay to all crew stations."

"Stations in," she replied and her voice was followed immediately by one from base, which was heard by the whole crew.

"Base to Wheorld. Eight seconds to go. Good luck to all. Four—three—two—one——" the voice was drowned in what sounded like a bomb explosion to those inside the space ship.

For a second of time the Wheorld shuddered under the violent shock. It seemed to her occupants that the floor on which they stood pressed upwards hard against their feet. Brief though the time-span of the sensation was, Dick Adams knew a moment of misgiving. He heaved a sigh of relief when it passed. Now he knew Gneut worked. If it hadn't done, that pressing of the floor would have continued, together with an ever-growing pressure from above, until each might have been crushed out of existence.

"Base to Wheorld. Perfect launching. Come in, please."

"Contact," Martha acknowledged.

"Adams to Base. All's well. Crew comfortable. Congratulations to Trevor. Cut."

"Cut," Martha repeated.

There followed an interval of silence, during which time Dick Adams kept his eyes on the clock.

"Base to Wheorld. Second stage imminent. Report——"

Once again the voice was drowned by the sound of an explosion. Again, the ship shuddered violently; but there was a complete absence of any sensation of pressure.

"Base to Wheorld. Second stage fired. Acceleration recorded. Report please."

"Adams to Base. No change. Cut."

"Cut," said Martha.

Dick Adams then spoke to Peter Richards.

"Feed oxygen to normalize," he said.

Slim switched on the flow of oxygen and adjusted the gauges. From then on the intake would be automatically controlled.

"Check," he replied when the operation was finished.

Martha reported contact again.

"Base to Wheorld. Third stage imminent. Report effect. Contact."

"Adams to Base. Contact."

He finished his message as the third and, to him, the loudest of the three explosions occurred. The Wheorld jerked suddenly, jarring its inmates. It was like being in a car with a driver who hasn't mastered the accelerator; but it soon slipped into its normal, smooth climb again.

"Base to Wheorld. Third stage fired. Contact."

"Adams to Base. Back in three hours. Cut and Out."

"Out," Martha repeated, promptly disengaging.

For the next few minutes, Dick Adams contacted each member of the crew for the All Well signal. None added anything further until he spoke to Big Gus.

"Are we testing the shooting gallery?" he asked.

"Hope not," was the reply. "Should be nothing to shoot at up here."

Leaving the ops room he went down to the recording, viewing and contact room where the bulk of the crew were stationed. He joined Derek at the viewer, a much larger one than the one in his suite. India was directly below them.

"You wouldn't believe there were four hundred million people living on that, would you, Derek?" he asked.

"Not if I didn't know it to be true," replied Derek, with a smile. "It looks so small from up here. Just a little triangle of land jutting out into the ocean. And take a peek at the Himalayas! They're no more than dried-out cart tracks."

"That remark would not please the members of Sir John Hunt's Everest Expedition," laughed Dick Adams, moving away to pay a brief visit to each of the others, including one to Mrs. Mullins in her kitchen.

"I wish I was going to get the chance to cook on these lovely stoves," she said wistfully.

"For my part, Maudie," the captan replied, "I'm damned hopeful *that* wish will never be granted. I've a date with my wife for lunch."

Chapter Four

THEY had been in space for two hours and forty minutes, during which time they had circled the earth from latitude 50° North to 30° South, passing over the North Atlantic, the Mediterranean countries, India, Malaya, New Guinea, Northern Australia, the South Pacific and the Northern half of South America. They had changed course slightly and were circling it at a constant 45° North on the second circuit.

Martha had just contacted base, reported and cut, and Captain Adams was studying the scene below him. On the left of his picture he saw the eastern seaboard of the North American coast, in the centre the stretch of the Northern Atlantic and, on the right, the continent of Europe. He was thinking what a minute creature man really was, and how insignificant in the vastness of the universe, when he saw a red flash to the left of his picture and a billowing green, brown and white cloud rising on the right.

The red flash disappeared as quickly as it had come and became, as that on the right, a mushroom of coloured cloud. Dick Adams's first thought was that a fire had broken out simultaneously in New York, perhaps, and somewhere near the Baltic. Even as the thought occurred to him, however, there were several similar happenings in Britain, France, Spain, in the Atlantic itself, and between Norway and Sweden. They Derek came in to report.

"Bombing in progress," he said in an agitated, frightened voice.

Dick Adams's heart sank. His first impulse was to descend at once, to get down there and find out what the hell it was all about. He was not scheduled to land for another twenty minutes though.

"Earth contact," he called.

Martha tried to make contact, but failed. Dick went down and tried himself, but contact remained severed.

He told Martha to keep on trying. Then he gave orders to Slim Richards and Len Kelly to take the ship down in her course to three hundred miles.

"Set for Base." he instructed Bill Spears. "We're going down."

"All set," came back from Bill Spears a few moments later.

After that, Dick Adams again joined Derek at the main viewer.

"Any more?" he asked.

"I've counted one hundred and sixteen up to now," Derek replied, without turning his eyes. He continued aloud, "seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty—one—two——"

"Looks like the Third World War's started. The War to end all wars. The wars we came up here to prevent," Dick Adams observed dryly.

"Looks that way, Captain. But who started it? The first bombs burst at the same time in East and West—after that, they just splashed the surface on both sides, non-stop."

As he was speaking, a dozen or more explosions occurred at almost the same time away up towards the North Pole, in the centre of the Atlantic and at Base. There were eight together on Base. The two men watched the smoke clouds develop into gigantic mushroom shapes and snake-like tongues of flame, fifty miles or more across, pass through them. The clouds spread and the flames licked at each other until the sky above Base looked like an artist's impression of hell.

"Alter course!" Dick Adams called to Bill Spears. "Get back on the original one."

"All set," came the quiet reply.

"Check the descent, Slim. Push back to space."

Slim Richards opened the throttles and released the force jets. The Wheorld banked over at a steep angle and, for agonizing seconds, just slipped sideways and downwards.

"She'll have to have the auxiliary jets," Slim reported.

"Give her what the hell you like, but get her back into space!" Dick Adams yelled at him.

"All right, keep your hair on, Skipper," Slim replied calmly; and, a few moments later, the Wheorld was again in her horizontal position, climbing away from and circling the earth.

"Close thing," said Slim. "We'd gone down a bit too far."

Dick Adams made no reply. He was back with Derek at the big viewer. The Atlantic was out of the picture now. It was Europe, with the Middle East, showing, and a vast

stretch of Asia. No country among them appeared to have escaped a blasting from the hydrogen bombs. The huge mushroom-shaped clouds were spreading everywhere, even from the oceans.

For a moment the captain allowed his mind to dwell on Jenifer and baby Gill. Fear for their safety gripped him.

"I thought we were only going to be up here for three hours, Captain?"

Dick Adams swung his gaze away from the viewer to glare at the speaker. It was the padre, Paul Brotherton.

"So did I!" he snapped. "Get back to your station, Padre, and stay there."

Paul Brotherton, however, had caught sight of those ominous clouds and the dancing flames.

"If something's wrong down there, don't you think I should know about it?" he asked.

"Why you any more than anyone else?"

"Because, if it's bad news, I feel that I am the most competent person to break it."

A steely glint came into Dick Adams's eyes.

"Listen to me, Padre. Your job, when stations are manned, is to remain with, and give assistance to, the doctor and the nurse, to comfort patients when necessary and to pray for the dead and dying. Do not on any account attempt to assume further responsibility."

The padre flushed slightly; but, without a word in reply, he rejoined Doctor Wilson and Molly. When he had gone, Dick Adams turned again to the viewer.

"Any more developments, Derek?" he asked.

"They're bursting in Tibet now. It's all so senseless," Derek replied.

"Yeah, just a bomb-happy world, Derek. Somebody touched-off the spark and everyone's using it as an excuse to get even with somebody else. It doesn't matter who—so long as they belong to the opposite school of thought, or hide behind neutrality, they're fair game."

"But what do we do, now our Base has gone up?"

Dick Adams glanced away before replying. He wanted to say that he saw Jenifer and baby Gill go up with it, that he never wanted to return to it, that he had no desire to return to the earth at all, that he'd no desire to live any more. He couldn't though. The crew depended upon him. Their lives were in his hands.

"We'll complete this circuit and take the next one round the Southern Hemisphere. Australia, South America, or South Africa, should provide us with a landing."

He was wrong though. Not even Australia's great, barren desert had escaped from man's latest madness; and South Africa and South America were just blazing infernos.

"Well, Maudie," he said later to Mrs. Mullins, "it appears as if your wish must be granted. Cook some lunch."

Meanwhile, he altered course to circle the Earth longitudinally around the poles. In this way, he hoped to obtain a more comprehensive assessment of the damage done, and the destruction still going on, as the globe revolved on its axis.

Everywhere on land was fire and smoke and, on the oceans, steam that rose to reinforce the gigantic banks of now-black cloud. The clouds grew in volume as a result, joining up with each other until not a pinpoint of light could be seen between them. It was as if the gates of a crematorium had shut, to hide from view the burning into ashes of the flesh.

That impenetrable ceiling of turbulent, rolling clouds persisted for several hours before Dick Adams caught a fleeting glimpse of anything through them. They were passing over Iraq at the time and an opening occurred to reveal a section of white-hot earth. He was immediately reminded of a white-hot rivet poking its end through the holes between the plates, glowing, scaled, shadowed and belching greenish smoke.

It was only a glimpse, then the gap in the clouds was closed again. A few minutes later, however, a gigantic sheet of flame burst through them and split the skies from pole to pole. The sound of an explosion, the veritable crack of doom, penetrated the Wheorld. For a moment, the ship shook as though it would disintegrate in space. It's occupants were thrown off their feet, but Dick Adams held firmly to the rail around the viewer.

He watched the flame die. Mountainous clouds of yellow, green and black smoke took its place and continued to pour into the skies until, once again, the earth was completely hidden from view.

Apart from the death-dealing radioactivity produced by the explosion of the countless hydrogen bombs, Dick Adams was convinced that nothing on earth could survive in that atmosphere of sulphurous gases and extreme heat. He suspected

that the globe itself had been rent in two—or, at least, split right across its surface to the poles. But that he couldn't know definitely until it became visible again.

Abandoning now all thought of attempting a landing, he instructed his crew to assemble in the upper lounge. Briefly, he told them what had happened, sparing them the horrors of a detailed account. He said man had not only destroyed himself, but he had destroyed everything else on earth.

The men took the news calmly and, on the whole, so did the women. Two of the latter showed signs of weeping. No doubt, their thoughts were upon those whom they had left behind, loved ones they would never see, or hear, again. Martha Jones went over to one of them and put an arm comfortingly around her.

"There, my dear," she said soothingly, "it must be awful for you. I'm so sorry."

Captain Adams's heart went out to her in that moment. Perhaps more heavily bereaved herself, her thoughts were for the others. Jenifer had done that when she tripped with baby Gill in her arms and broke a wrist. The baby, unhurt, had cried with fright and Jenifer ignored her own pain to comfort it.

"They say that the devil looks after his own, and I'm damned if he doesn't. The world comes to an end, millions of decent folk perish and the like of you is allowed to live!"

Dick Adams just gaped at the speaker, who had addressed herself to Martha.

"Mrs. Mullins!" he snapped. "Don't you dare speak like that to any of these ladies again. You're distraught. Go and lie down."

"I'm all right. It's her. Makes me see red when I think what's happened and she's still alive," Mrs. Mullins retorted, pointing a finger at Martha. "She's no blinking lady, she's bad. Knew her before she got this job, I did. Came to my house to live—till I caught her with a man in her room. She paid three weeks back rent when he'd gone. If that ain't being bad, I'd like to know what is. I threw her out on the street where she belonged."

Martha Jones took her comforting arm away from the bowed shoulders of Lady Pamela Launceston. She went over to where Mrs. Mullins stood.

"I owed you three weeks rent, Mrs. Mullins. You wouldn't give me any peace, because I couldn't pay it. When I did,

simply because I refused to tell you how I got it, you threw me out," she said quietly.

"You won't deny you had a man in your room, *and* at three in the morning."

"No, I can't deny that," Martha replied.

"And he gave you the money," Mrs. Mullins said accusingly.

Martha looked desperately at the faces of the onlookers. She wished at that moment that the floor would drop out where she stood.

"What difference does that make to you, Mrs. Mullins? You threatened to put me out if I didn't get it—and you threw me out when I did. You knew I had a job when I came to you, and lost it through no fault of my own."

Mrs. Mullins sneered.

"More likely your boss was tipped-off that you were a bad lot," she said.

"It isn't true," Martha said despairingly. "You know it isn't. But you can't do any more harm now, so suppose you leave it at that?"

What Mrs. Mullins might have answered will never be known. Captain Adams had heard more than enough.

"Yes, we'll leave it at that, Martha. Forget what Mrs. Mullins said. From now on, our past is dead. We've witnessed the end of the living world. Which means we are the only people left to return to it if God grants that life will ever be possible again down there. We'll be fourteen individuals starting life anew. The first in the world—and, with the first, there cannot be a past. We've only the future. The laws Man made have died with Man. When we return, it will be under laws made by ourselves to govern ourselves.

"There cannot be any doubt that life has ended down there—and, believe me, I'm sorry for all of you. I know how you feel. I'm feeling the same way myself at the moment. But I'm going to shake it off, because I know everything's gone—wife, child, home, gone for good. Nothing's ever going to bring them back, so we may as well face up to it. We've all got to forget there ever was a yesterday. Only a distant tomorrow matters now.

"We will be the beginning of things, just as Adam and Eve were the beginning of the Old World. We've a decided, but questionable, advantage with nine Adams and five Eves, of course." He paused and smiled before he added, "And that could cause trouble."

He paused again, as if undecided whether or not to go on. The others looked at him expectantly. He knew that what he wanted to say would be received with no great show of pleasure. It could, in fact, meet with open hostility; but that was a risk that had to be taken.

"In the light of what's happened, I'm going to dispense with the services of the women. I want them to go to their own floor and stay there. Maudie can cook and deliver the food to the men. The only other one likely to be required is the nurse, if the doctor should need her assistance. I don't propose to have them mixing with men again till I send for them. That's not likely to be before there's some change in the thick mass of smoke, steam and clouds surrounding and blotting from our view the face of the earth. Meanwhile, I'll appreciate it if they will segregate themselves completely, and if the men will honour that request. I didn't want to set out by forcing orders upon you, but this one I find to be essential. We don't want any free love, or sympathetic bonds passing as love, or any unwanted babies in the Wheorld."

"But why the hell go to the extreme by separating us?" demanded Big Gus.

"Among other things, to minimize the risk of any unpleasantness. As I've said, we're nine men and five women and, as far as we know, the entire population of the World. When the significance of that fact has had the opportunity to penetrate our dulled senses, we are likely to look upon the opposite sexes with a different outlook.

"It wouldn't be fair to either sex to allow anything to happen till we've seen what remains of, and if we can return to the earth. I intend to protect you from each other till then, myself no less than anybody else. In the light of developments, we'll see what changes can be made. But, for the present, the women are going to be kept away from the men. Let that be clearly understood."

Big Gus sneered.

"You're too bloody good for this world," he growled.

Derek James, tall and very thin, took up the complaint.

"You've no right to do this. Amy and I are engaged. We're going to be married as soon as we get back. What's wrong with us seeing each other?"

"The women will be segregated. See to it, Steve," was the cold reply and, without further preamble, Dick Adams left them, to return to his suite.

Big Gus glowered after him. Derek looked helplessly at his sweetheart, Amy. They had first met when she applied for this job twelve months earlier. She was a mannequin before that. He had asked her why she was volunteering to risk her young life. She told him the money she would get would set her up in a business of her own. He had offered to throw in what was due to him for the development of the business. From then on, they had made plans. They had fallen in love and were engaged just before embarking upon this trip. They intended to marry a fortnight after the Treasury settled with them.

She had met his mother, his father and his sister, Vera. They had all made such a fuss of her, especially Vera. Derek had spent a pleasant evening out with her dad, having a few drinks; and, contrary to expectations, he had found his future mother-in-law to be a most charming person. It would have been grand to have them all together for the wedding—surely it wasn't possible that they could be dead? Her mother, her father, his own family, all gone, blasted off the face of the earth!" Just him and Amy left; and now Captain Adams was virtually taking her away from him. He saw the tears in Amy's eyes.

"He can't do this to us, my pet. We'll meet somehow," he said soothingly.

"He's a beast, darling—a beast and a brute!" Amy sobbed. Steve Ronson parted them, gently but firmly.

"Come on, kids, break it up. You heard what the Old Man said."

Both of them looked at him imploringly, but Steve's face was an inscrutable mask. They must have thought him a hard man. Hell, he didn't want to hurt the kids. He had two young daughters of his own, with boy-friends. At least, he did have not so many hours ago. God, what a bloody mess! No wife, no kids, no home. He thought he caught Big Gus glaring at him. Big Gus the tough man, it wouldn't do to show any weakness in front of him; he was a typical bully and appeared to have everyone on the men's floor a little nervous of him.

"All right, kids. I said break it up. Come on now, Amy, you're not being parted for good. Might only be for a few hours, or days at the most," he said.

Derek looked at him as if he would have liked to have murdered him, but Steve gave him a fatherly pat on the

shoulder and whispered, "come on, boy, buck up"; and, a few minutes later, the men were alone, eight dejected-looking figures sitting, or sprawling, around the lounge.

"That blighter's posing as if he were a saint. Just because he's the boss, it doesn't give him the right to treat us like a pack of ruddy criminals," growled Big Gus.

"He's every right to give reasonable orders," Doctor Wilson countered.

"Do you consider it reasonable to shut the women away at a time like this?" the other demanded.

"In their present condition—suffering from severe mental shock and under great emotional stress—I would say, indubitably, yes."

The face of Big Gus turned red.

"You ruddy quacks are all alike. You'd imagine a disease if there wasn't one," he answered, raising his voice.

The doctor smiled.

"But we wouldn't imagine the symptoms. I'm not imagining them now. Those women are on the verge of hysteria. Leave them with each other and they'll be all right," he said.

"I agree with you wholeheartedly, Doc."

"So now the church has to butt in, does it?" Big Gus demanded angrily of the last speaker.

Paul Brotherton flushed slightly as he looked at the hard, red face before him. A University Blue and an amateur heavyweight, he felt that he would like to teach the bigger man a lesson. It was a pity that his calling prevented him from participating in a brawl. Gus Hardwicke might think that he was afraid of him.

"It's a great pity it didn't butt into your life a little earlier. It might have helped you to grow into a better mannered and far less brutal character than you are," he said.

"You keep your nose out of my affairs, Padre, or I'm likely to forget that you belong to the Church. That's the last I want to hear from you."

"Then you'll have to wear ear-plugs. I'm going to do a lot of ministering while I'm with you."

Big Gus clenched his massive fists and half-rose out of his seat, glaring into the calm blue eyes of Padre Brotherton as he did so. However, there was something about that calm expression of the padre's that made him change his mind. He flopped back into his chair.

"Aw, go to hell and stay there!" he snarled.

The padre smiled and crossed over to another corner of the room, where some other members of the crew were sitting. Bill Spears, a dark little man sat with bowed head in his hands.

"Take it easy, Bill," Paul Brotherson said to him.

"Take it easy! Christ, Padre, it's awful. My poor wife and the kids never knew what luxury was. And now, just when I was ready to give it to them, they're ruthlessly blotted out. That money was going to do wonders for us. It was all planned. We were going to have a shop built, with a house above it, on a new estate. It would have been a newsagent's and general business. The papers would've brought in the customers, then they'd automatically buy other things. I was going to run the paper end of it and Mary was taking the General side. She was pretty good at it—used to work in a shop for years. Poor Mary—and the kids, God bless 'em! D'you think they might have died quick, Padre? Christ! I couldn't bear to think of them suffering."

The padre looked at him kindly.

"Yes, Bill. It would be so quick that they wouldn't know anything about it. If I were you, I'd just think of them as being happy now. Happier than ever you could have made them. I know it's advice easier given than taken, but try it, Bill," he said.

"That's advice I won't be needing," said Slim Richards miserably. "I've been telling myself just that over and over again. You see, padre, me and Angela had a row just before I left her. My fault, rotten jealousy. She didn't dare look at another chap, but I'd threaten to clout her. I'd get ideas she was having an affair behind my back—or maybe she'd known him before she met me and had given him all she'd got. Yep, she'll be happier. Life must have been hell on earth for her with me. My deepest regret is that she might have died thinking of that last rotten remark I flung at her just before I stamped out of the house."

Slim fell silent—as if he expected the padre to ask what that last remark was—but the latter maintained a discreet silence.

"I called her a child-murderer. I said she wanted our little girl dead, so she'd be free to go gallivanting with her old flames again. Oh, hell, I knew I was telling a damned lie, I knew I was only saying it to hurt her. Little Irene died of pneumonia—my wife had nothing to do with it. But I said

it, and that's that. I regretted it before I was halfway down the path, but it was too late then to turn back and say I was sorry."

Paul Brotherton patted him gently on the shoulder and gave him a word of encouragement. Then he found a word for Len Kelly.

"In a deep study, Len?"

"I wouldn't say that, Padre. Nothing serious on the mind, really," the other replied.

"Nothing?"

"Well, not exactly. I'm taking the Old Man's advice. What's past is past. That about sums up what he meant. I had a wife and she was a good one. There were no kids. That might have made a difference. Now she's gone and I'm one of nine candidates for five women. I intend to go all out to get one of them. I'm a firm believer in home comforts."

Paul Brotherton smiled.

"I wish you luck, Len. Any particular fancy?"

Len pursed his lips and sat in thoughtful silence before he replied.

"Well, there's the young one, of course—the stewardess, Amy. I know she's engaged to young Derek, but all's fair in love and war. Failing her, I'd have liked Martha—if that big-mouthed cook hadn't told everybody she was a bad girl. Takes some believing though. She's such a nice kid. She's got charm—and, boy, what a figure! Nobody'd ever take her for that sort, but there's no getting past what she admitted, is there?"

The smile left the padre's face.

"Don't be a hypocrite, Len. You're interpreting Captain Adams's advice to suit your own ends only," he said seriously.

"What do you mean?" Len asked sharply.

"You're going to forget you ever had a past on your journey into the future. So, surely, you should forget what you heard about Martha. Frankly, I believe she has a heart of gold."

Len Kelly made no reply and Paul Brotherton left him to join the doctor.

"You weren't married, were you, John?"

Doctor Wilson shook his head.

"No, Paul, I never married. But I had forty little children for all that and a dozen good mothers looking after them," he replied quietly.

"A hospital?"

"In a sense, yes. A little place all of my own and an excellent staff. I sank all my money into it. Poor little mites, they were all so hopelessly and helplessly crippled. They wouldn't stand a chance. I only came up here for the promise of that fat cheque I was going to get. I wanted it for those kids.

"You know, Paul, there's something far more cruel about killing a helpless cripple than a strong, healthy person. Being a doctor, I shouldn't feel that way, I know. But it's the idea of it having to lie there helpless to the end, I suppose—whereas the fit and the healthy, although they stand as little chance of survival, do have the ability to fight their terror by doing something, even if it's only to run."

Chapter Five

WHEN the women left the main lounge and retired to their own floor, they, too—with the sole exception of Amy Fergusson—sat around. Amy went racing off to her bedroom. Flinging herself on her bed, she cried until she went to sleep.

"I think Captain Adams is the most narrow-minded man I've ever met in my life," grumbled Mrs. Mullins.

Lady Pamela Launceston looked at her in some surprise.

"Coming from you, Maudie, I think that's rich," she said.

"Why?" demanded Mrs. Mullins.

"Is your memory so short that you don't remember the horrible things you said about Martha?"

"What's that got to do with it? What I said was the truth!" snapped Mrs. Mullins.

"Can you not see that had you not been so wilfully poison-tongued, Captain Adams would have had no cause to shut us away from the men?"

"I'm damned if I can."

"Well, let me put it to you as simply as I can. None of those nine men we have just left is a saint. Probably, the contrary. It's likely that they would have got fresh with us sooner or later. Indeed, it's more than likely. I'd be thinking that I'd lost my appeal if they didn't.

"In all probability, I, for one, would have kept them at

arm's length. Not because I am a prude—don't have any mistaken illusions about that—but because I want to safeguard myself. So what do you think those men would do, Maudie?"

Mrs. Mullins sneered.

"I should care! They wouldn't get fresh with me," she replied.

"No, I doubt very much if they would," agreed Lady Pamela, "they'd take the least line of resistance and make poor Martha's life a hell. She'd have no defence, poor darling. She couldn't plead honour and all it stands for. She couldn't plead the protection of her character, Maudie, because you took that away from her. She could have refused—and I don't doubt she would have done—but I've a feeling she'd have had a mighty rough passage.

"Dick Adams obviously knows something of the psychological functioning of the male mind. I pride myself upon knowing a little about it, too. You were unforgiveably beastly, Maudie."

When Lady Pamela finished, Martha was sobbing. Nurse Jordan sat with an arm about her waist.

"I shouldn't take any notice, Martha dear," she coaxed.

"It's too late now, Molly. They all know. It's not that I intended to deceive anyone. There just wasn't any reason why anyone should know. I wanted to bury the memory of it. But, of all the women in this world, they had to choose Mrs. Mullins to be our cook."

"You lived with her. What sort of a home had she? Was it clean?" Molly asked.

"Scrupulously."

"And her cooking?"

"Excellent, really. She makes delicious pastry."

Nurse Jordan glanced significantly across at Lady Pamela; and she in turn looked at the truculent Mrs. Mullins.

"Don't you think you ought to apologize, Maudie?" she asked.

"I don't see why I should. I only spoke the truth," persisted the other.

"It's going to be very lonely being the odd one out for the rest of our stay in the Wheorld, Maudie—and, maybe, after we leave it. Nobody likes a poison-tongue, even when it speaks the truth, you know. I, for one, consider it to be more deadly than a rattlesnake. I invariably treat it as such, too.

And why be vindictive? Martha has nothing derogatory to say about the way you ran your house, and she has only the highest praise for your cooking."

Mrs. Mullins clambered awkwardly to her feet and walked slowly over to where Martha sat. She sniffed audibly and Nurse Jordan, with Lady Pamela, made a discreet exit.

"I believe the old she-cat is losing her claws," Molly whispered.

"If it were only claws, it wouldn't be so bad, Molly. Cuts and scratches will heal. I feel downright sorry for Martha. I rather like her."

"So do I, and I'm glad the captain took that line about the whole thing. He's an admirable man," the nurse commented.

"You think so? I wonder how long he'll leave us to ourselves. I suppose a lot will depend upon how little, or how much, he appreciates the company of women."

Molly Jordan pursed her lips.

"I'm not exactly struck with this segregation idea myself. I'd much rather flirt with a man than just sit twiddling my thumbs looking at you," she said lightly.

Lady Pamela laughed.

"Well, I prefer men's company all right. But I wouldn't fancy flirting with any of that lot we've got for a crew. However, I suppose even that would be preferable to being sociable to Mrs. Mullins. I detest the type."

"So do I," affirmed Molly, with emphasis.

"I wonder how she got this job. Has she a husband? I know they turned down every female applicant who had a husband, or children, living with her."

"She's got a husband all right," was the spontaneous reply. "He's in gaol. She told me so herself at the party last night. Apparently, he tried to strangle her. I don't know the details."

Lady Pamela was silent for a little while. Then she suddenly clicked her thumb and forefinger together.

"But I do!" she cried excitedly. "I remember. It was about two years ago. I read all about it in the Sunday papers. There was a photograph of her, too. I had a feeling I knew something about that woman. What a pity it didn't occur to me before. Oh, what a pity! Mrs. Mullins had slandered her husband's sister. There was an awful lot of unpleasantness, including an assault and battery charge being made against Mr. Mullins's sister's husband. Are you with me, Molly?"

I think I've worked it out," Molly Jordan answered with a smile.

"Well," continued Lady Pamela, "the sister's husband was given a three years' sentence. But, before he left the dock, he shouted at his wife that he'd murder her when he was released. She went straight home, poor thing, and committed suicide. It was a horrible, sordid story, Molly. Mr. Mullins was so upset about his sister's death—and knowing his own wife's slanderous tongue had caused all the trouble—that he tied a stocking round her neck when she was asleep one night. He thought he'd succeeded in strangling her, poor man. He went straight along to the police and gave himself up. But somebody reached the house in time and managed to revive her. What a pity!"

"You mean?" asked Molly, a twinkle in her eyes.

But Lady Pamela only smiled.

"What a pity," she repeated.

Chapter Six

TWO uneventful years went by, every day of which brought the same news from Captain Adams. At precisely ten o'clock each morning, he scribbled two bulletins, of two words each—"NO CHANGE". These he passed to Steve Ronson.

On the first morning, he told him to post one in each lounge and, thereafter, he handed them over daily without specific instructions, returning to his suite. He had practically shut himself off from his crew, from the men no less than the women. The padre and the doctor were concerned about him after the first few days, but he assured them that there was nothing wrong. He was spending every available minute by the viewer, looking for an opening in the blanket that covered the globe.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Mullins was the only one among the women who went near the men, and then only to deliver the food to the dining-room. Of the men, only Steve caught an occasional glimpse of the women when he posted the news bulletins, but he never lingered.

Then came the day when the bulletin was replaced by a notice to assemble in the main lounge at ten-thirty in the

morning. The men were all there when the women entered. Lady Pamela said, "Good morning, gentlemen," as though it were an everyday occurrence to meet. Martha smiled shyly about her. Amy Fergusson ran to the arms of her eager Derek and sobbed on his shoulder, and Mrs. Mullins said she was pleased to see they were all looking fit and well on her cooking. However, it was cheery Molly Jordan who really broke the ice.

"Golly, am I glad to see a man! We've been cooped up down there like a lot of broody hens. I'd have given anything to hear a cock crow," she said in mock seriousness.

Big Gus imitated a cock crowing and Molly and the others laughed.

"You're too late, Big Boy," she said gaily. "This is no time to precipitate a cock-fight."

Dick Adams joined them. Lady Pamela thought that he looked much older than his thirty years. Perhaps, in spite of the advice he had given about the past being something to forget, he was still brooding about the loss of his wife and little daughter. He wasted no time in telling them why they were together again.

"What I have to tell you was too much for the daily bulletin," he began, "so I had to bring you all together to let you know what's taking place. First of all, the dense ceiling of sulphuric-like smoke and clouds has left the surface of the earth. It can be clearly seen again. I made a note of the change yesterday morning. Since then, I've recorded all I've seen in every minute's vigil by the viewer.

"The earth, as you knew it, is no more. It's still a sphere, but its surface has few of those geographical features which we knew so well. It must have tilted on its axis. South Australia appears to have become the new South Pole and most of that continent is ice covered. The North Pole now covers part of the Atlantic Ocean. I would say its most northerly point would be slightly to the east of what was once Bermuda—but the whole of the east coast of the U.S.A. is under ice.

"As for the Atlantic itself, it bears no resemblance to its former shape, being cut by the new North Pole and a stretch of land linking Brazil to North West Africa. The familiar shape of the Mediterranean has gone; the sea stretches far down into the heart of Africa and, where the old poles once existed as ice-covered masses, there are vast stretches of

land. It might help you all to look at this sketch," he handed a sheet of note-paper to Paul Brotherton. "It's my impression of the shape of the New World. It's far from accurate, having been sketched as we circled, and only the main features are shown. In the next three years, I'll fill in as much detail as I can, keeping my eyes open all the time for a suitable place to land. Which brings me to my second point,

"Up here in the Wheorld, indeed anywhere in the Wheorld, I am the master and, as such, give the orders. When we land, that responsibility will no longer be mine. We fourteen are all that are left and, as I see things, one among us will eventually be made our leader, chief or king—call him what you will. Or we can be governed by a representative body of so many men and so many women. Or, yet again, the whole fourteen of us can agree upon and make legislation to govern our way of life."

"Just you leave us to mind our own business when we land. It'll be a case of the survival of the fittest," Big Gus interrupted.

The captain's grey eyes surveyed him coldly.

"If there were just you and me Gus, I would. But there are women in the party and men who might not match up to your brute strength. They must be protected. Not necessarily against you, but against one another. The best protection lies in preventive laws. They tend to restrain would-be evil-doers—and I, for one, would welcome them. How about you others?"

There were murmurs of assent, but Captain Adams asked for a show of hands from those in favour. Everyone, with the exception of Big Gus, put up a hand.

"Right, except for one abstention, we agree we want laws. now, how to make those laws and what laws to make? They must be few, simple and effective—drastically so if need be."

"You're making them act like a lot of silly school kids. Nobody's going to make laws to prevent Gustave Olaf Hardwicke doing what he likes, so get that straight."

"A great deal will depend on what you like," was the answer.

"Who'll make the laws?" asked Lady Pamela.

"That's for all of us to decide," Dick Adams replied.

"I suggest one man makes them with the help of any he wishes to call upon," said Padre Brotherton.

"Would we be called upon?" Lady Pamela queried.

"On questions affecting your sex, no doubt you would."

"I see no objection. But what one man do you consider to be sufficiently competent?" Doctor Wilson asked.

"How about yourself?"

The doctor shook his head vigorously.

"No thanks, not me. It's more in your own line," he replied.

Padre Brotherton disagreed, however.

"Laws made by me would tend to have a religious bias. That wouldn't suit some people," he said with a smile.

"How about the captain?" piped Derek James..

"Here! Here!" agreed Steve Ronson.

Molly Jordan expressed her doubts about this.

"With all due respect to Captain Adams, I think someone with a little more consideration for the feelings of others should be chosen," she said spiritedly.

Big Gus greeted her comment with a loud hand-clapping.

"Good for you, nurse. I'm ruddy glad to see that one member of this outfit, at least, isn't a creeper."

The others ignored him. Captain Adams's thin lips curled slightly at the corners into what might have been intended as a smile, but, otherwise, his face remained expressionless. Looking at him then, Lady Pamela was half inclined to agree with Molly. Dick Adams was a man of education, of understanding, of proved ability and, what was even more important, of great strength of character. If any man could make laws without fear or favour, that man was Dick Adams.

When a show of hands was again asked for, she noticed that Molly kept hers down; so she pinched her and, to the disgust and disappointment of Big Gus, the hand of his only ally shot into the air.

"Blasted women!" he growled. "They never know their own minds for two minutes running."

The captain thanked them and said that he was honoured to accept the task of shaping their future lives, and maybe the lives of those who might come after them. As he said this, Amy looked across at Derek and blushed. Derek gave her a reassuring smile.

"I'll make a start right away. I can't promise when they'll be ready, but before we leave the Wheorld, we'll be armed with, and protected by, a comprehensive code under which we'll live. Should I need help, I'll ask for it.

"Meanwhile, the Wheorld will be kept in space. She'll stay up here for her full span of five years. Thanks to the organizers, every oxygen tank was full when we left the Earth two years ago. Our walls were flooded with water and our storehouses loaded to capacity."

Dick Adams turned to leave. At the entrance to his suite he stopped and faced them again.

"Just carry on as before. Ladies back to the lower floor."

Before anyone could think of anything to say in reply, he was gone.

"Somebody should tell him the surest way to make one want something is to deprive one of it after letting one know it's there to be had. And for another three years! The man must be mad," Molly Jordan said testily.

"That's the way I feel about it," Len Kelly added and he winked and laughed at Molly.

"I shouldn't take her seriously Len," said Lady Pamela. "Nurse would run a mile if a man made a pass at her."

"Speak for yourself, Countess. I'm heartily sick of this hermit-like existence. I like a bit of fun, a dance, a drink, men's company, a joke, a laugh. Oh! Hell, I like to live. Dammit, I only want to *live*!"

Molly turned and fled from the room. Martha followed her.

"You shouldn't have let yourself go like that, Molly darling," Martha said quietly.

"And why not?" demanded Molly. "I spoke as I felt."

"That's the trouble, darling, you left no doubt in the minds of those men what you wanted. I'm not saying they all think the same thing, but I saw that man wink at you and there was no mistaking his meaning. Given half a chance he'll be after you, Molly, and it's your own fault."

"I was fed up, dear. That captain just gets on my nerves. I *do* like a bit of fun. If the truth were told I'm no different to you. Probably worse. Tell me truthfully, Martha, how many boys had you been with before you became a—a—sorry dear," she stammered when she saw the colour mount to Martha's cheeks, "I didn't mean it, I just didn't know how to put it."

"Pro," said Martha harshly. "Don't mince any bones about it. Well, you might not believe me, Molly, but there was never a man in my life before Mrs. Mullins caught that one in my room. There's never been one since, but it doesn't alter the fact. I did it and Mrs. Mullins saw to it that I was properly labelled."

"What a crying shame! Do you know, I wasn't happy when I was a kid of thirteen till I knew what happened. There was a boy next door only too willing to show me. But I saw nothing wrong in it. In a way, I suppose I'm an immoral woman. Stylish clothes, expensive dinners, weekends in the country and Lord knows what else. I couldn't provide them for myself. But I can't say I regret one single moment. I lived and loved and loved to live.

"You aren't bad, Molly darling. You let your heart guide you. I didn't. I had to find the rent for Mrs. Mullins, or get out. I chose what I thought was the easy way. I was disgusted with myself afterwards—and with men. It made me hate them, Molly."

"Just because one gave you money?"

"No, darling, it's not that. It's no good trying to explain what I mean, or why I mean it."

"It might help if you do."

"Well, perhaps it was because a cherished dream was shattered. I wanted love that night, *my* conception of it. If that's what I got, it's little short of—Ugh!"

"What a morbid creature you are, Martha! Why, dear, men are such good fun and so gentle really. I've had to tell them I won't break, I'm not a china doll. Even then, they've kept kid gloves on."

"Maybe the money did make a difference," Martha replied quietly.

"You two don't know the argument you've left up there," announced Lady Pamela, bursting in upon them.

"What sort of an argument?" asked Molly.

"Oh, Steve Ronson, Big Gus, Len Kelly and Bill Spears are all at it, with the doctor and the padre siding with Steve. I'm afraid you started it, Molly. You shouldn't have encouraged Len Kelly. He said Captain Adams must be useless after you ran down here. Steve told him not to speak like that about the Old Man again.

"Then, as you can well imagine, Big Gus chimed in: 'The man's depraved. He must think we sit here all day with our minds only on women. He must do, or he wouldn't have this mania for keeping us separated.' I nearly burst out laughing, but Padre Brotherton told Big Gus to remember there were ladies present, so I had to keep a straight face as a lady would.

"Doc Wilson told Big Gus the captain was probably a

damned good thought-reader. I thought Big Gus was going to hit him. He raved about the inefficiency of the medical profession in general and about Doc in particular. How did it go now? Oh yes. "You ruddy medicos are all alike. A normal being, as far as your profession is concerned, is a freak, something to be experimented with. You know ruddy well we're only being normal now, the abnormality exists in the mind of the Old Man. Why'n't you go and test his ruddy brain instead of having the audacity to presume that he must be right and the rest of us wrong. Do your job and go and tell him that he's punishing thirteen people unnecessarily. But that's too much to ask, isn't it? That's too much to expect—you'd get in his black books. Too many damned crawlers in this outfit, that's the trouble.' It looked like getting a bit rough, so I didn't wait to show them how really frightfully bloodthirsty I am, I came away."

This idea of keeping us apart is sure making Dick Adams a most unpopular man," Molly commented.

Before she replied, Lady Pamela looked around the room to see if either of the others had come down.

"There's one good thing come out of it, Molly. Have you noticed the change in Maudie?" she asked.

Molly had and indeed they all had. Mrs. Mullins was no longer truculent and vicious-tongued. She was just an ordinary middle-aged woman, ever ready to oblige, always keen to please and to be pleased. Never once since she apologized to Martha was she heard to pass any derogatory remarks about her to any of the others, or about anyone else for that matter. Lady Pamela's threat to have her ostracised had taken immediate effect.

What none of them knew was that Mrs. Mullins was terrified of loneliness. She had to have someone to talk to all the time. In the past, it had been an outlet for her slandering tongue; there had always been someone ready to listen. Since these women were not prepared to hear that kind of talk, she had the remedy in her own hands. She had to speak of anything but people.

It was a little strange at first and she often found herself tongue-tied. However, constant practice, joining in the pleasant and varied discussions between the others, soon proved to be a success, so that she found herself enjoying normal conversation. She was, in fact, a very much happier woman than she had been when she first joined up with the

others in the Wheorld. She now knew the reason why. Lady Pamela had done more to bring it home to her than anybody on earth had ever done.

Her slandering tongue had proved to be a magnet for the gossips. Once they had heard what she had to say, she ceased to be of any further interest to them. Normal, healthy-minded people had not gone out of their way to make her acquaintance. If, by chance, they had met her, the acquaintanceship never developed into friendship. So there were always only the gossips and, to keep them attracted, it was necessary to feed them with every bit of scandalizing filth she could rake out of the gutter. That someone always got hurt as a result of it bothered her not one iota. She had always claimed that her conscience was clear because she believed what she uttered to be true.

She joined the others a few minutes later.

"I stayed on with Amy. She's still hanging on to her boyfriend's neck, poor kid," she explained.

"Is it all quiet up there?" Lady Pamela asked.

"It is now. I thought Big Gus was going to hit the doctor, but Steve told him he'd report him to the captain, and have him forcibly restrained, if he didn't calm down. Then the padre joined in. He said it would be better for everybody if they stopped snarling at and threatening each other. 'Take the captain's decision on all matters while we're in this ship,' he said. Then that quiet man, Slim Richards—the one who seems to sit and brood all the time—he took a pack of cards out of his pockets.

"Any of you boys got any money left?" he asked. 'I'm ready to take it off you if you have. You'll have something to scream about then. Come on, what's it to be, nap, brag, pontoon or shoot?' 'You and your ruddy cards!' Big Gus roared, but the others, Len Kelly, Bill Spears, Steve and the doctor sat down to play."

"And what did Big Gus do?" Molly asked.

"He said something to the Padre about Slim having cleared him out of ninety-four pounds. The padre offered to let him have some to play with. I don't know if he took it, for I came away then. I asked Amy if she was coming, but she shook her head. I think she'll stay there for as long as Steve Ronson will let her."

It was Derek, however, who held Amy back; not that she was in any hurry to rush away.

"Let's wait till we can get the padre on his own. I'll ask him to see the captain for us. He shouldn't object to us marrying. After all, he knows we've intended to get married all along," he whispered.

"It would be lovely, darling. He might even let us have a short honeymoon together," Amy said hopefully.

It was then Derek saw that the padre was free. He beckoned to him to join them.

"Padre, will you do Amy and me a favour?" he asked.

"Certainly Derek, anything within my power."

"We want you to marry us, now. Will you see the captain for us?"

The padre laughed.

"You leave me little choice in the matter. But why not wait till you can be together permanently?"

"We'll be happier if we're tied—even if it means being with each other for only a few hours." Derek replied.

"Is he speaking for both of you, Amy?" the padre asked seriously.

"Oh, yes," Amy replied with a sigh.

"All right then, we'll all go along and see what the captain thinks about it. He can't have any objections."

Dick Adams *did* object though. He addressed himself wholly to the padre.

"There'll be no marriage ceremony aboard the Wheorld. When I issue an order, I expect it to be obeyed," he said coldly.

"If you're referring to the forcible separation of the women from the men, this marriage wouldn't interfere with it. These two are quite prepared to be parted again, once they have been united in matrimony."

"Listen Padre, I'm making no exceptions. I said at the time of parting the sexes that I intended to protect them from each other. That still stands. When they're beyond my jurisdiction, they can please themselves what they do within the limits of the laws of our community. I've only to give way to these two now, and God alone knows what it might lead to."

"I think you're being very unreasonable," Paul Brotherton replied.

The captain gave that faint suspicion of a smile again.

"The order was never issued that didn't have its critic," he said quietly.

"So you absolutely refuse the request?"

"I do."

"May God forgive you," Padre Brotherton murmured. Turning to the lovers, he said, "I'm sorry."

Amy burst into tears and rushed from the room. Derek looked at the captain, opened his lips as if to speak, but changed his mind and followed Amy out. She had returned straight to the women's quarters, however, and a long time was to pass before they were to see each other again.

Chapter Seven

"CARDS! Cards! Cards! I'm sick of the ruddy sight of them."

Slim Richards looked aghast at the speaker.

"It's as good a pastime as any I know," he said solemnly.

"Can you think of anything better?"

"Can I think of anything better?" Len Kelly sneered. "I never cease to think of something better. I think all day and I think all night. She's haunted me for eighteen months—and, dammit, if I don't do something about her soon, I'll go crackers!"

"You're too late for that, son," the poker-faced Slim replied. "Who is it—nurse?"

"It's her all right. She's game. I'd give my right arm to be hitched up with her," Len replied.

"Anybody'd think you were the only one with woman-trouble," said Bill Spears.

"No, but seriously," protested Len, "it's three and a half years now since we lost our women back home. I feel it's about time we got hitched up again. But, the way I see it, we won't stand an earthly."

"Why not?" Big Gus demanded.

"Use your load Gus," Len snapped contemptuously, "there's nine of us, but there's only five women. You don't think the great Captain Adams is going without, do you?"

"If I get my way, he will. Let him come any funny business and I'll do him!" Big Gus growled.

Len sneered again.

"Funny business! I like that. What do you suppose is going on now? Why d'you suppose he's kept them locked away all

this time? Don't kid yourself, Gus, he's keeping them away from us so he can have his own pick when the time is ripe. And he isn't going to ask *your* permission. It's my bet he'll pick the aristocracy, just to keep it alive, to breed it afresh, him being the boss. He'll claim the Countess, that's what he'll do."

Big Gus looked relieved.

"He can have that sour-puss. So long as he doesn't interfere with the rest, him and me'll have no argument."

"Personally I have a sneaking regard for the Lady Pamela," said Slim, idly shuffling the cards. "She's got class, she's got figure, she's got sense and she's got what it takes. To my way of thinking she's got looks, too."

"She'd give you chronic indigestion," snorted Big Gus in disgust.

Slim wiped his tongue around his lips and sighed noisily.

"Gus, boy, would I welcome indigestion right now," he said.

"She's not the only one we wouldn't stand a chance with," Len went on. "Steve'd have his pick, probably nurse. It makes me boil when I think about it. Even if *he* didn't get her, you can bet your sweet life doc or the padre would. There are times when I feel I could cheerfully commit murder."

"Don't talk daft. The women would have a say in it," said Bill Spears.

Len gave him a contemptuous glare.

"The only one likely to get a say in it is old Maudie and *her* only if she's not claimed by one of the big four. You mark my words. The Old Man's not keeping out of our way for nothing. Do you believe he's not seeing Steve, doc and the padre? Sure he is. Will they have anything said against him? No, they won't. I'm sure there's a wangle going on and we're being deliberately kept out of it. We're just the insignificant small fry around here."

"Stick to the women, Len, blast you," said Big Gus, quietly for him.

"Well, I reckon it'll be the Old Man and the Countess, Steve and Molly, doc and Martha—she might have been a bad lot once but nobody can be choosy now—the padre and young Amy. He might be magnanimous and let Derek have her, but certainly none of us. That would leave Maudie for him—or, if he didn't want her, for the mugs."

For once, Big Gus had nothing to say. He just sat watching Slim shuffling the cards. The same thoughts had passed through his own mind many, many times during the last three-and-a-half years. But he had tried to convince himself that it just couldn't happen that way. The idea of spending the rest of his life in a world where there was no woman to marry was to him almost unbearable. He had only come on this trip in order to acquire sufficient capital to purchase a bungalow and furniture, preparatory to marrying again.

It was a great pity about Pauline. She had been a grand little woman, full of life and fun. She didn't have to dive into the icy Atlantic to save that little shrimp of a man from drowning. She did it just because her big husband wouldn't. He had a sense of values and, when he knew who the man was who'd fallen overboard, he didn't think the risk worthwhile. Pauline did though. She fished the little man out and delivered him unharmed to his wife. Yes, and he delivered Pauline to the undertaker as a result of the rheumatic fever and double-pneumonia she developed after it.

Every time these thoughts occurred to Big Gus, a tantalizing mental picture of Derek's girl came to his mind. She was so near to the mental image of Pauline. Not quite so vivacious, perhaps—but that was to be expected with such an under-developed weakling as Derek for a lover. He would alter all that. He wasn't going to stand by and see her throw herself away on Derek. Amy was the girl for him and Amy he was going to have. Damn Len Kelly for setting these thoughts in motion.

"Deal the darn things," he snapped suddenly at Slim.

"Nap?"

"Suits me. Anything's better than this harping on women."

"How about you, Len? And you, Bill?"

Both nodded.

After the first half-an-hour, they were joined by Derek and, a little while later, the padre came and watched them playing.

"You know, Padre," said Len, "I've often wondered how you pass your time away at night. You don't play cards. That's the only thing we can find to do. We play here sometimes till one in the morning."

There was a motive behind the words so innocently put. Len Kelly's suspicions, unfounded though they were, were so deep-rooted that he felt he couldn't rest until he found out

how the time of those who didn't play cards was spent. He hoped the padre would tell him he spent the evenings in the captain's company, or that he paid occasional visits to the women. He wanted him to say that, just to confirm his worst fears; but Paul Brotherton was not in the least helpful.

"I read, and I try to understand what I read. It isn't always easy," he replied reflectively.

"The Bible, of course," said Slim.

The padre hesitated before answering.

"Mm, in a way, yes. At the moment I'm studying the Koran."

"Not changing your religion?" Bill Spears queried.

"No, comparing mine with Islam, that's all."

"Damned lot of rot, the lot of it," retorted Big Gus taking up his cards and examining them.

"In some ways, I suppose, it is," the padre agreed to his surprise. "But," he added, "in many, many ways it makes one think and go on thinking."

"What does, the Koran?" asked Slim.

"No, the comparison, Slim. Mohammed filled that huge book with revelations showing there is but one God and that He alone should be worshipped. The Old and New Testaments tell us the very same thing. Christ never asked to take the place of God. 'I bring the Word of God,' he said. 'Worship God,' says Mohammed, 'the prophets are but his messengers on earth.' As to the only God then, we see Islam and Christendom are in full agreement.

"But—and here is what sets one thinking—both lay down a far different way of life on earth to guarantee entry into Heaven. According to the Mohammedans, I am teaching you to sin by asking you to practise what Christ preached. And, according to our own religion, it would be the greater sin to be a follower of Mohammed. Yet Christ said, 'Our Father which art in Heaven . . . Thy will be done in earth as it is in Heaven,' and Mohammedans pray, By the Grace of the Most Merciful God. . . . There is no God but God."

"The only difference is in the words—they both mean the same thing," Slim observed.

"I know, but the rest of their teaching is anything but the same. Mohammed tells us to hate all unbelievers, Christ tells us to love and to forgive. The Koran authorizes killing and the New Testament teaches against it.

"I try to compare them, but their only likeness is in this

acknowledgment of the one and only God. Yet both Christ and Mohammed claim to bring His Word. I don't doubt for one moment that Mohammed was a prophet, and he gives full recognition of the birth of Christ to the Virgin Mary. He goes further, he says Christ spoke of his mission on earth at the time of his birth, and accepts the fact that he was a prophet without question.

"Then, since God revealed himself to both of them, why, as a result of those revelations, should men be set at each other's throats? Can it be possible that even the prophets misinterpreted His words? I know there is no answer to that question, but I can't help thinking."

Whilst the padre was speaking, the others continued playing. After clearing the kitty with a nap call, Big Gus looked up at him.

"I drink, I smoke, I swear, I gamble, I love women and I get an especially big kick out of 'em if they belong to somebody else. I'd kill if I was driven to it, steal if I thought I wouldn't be caught. Since all those things must bar me from being a Christian, and I expect a Mohammedan—though I don't profess to know much about them, except they flop on their bellies to pray on a mat and go to Mecca—you'll be under the impression I haven't a religion. Well, as you teach it, I haven't. But I do believe in a God, I'd be a fool if I didn't. What do you make of that?"

"Worship of God is the heart, the core of all religion, but, quite frankly, I cannot tell you which way that worship should be combined in one's daily life. By way of the New Testament, all the Mohammedans who ever died are languishing in hell. Similarly, if we are to believe the Koran, then every unbeliever is most assuredly there. So how can I say what's to become of you, Gus?"

"Oh, I'll go to hell, all right," Big Gus replied, with a smile. "But I'd hate to think that the population there was predominantly Arab. Had enough of them in the Middle East. They'd pinch the boots off your feet and sell 'em back to you."

"If they thought they wouldn't be caught," the padre murmured as he walked away, leaving Big Gus glaring after him.

"He'll be off to have his little natter and a nightcap with the Old Man now," Len said confidentially.

"Good luck to him," added Slim.

"That's not the point," Len went on. "There's more in it than you think. I'm wondering if he wasn't just shooting a line with all that tripe about Mohammedans. Maybe he's trying to prepare the way for when he takes one of the women. We'd take a dim view of it if he did take one. We'd say he was no Christian and certainly not fit to be called a padre. So what would he do, eh? Turn around and tell us he wasn't a padre any more, he was all muddled through reading the Koran."

"Get on with the game," growled Big Gus.

At what would have been eleven o'clock, Greenwich Mean Time, Derek James retired. The other four continued until twelve-thirty, when Big Gus threw down his hand of cards.

"Come on," he snapped.

"Where?" asked Len.

"You'll see," Big Gus replied. He headed for the doorway leading down to the lower floor, being closely followed by Len Kelly and Bill Spears.

"What you going to do?" Bill asked.

"Stake my claim and to hell with the lot of them," was the reply.

"I'm for the nurse, so lay off her," warned Len.

"You?" Big Gus asked Bill.

Bill Spears swallowed hard.

"I'm not fussy. I want one of 'em, that's all," he replied.

"Well, I am fussy. I'm going for Amy Fergusson. If Derek ain't man enough to come and get her, I am. Stand no nonsense. We don't want any trouble. Grab the woman of your choice. If she screams, she's got to be quietened. Understand?"

"Nurse won't scream," Len replied with a grin.

Silently, they moved down the main stairway and opened the door to the women's lounge. As they entered, Martha Jones, clad only in a flimsy dressing gown, put down the book she was reading and faced them. She showed neither fear nor surprise.

"You boys shouldn't be down here," she said quietly, but not unpleasantly.

"We know that. So we're going to make the risk worth while," Big Gus replied.

"What do you mean?" demanded Martha.

"Just you show me where Amy sleeps and don't ask silly questions."

Len Kelly had come down filled with the idea of finding the nurse; but the more he looked at Martha the more certain he was that, of the two, he preferred her. The same idea was passing through the mind of Bill Spears.

"You go and find nurse, Len," he said.

Martha had other ideas, however.

"Now listen, if you've come down here looking for trouble, you can have it. I'm not showing any of you to the rooms of the others and if you're not out of here within ten seconds, I'll call for help."

"You do just that, my girl," Big Gus answered with a sneer. "You do, and I'll swear to the Old Man you came up and brought us down here. I'll tell him it's not the first time and you never wanted to shout for help before. Don't forget, with your reputation, he'd have to believe us. Particularly when he sees you with only a fish-net covering you as we can. Now be sensible. Which room is Amy's?"

"Then lead me to yours, kid," Bill Spears almost sobbed.

"Why don't you go for the nurse, Bill?" Len Kelly suggested.

"Not on your nelly!" Bill replied and Martha blushed.

It was a blush of shame. She felt that these men had her at their mercy. Of course, they were right; no decent thinking person could be expected to take her word. The very thought of being mentioned to Captain Adams in connection with men made her want to cry. She didn't know why that should be, but it was so; she would do anything to avoid it. All that was required of her was to show these men to the rooms they wanted; she could then retire and be completely out of the picture. She would be safe if she led them to Lady Pamela, Molly and young Amy. But she couldn't betray them, they were her friends. No, these men were not going to interfere with the other women, even if, to prevent them, it meant giving herself. She could try persuasion and, if that failed, well . . .

"Why do you want to hurt the others? Why poison their minds against you and make them afraid?" She turned to Big Gus. "You know Amy's engaged to young Derek. Don't be foolish, Gus. You'll ruin their young love, and Amy's just an innocent kid. I hate to think what would be the outcome if you went into her bedroom."

"That's a risk I'm willing to take. It's what I came down here for," was the surly reply.

"She'll scream and kick up a terrible din. You'll have the whole crew in here in no time," Martha persuaded desperately.

"I'll take care of her screaming. Noe come on, no more nonsense, where does she sleep?"

If she could change the mind of Big Gus, Martha felt she could handle the other two. She considered them as sheep following their leader.

"Why go to all that trouble, Gus? You don't have to, you know. After all, you were only prompted by desire to come down here. I can give you anything Amy could—and there wouldn't be any risk of screaming either," she said softly.

"What about us?" Bill Spears croaked in a hoarse voice.

However, Martha continued to look Big Gus straight in the eyes. She saw the colour mount to his cheeks and his pupils grow noticeably larger.

"Get going," he said, his hard face breaking into a broad grin.

At that moment, Padre Brotherton stepped into the room, being closely followed by Slim Richards.

"The only place you're going is out," said the padre, as with lightning-like suddenness his right fist crashed under Big Gus's jaw.

For a fleeting second, the big man just stood, a look of pained surprise on his red face. Then, like a felled tree, he crashed to the floor on his back. Paul Brotherton turned to the other two.

"Pick him up and get him of here," he said quietly, menacingly.

Without a word, Len Kelly and Bill Spears bent to the task of removing the unconscious Gus, but it was too much for them. Bill turned to Peter Richards.

"Hey, Slim, you were in this as well as us. Come on, give us a hand," he said unpleasantly.

"You birds got the wrong idea thinking I'd take part in a mutiny," Slim replied, casually bending down to assist the other two.

When they had gone, the padre spoke to Martha.

"You're a very brave woman, Martha. I heard it all. I believe I am correct in saying that you were sacrificing yourself to save the others?"

Martha nodded.

"I thought so. But to think those brutes would have let you

do it makes me want to forget that I am a priest. I did do so for one mad moment."

"It would've been no great sacrifice to me, Padre," Martha replied miserably. "They couldn't hurt my character—Mrs. Mullins saw to that. What I would have done tonight is no more than I've been accused of doing back on earth."

There were tears in her eyes when she finished speaking and Paul Brotherton was deeply moved.

"My dear," he said, "if you have sinned, you have repented. God will have forgiven you. I know He will."

Martha wiped her eyes with a flimsy handkerchief.

"Thank you for a comforting thought, Padre," she said, smiling faintly. "For that, I suppose I should be thankful, but I want more than that. I want God not only to forgive me himself, but to make all men and women forgive me also. In other words, I'm kicking at this hell I created for myself."

The padre patted her shoulder.

"If I can do anything to lift you out of that, my dear, I'll gladly do it," he said tenderly.

"Nobody can, Padre. Whatever else you did, you couldn't obliterate the knowledge from your memory. My greatest enemy at this moment is memory, my own memory, people's memories. When they think of me they automatically think of a—a——" Martha put her hands over her face. "Oh God!" she cried. "Why did you spare me?"

"I wouldn't worry any more about it Martha. I'm sure the other women will have no word spoken against you when they know how you saved them tonight. As for the men, there'll be at least three to whom the mere mention of your name will put in the hell you now live in. We others will think of you, not as you imagine, but as a guardian angel. with a heart of gold."

The tears came again to Martha's eyes.

"You mustn't report these men, Padre. I don't want the captain to know anything of what's happened tonight," she said.

"But they deserve to be severely dealt with. They must face their punishment," Paul Brotherton protested.

"That is people. Punish, punish, punish. Oh God!" Martha said bitterly. "I don't want them to be punished. To punish them is to further punish me. Can't you see, Padre, I don't want it to be known that they came down here, that I was here when they came? I just want to forget all about it. Please do the same, please!"

Although he was convinced that exposure and punishment were the only measures to safeguard against another mutiny, the padre could not but admire the great heart of Martha Jones. She was one of those rare characters who, full of self-pity and self-reproach, was prepared to believe that everyone else who did wrong suffered as she did. He turned to leave.

"You know, Martha, of the two of us, you should be the cleric. I will respect your wishes, good night," he said.

"Thank you," Martha murmured to his retreating back.

Alone, she tried to analyse her thoughts. In her heart, she knew that she wanted to see Big Gus and the other two severely dealt with by Captain Adams. But only if she was not the chief witness against them. She couldn't bear to think of herself standing before him, giving evidence once again designed to advertise her as a bad woman. Her mind went back to the day Mrs. Mullins had exposed her. The shame she had felt had been most pronounced because Captain Adams was present. It had been far worse when he had spoken kindly to her. She wondered if Big Gus would go to the captain and carry out his threat now that the padre had intervened. She quaked inwardly at the thought.

She need not have feared, however. Four minutes after the padre hit him with that hard, crisp right, Big Gus opened bleary eyes. He was lying on the floor of his own room.

"What happened? What'm I doing here?" he asked.

Stony silence from three equally-stony faces was the only response. He climbed painfully to his feet.

"What do you make of a coward like that, eh? Hitting me when I wasn't looking!"

The silence continued. Bill, Len and Slim had seen that blow struck and they knew when it was delivered the padre was looking Big Gus straight in the eyes.

"We'll be in a hell of a mess when the Old Man hears about it," said Len Kelly. "We were mugs to follow you anyway. You always go looking for trouble," he complained.

"Me?" gasped Big Gus.

"Who else?" Bill Spears asked.

"It was Len Kelly started it all," Big Gus growled.

"It was all three of you," Slim said quietly.

"Four of us," replied Big Gus.

"No, Gus, not even if you took the ship over before making the attack, would I be a party to an invasion of the lower floor."

"You shopped us, didn't you?" asked Bill Spears.

"Yeah, and I'd do it again," said Slim in the same quiet voice, nonchalantly departing, leaving the other three staring after him.

Chapter Eight

DOCTOR WILSON was congratulating himself on the complete absence of illness and accident in the Wheorld. The vitamin tablets religiously taken by the crew and the scrupulous care and attention paid to his instructions in connection with the water, oxygen flow and the food were no doubt responsible for the former. Good health and the strict eye of Steve Ronson contributed largely to the absence and prevention of the latter. He was explaining to Paul Brotherton:

"I thought we might be troubled with ulcers. Years of dehydrated foodstuffs and lack of variety. But thanks to the cook and the good sense of everybody, my fears were unfounded."

"The trip's not over yet, John," the padre replied with a smile. "You shouldn't tempt Providence."

"After four years and three months, I don't think I need to worry. Unless, of course, we can't land. That would be serious. There'd be no water, no food and no oxygen—so my services wouldn't be necessary."

Paul Brotherton was about to remark that he would come into his own if that happened, when the panel-board indicator on the wall of the doctor's room lit up and Number Eleven flashed red.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Doctor Wilson exploded, his eyes popping. "That's the women's quarters."

"Who's in Eleven?"

"Lady Pamela Launceston, Cheerio—I'll be seeing you."

Grabbing his bag, the doctor dashed from the room and down to the lower floor. Molly Jordan opened the door of Number Eleven for him.

"I'm glad you've come, Doc. I sent for you," she said, "I think it's appendicitis. She's vomiting, has nausea, suffers cramp and other painful symptoms."

"Could be. We'll soon see."

All the same, Molly knew that she was right; she had attended hundreds of such cases. She was not surprised, therefore, when Doc Wilson said he would have to operate immediately.

Lady Pamela was not very happy at the prospect. She had always dreaded the thought of anything ever happening that might necessitate her being put under an anaesthetic. She was by her father's side when he was given one and he never regained consciousness. She told Doctor Wilson this.

"My dear Countess, it would only happen in one case in a million," he reassured her.

"But I might be just that one case," she argued fearfully.

"You won't," the doctor replied confidently. "You'll be all right."

"When will you do it?"

"As soon as we get things ready. In about an hour. I'll have you O.K. again in a day or two, so don't worry."

Molly Jordan told her the same thing; and both Mrs. Mullins and Amy showed her how small their own scars were, following a similar operation. After that, Lady Pamela kept her fears to herself and pretended to the others that they had passed. Nevertheless, she was terrified to her last conscious breath. She knew nothing of the journey to and from the small operating theatre next to the doctor's room, nor of the visit to her bedside of Dick Adams. He had been gone only a few minutes when she showed belated signs of passing from black emptiness, through the misty subconscious to consciousness.

"It was Paul," she murmured and, after a pause: "You've killed him." This was followed after another long pause by, "I'll wait for you, Paul," mumbled barely audibly between sobs, and tears ran down her cheeks.

Martha and Molly were both by her side when she opened her eyes, her mind still focused on that last few seconds with Paul. She fancied she might have spoken his name; some inner instinct told her that she had done so. Gradually, she became aware of her surroundings, of the presence of Molly and Martha. She wondered how much of the story she had told them . . . that story hidden away in her heart, the story

shame would not permit her to utter to a living soul. Poor Paul! He had always protected her.

He had warned her not to go out with Jerry Lambton that night, but the spirit of excitement and adventure had refused to be denied. She had gone with Jerry, the man with a reputation, just for the hell of it. He wouldn't dare to forget that she was the Lady Pamela. He did, though—in that little room in his night club.

Jerry had very little to drink and they had had a delicious dinner. She was gay and light-hearted, enjoying every moment of her companion's hospitality. Then she was waking up on a divan. Jerry Lambton was on the floor and he was dead. Paul was beside her, trying to dress her and telling her that she had been drugged, a common trick of Jerry's. Poor Paul; he got ten years. She never knew how he managed to keep her out of the case. She had promised to wait for him.

She was young then, though, and that happened before she met Cyril Phillips. He came into her life at the university. Cyril wouldn't have allowed her to come on this trip if he'd known that she was only doing it to obtain money to help him in his work. She had wanted him to be a success; he was such a hard worker. He needed money to allow him to complete his inventions, and this seemed to be such an easy way of getting him what he needed. They would have been married soon; and then poor Paul would have suffered a far greater hell than ten years in gaol. Paul did love her so much. He had always loved her. Now he was gone, now they were all gone—Cyril, Paul, the family—and the tears flowed unchecked down her cheeks.

Martha wiped them away and was rewarded with a wan smile; but the practical Molly, producing a kidney-shaped bowl and cold swabs, told her to go.

"Did I speak when I was recovering?" Lady Pamela asked after Martha had gone.

"Just the usual nothings, darling. A lot of people do. Never makes sense," Molly replied good-humouredly and Lady Pamela sighed with relief.

There was another visitor to the lower floor on the following day. It was Padre Brotherton, but he did not enter unobserved. The men knew of Lady Pamela's operation and they could readily understand why Doc Wilson should visit her; but they could not, however, see any reason why the captain

and the padre should. At least, Len Kelly couldn't, and he'd seen both men go down. He told Big Gus about it.

Gus Hardwicke was cautious, however, he remembered how, after the last time, Len Kelly had blamed him for inciting him and Bill Spears to enter the women's quarters. He also remembered that blow on the jaw the padre had given him. Sometimes, it angered him to think about it, because he knew that the others were not now nearly so afraid of him as they had been previously. He felt that he had lost prestige, but he did not feel equal to trying to regain it in a stand-up fight with the padre. Had it been Bill Spears, Len Kelly or young Derek, certainly. Even Doc Wilson. But the captain? He wasn't so sure. There was something in the cold, haughty manner of Dick Adams that made the blood run cold. The fellow gave one the impression that he could kill without even losing his temper.

He was the kind of man Big Gus wanted to emulate, with his own powerful physique, of course—although the captain was not much shorter than him, and gave the impression of concealed strength. It was this impression that made Big Gus doubtful.

"Look here, Len Kelly," he said roughly. "If you want to go and have a peek at that sickly-faced, plum-chewing sourpuss, there's nothing stopping you. All you've got to do is ask permission to see her. The Old Man could hardly refuse it, I'd rather go on thinking of a young, fresh face with blonde curls on top."

"That's what I mean," Len coaxed. "They aren't just going down there to have a look at the Countess. Can't you see it, Gus? The women all fussing round her and the captain going in and laughing and joking with them. Then Doc, and after him the padre. Every visit bringing each male nearer to the female of his choice, Gus. They'll have it all worked out between them, you can bet. I'm not saying that the women will realize what's going on—it's a kind of softening-up process on the men's part for when we put to earth, and that's not so very far away now. Just a few more months will see us wandering around an empty world with no mates, while them lot lie back with their womenfolk as contented as animals. It just isn't right, Gus. It isn't fair, not playing the game, we've as much right to them as they have."

"What about Steve?" Big Gus asked doubtfully. "You were full of the big four the last time. Has he gone out of favour

with the others?" he added this last sarcastically, and it took Len Kelly nine days to find an answer to it.

Captain Adams had paid his daily visit to the sick room and found Lady Pamela completely recovered. They had talked for an hour, mainly on what they expected to find when they left the Wheorld. He told her that he favoured a landing somewhere between what had been Brazil and North West Africa. He said that, maybe, the new land was part of the legendary Atlantis thrown up by a major upheaval, or eruption, at the time of the heavy bombing. She asked if he had any particular reason for choosing that part of the world. He told her that he thought the climate would be akin to the Mediterranean one they had known so well, that new life might spring early in its virgin soil, so long buried under the ocean. He had also observed rivers running from very high land, both to the north and to the south, between wide, green valleys. To give her a much better idea of what it looked like, he offered to let her see a sketch he had made of it, and told her that he would bring it down when next he visited her.

Later that day, however, when he had asked the doctor his opinion of the patient's progress, Doc Wilson told him that he had paid his last visit and pronounced her fit. Dick Adams, therefore, felt that further visits from himself would not be desirable; and that was how Len Kelly saw Steve Ronson go down to the women's quarters.

They were sitting together, Len and Steve, when the captain called for his second in command. He asked him to take a sketch down to Lady Pamela for him.

"Don't hang around, Steve. Might give the crew ideas," the captain advised, but Steve didn't need to be asked. So far as he was concerned, the only women he had ever wanted to hang around were dead—his wife and his two daughters. That didn't prevent him though, from pulling Len Kelly's leg before carrying out his errand.

"What's up?" asked Len.

"Got a date," was the reply.

"Who with?"

Steve laughed.

"An angel—and am I just aching for a look at her. A bit of fun will go down fine right now."

Saying which, he made off towards the entrance to the lower floor. Had Len Kelly waited something less than two

minutes, he would have seen him emerge again; but he lost no time in rushing off to tell Big Gus about it.

"The swine can't do this," Big Gus growled.

"Can't do it!" Len sneered. "He's done it. Gawd knows, it's probably been going on all these years—only, now that they've an excuse, they've come into the open about it."

"Shut up!" the other snarled. "You're like the ruddy voice of Satan!"

"Well, you know it's true—that's why you're losing your temper."

Big Gus glowered at him, eyes flashing angrily.

"I'm—not—losing—my—temper!" he said menacingly, and Len Kelly decided to say no more. He relapsed into silence, staring moodily into space. But his mind was fully active. He fell to thinking, and they were nasty thoughts. Big Gus was thinking, too; but the padre's heavy fist kept blotting out the end product of his ruminations.

They were playing cards when Len again brought up the subject. There were just the four of them, Slim, Bill, Big Gus and himself. In the interim period, he had told both Bill and Slim of Steve's visit to the lower floor and what the second in command had said before he went. Neither had received the news with any show of pleasure. This encouraged him.

"You know, when we consider it, we're a lot of mugs," he said.

"Here we go again!" Slim murmured, with a wink at Big Gus.

"No, no kidding, we are. After all, who are the technicians in the Wheorld?"

There was no answer. Each man wondered what was coming next.

"We are. Who is the engineer? Me. Who is the electrical bod? Slim there. Who'll navigate us when we're looking for a landing place? Bill will—and, if we meet trouble, which we won't, you'd be the man behind the gun-buttons, Gus. Now what about the rest? What does the Old Man do? Looks through the viewer, that's all. The job young Derek was engaged for. And Steve? Just the Old Man's whipping-boy when he wants a dirty job done. The padre? Sweet nothing, and the quack about twice as much. I maintain that we're the four most important people here—without us, the Old Man couldn't do a damned thing."

Len stopped talking for long enough to pick up his cards and study them.

"Anybody gone anything?" he asked.

"No, we're waiting for you. If you kept your mind on the game, you wouldn't have to be told," Slim admonished.

"Bundle," Len said. "I don't have to play them. I could take eleven, if it was my lead," he added, laying down his cards for the others to see.

"Ruddy stone-waller, you are," Big Gus growled.

"Yeah, Gus. I always make sure—that's what I've been figuring out about us. We couldn't lose if we took over the Wheorld. As I've said, the Old Man can't do without us—but we can do without him and all his tribe of seconds in command, padres and doctors. The people who can lay down the law are the people who're going to be the most respected by the women. Why should we be mere minions in their eyes when we can prove that we are the masters, the brains that keep the Wheorld moving?"

"Why not just write to the women and tell 'em how important we all are? Save a hell of a lot of trouble," advised Slim, looking down at the pack of cards as he shuffled them.

"Why don't you be serious for once?" Len demanded, showing signs of losing his temper.

"I am," Slim replied quietly.

"We could imprison the four of them and then tell the women that they were free to roam wherever they liked. The women would appreciate that, and they'd soon realize how insignificant the others really are."

"How would we set about it?" asked Bill Spears.

"We'll think about that if we get agreement that it should be done," Len replied. "I'm convinced, as I've been saying all along, they're playing an underhanded game with us—just taking advantage of their positions, that's all. We'll be left out in the cold. It's got to be soon, or they'll all be fixed up, and there'll be four unwanted bachelors wandering around for the rest of their lives. I don't want that to happen to me."

"I'm not sure that I do either," said Slim.

"Nor me," added Bill Spears.

Big Gus remained silent. He knew that the decision so far as Bill and Len was concerned, rested with him. Just the same, he felt that he would be a fool to risk one thing, only to lose what he took that risk for. To lock away the captain and the others, and to release the women, was tantamount to throwing Amy at her lover, Derek. He couldn't stand by and see that happen. For years now, the thought of her had

brought longing to him. He had only to hang on until the end of the trip and, if need be, take her by force—even if it meant having to use a gun on the others. They would never catch up with him once he got away.

Len's way would be the easier ; but the shadow of Derek James loomed large. Nor could he suggest reasonable grounds for locking Derek away with the others. There was an alternative—not very satisfactory in that it would be scarcely calculated to win love and respect—but he would, at least, get Amy. That was to lock the four up as Len suggested, but keep the women in their quarters and visit them. He could take care of Derek that way, if he interfered. Slim would automatically choose Lady Pamela ; Bill and Len would make up their minds between Molly and Martha. That would leave him and Derek, and Amy. It looked as if Derek would have to content himself with Mrs. Mullins. The thought made Big Gus smile.

"We'll have to make plans," he said.

"I'll chance a Solo," said Slim. "You lead, Len."

Chapter Nine

IT is as well, perhaps, that Dick Adams was unaware of the reason for the unexpected call, so late at night, of Big Gus and Len Kelly. The revolver lying in the drawer of his desk would otherwise have been in his hand when he went to open the door to them; and, without a doubt, there would have been bloodshed. As it was, he found himself looking at the muzzles of the levelled revolvers.

"Get back in there!" Big Gus commanded.

The captain stood for a few moments as if undecided. Then he obeyed and retreated into the room. He did think about slamming the door in their faces; but the chances were that a bullet might find its mark before he could get to his desk; and, somehow, he didn't want to die before learning why these men had come to him armed.

"What's this in aid of?" he asked quietly.

"Just call it a complete reorganization," Big Gus replied.

"You mean you're taking over the Wheorld?"

"We mean just that," Len Kelly said.

"You realize that this is mutiny, of course?"

"We prefer to call it an act of justice," Len replied.

"Prompted by whom, and by what?"

"Listen, Captain," Big Gus cut in. "We've told you we are taking over. Let that suffice. The way you've run things hasn't met with our approval. Now it's our turn. We can do without you. We can keep the Wheorld in space, and we can land her when and where we like."

"And what do you propose to do with me?" Dick Adams asked, without showing any signs of alarm.

"We should kill you, but we won't. We'll lock you up along with your friends the padre and doc, with Steve thrown in."

Dick Adams was well satisfied. He knew now how many were involved in the mutiny. He was also thankful to learn that the three who were to be with him were the very three he would have picked if asked to make his own choice.

"How about the ladies?" he asked.

"They'll be released from the prison you've kept them in for all these years," Len Kelly informed him. "There'll be no more sneaking down there by you and the others, no more feathering your own nests for when you land. The women can make their own choice now, influenced by nobody."

So *that* was it? The women again. He had always thought there might be trouble over them; the situation having gone on for so long, he had not expected it at this stage of the journey. Just a few more months and, he had hoped, everything would have been settled to the satisfaction of all concerned. Should he tell these men of the laws which he had made? It would be such a great pity to see all his work rendered to nought again. They had mutinied though. One didn't attempt to pacify, nor to satisfy, the curiosity of mutineers.

"We'll put you in Room Four," Big Gus was saying. "The oxygen feed's linked up and we've put four beds in it. Don't ask for anything else, because we're taking no chances. You know it's got every convenience, so there shouldn't be any complaints. It might be as well to tell you the door will be locked and one of us will be on guard all the time. Try any monkey tricks and, for a start, we'll cut off your food."

Len Kelly looked at his watch, nodded to Big Gus and backed towards the door. His automatic was still levelled at the captain's chest.

"Get going," Big Gus ordered. As Dick Adams obeyed, he fell in behind him, prodding his captive's back with the muzzle, just to let him know that he meant business.

It was Derek James who collected Steve Ronson. The last thing the second-in-command expected to see was the in-offensive Derek with a gun in his hand. Even when he saw it, he thought that it was some sort of a joke.

"I'm going to lock you up, Steve," Derek said.

Steve laughed and walked towards him.

"O.K., son—but, for the Lord's sake, put that toy away. It could go off, you know."

As he spoke, Steve stretched out his hand to take the gun . . . and it *did* go off. Fortunately, the bullet just took away a minute portion of the tip of one finger; but it was sufficient to make him realize that Derek James was not fooling.

"What the hell's gone wrong with you, Derek?" he asked, white-faced but not in the least afraid.

"Just you lead the way outside this door," Derek replied hotly. "You're going to join your pals."

He wanted to tell Steve what the others had told him, but thought better of it. Steve would be certain to deny it. The dirty hounds, taking advantage of the small fry the way they'd done! It was hard to believe, but then all the others couldn't be wrong. Dick Adams's dirty game was as clear as daylight now; that's why he'd not allowed him and Amy to marry; and that's why the padre hadn't insisted too strongly. Well, none of them would get Amy now. She would be with him again within the hour.

Len had been quite frank about it: "It's easy enough to see what their game is. They intend to cut us right out, even if they have to kill us in the end. And you can bet your life that those four beauties are not after Mrs. Mullins. Which means that your Amy's as good as lost to you, unless you come in with us."

Steve Ronson toyed with the idea of attacking Derek, but discretion prevailed. That revolver had spat once; it could do so again, with more serious consequences for someone.

"O.K., son, I'll go," he said, leading the way.

As he emerged from his room, he saw the captain entering Room Four, and Len Kelly and Gus Hardwicke standing outside. A few seconds later, Bill Spears, also with a gun in his hand followed the doctor out of the latter's room. Doc Wilson had given no trouble at all—except to remark that he'd be delighted to attend to Bill's anatomy when Captain Adams had finished with him.

With the padre, it wasn't so easy. He refused to accompany Slim until he had heard the whole story. Slim threatened, but Paul Brotherton was unmoved.

"Go ahead and shoot, Slim," he said—but he thought he knew his man and, so far as Peter Richards was concerned, he was not mistaken. Slim told him what was happening, and why.

The padre protested his innocence and claimed innocence on the part of the others, too. He explained that the only time any of them had been down to the lower floor was to visit Lady Pamela when she was ill. They had shown no interest in any of the others. There was, of course, the night when Slim himself had called him—to assist in the removal of Big Gus, Len and Bill—but none besides those actually involved knew anything about that.

Slim believed the padre and told him so; but he asked him to accompany him, nevertheless.

"Tell me, Slim, what do you propose to do about the women now?"

"Just let them roam freely wherever they wish."

"Promise me one thing, and I'll come quietly. Will you look after Derek and Amy?"

"You bet I will, Padre," Slim replied solemnly.

Contemptuously pushing aside the pointed revolver, Paul Brotherton walked from the room, followed by a man whose heart was no longer in the job on hand. When his charge was safely locked away with the other three, Slim threw down the revolver.

"That's the first move, you birds. From now on, we carry no weapons around, agreed?"

Derek collected all their revolvers and replaced them in the armoury, returning the key to Big Gus when he had done so.

"You do the first turn on guard," Big Gus said as he took over the key. However, before Derek could open his mouth to protest, Slim again spoke up.

"No orders, Gus. We're a five-man crew without a captain, each with as much say as the other. If you want a guard put on the prisoners, we'll cut the cards for turns."

"You're getting high and mighty, aren't you?" Big Gus demanded roughly.

"No," Slim answered quietly. "I'm just making sure that nobody else does that's all."

"He's right, Gus—any decisions will be made by the lot of us," Len Kelly added.

"Suits me. Get the cards out then," agreed Big Gus.

"Low goes first, high last," instructed Slim placing the pack in front of them. Bill Spears cut a four, Big Gus a nine, Derek a Queen and Len Kelly a seven.

"Looks like you doing the first turn," Slim said to Bill Spears with a smile; then, to his disgust, he turned up a two. "A deuce, dammit, I misjudged that badly," he complained. "What's the betting the next card's a King?"

There were no takers so he turned up the next card. It was the King of Clubs.

"I don't often make mistakes, not silly mistakes like that," he said quietly. "However, I'll go on. It's twelve now—so you relieve me at two, Len. I think we can agree to two on and eight off?"

They all agreed and left him to his vigil outside the door of Room Four.

"When do we tell the women?" Derek asked when he and the others were back in the lounge.

"First thing in the morning should be soon enough," Big Gus answered.

"I'm not waiting till then," Derek said emphatically. "You told me we'd release them as soon as we had locked up the others."

"Sure, I did. But I didn't know then that it was going to take so ruddy long. You wouldn't want your little Amy disturbed after midnight now, would you?"

It was the mocking way in which Big Gus said it that made Derek angry.

"It wouldn't matter to Amy what time it was, so long as it was me disturbing her. I'm going down now," he replied.

"You're staying right here," Big Gus snapped; and, as he spoke, he gave the other a vicious punch behind the ear, dropping him senseless to the floor.

"Come on, you two, let's go."

"What did you have to hit him for?" asked Bill Spears. Big Gus glowered at him.

"For years, I've been waiting for the time when I'd get Amy on her own. Now that that time's come, I'm not standing by to let a half-grown weakling beat me to it. You two've got no problems. There's Martha and the Nurse and—if you like the type—the Countess, though I think Slim's got his eye on her."

"All the same Gus, you shouldn't have hit him. We don't want enemies in our own camp," Len grumbled.

"All right, so I shouldn't have hit him. I should have let him go and do the hero act to his girl-friend. What you trying to do—fix me up with Mrs. Mullins? You two had better get this straight. I want Amy, and Amy I'm going to have. It would be the same if I was after one of your women. I'd fight for her. Come on."

Once again, Big Gus led Len and Bill to the lower floor. However, from where he stood on guard, Slim had a clear view of the entrance to that floor. When he saw only the three of them enter it, he raced along to the lounge and saw Derek lying there.

"Don't worry, chum," he said to the unconscious man. "They won't get your Amy. I made a promise to the padre."

Unhurried, he made his way back to the door of Room Four and deliberately unlocked it. Dick Adams was lying in bed and so was the doctor; but Steve and the padre were sitting talking when he entered the room.

"Better get moving, Padre. Big Gus needs another sleeping draught," he said quietly.

Paul Brotherton laughed.

"Good for you, Slim. Come on, Steve. Come on, you others—and you'd better hurry," he said.

Dick Adams braces dangling, was only a few seconds behind Steve and the padre. He reached the women's quarters just in time to see Big Gus seemingly push his stomach on to a pile-driving right that almost doubled him in half, and a left that straightened him up again.

"Do that again, Paul—I want to learn," he said admiringly and, solely for his entertainment, Paul Brotherton repeated the blows. He found little pleasure in doing it though, because Big Gus was out on his feet before the second left crashed into his jaw and felled him.

Meanwhile, Steve Ronson was exchanging blow for blow with the shorter and more agile Bill; and Slim was holding Len Kelly in a half-Nelson. By the look on Len's face, he was being held none-too-gently.

"Steve, be a good man and back out, please. I want to practise that one the padre taught me." The captain spoke quietly and with obvious enjoyment.

Steve reluctantly left his man to Dick Adams; and, a few seconds later, Bill Spears lay flat on his back, out to the

World as a result of precisely the same technique that had put Big Gus out of action.

"One would almost say that I struck the blows myself," the padre observed with a smile.

Dick Adams pointed to the terrified Len Kelly.

"Your pleasure, Paul?" he asked.

"No! For God's sake don't hit me! I didn't do anything. It was Big Gus. Honest it was," Len Kelly whimpered.

The disgust he felt showed clearly in the padre's blue eyes.

"Wouldn't be much fun, would it?"

"Then let's share him," said Dick Adams, speaking with a slow deliberation that made Len Kelly's blood run cold. He tried to struggle free, but Slim pushed him towards the padre. It was all over in less time than it takes to tell. He felt a sledge-hammer blow land in his solar plexus. Just when he experienced the agonizing pain, and realized that he couldn't breathe any more, a pole-axe seemed to smash his face in, stifling the scream of terror that he tried to raise. For the fraction of a second, he thought death had come as he felt the paralysing effect of the blow. Then there was just an empty void.

"Not bad," Dick Adams murmured, as he gazed at the result of his own and the padre's combined efforts. "And without even disturbing the ladies."

Between them, they carried the unconscious men up to Room Four and placed them on the floor there. Slim sat on one of the empty beds.

"You staying in here?" asked the captain.

"I thought I——" began Slim, but Padre Brotherton interrupted him.

"It's very unwise, Slim. I told the captain that we had an ally in the enemy camp," he said.

"Two allies, Padre. Derek's probably still unconscious in the lounge," Slim replied.

Steve Ronson looked ruefully at his bloody finger-tip. Then he smiled and Dick Adams almost succeeded in doing so, too. Nevertheless, he was not smiling the next morning when Big Gus, Len and Bill, miserable, crestfallen and looking extremely unhappy, stood before him.

"I'm not going to waste time on preliminaries. You all know the penalty for mutiny. I ought to have all three of you shot. Believe me, if any one of you had succeeded in giving annoyance to the ladies, it would have given me the greatest

pleasure to shoot you myself. Luckily for you, they were undisturbed. You've them to thank for your lives."

"Life's not going to be any ruddy good to us if there's going to be no women in it," Big Gus said defiantly. "So, as far as we are concerned you can go right ahead and shoot."

Len Kelly looked at him with alarm and Bill Spears turned deathly pale.

"Speak for yourself—you got us into this mess. Let him shoot you if he likes, but not me," said Len.

"Don't tempt me too far, Gus," Dick Adams replied, showing that faint suspicion of a smile at the corners of his lips again. "Think of the trouble of which I'd be ridding the Wheorld's company. You're a bad influence on weak-willed, weak-minded men—if we can call them that. But I'll take a chance with you—you won't be shot. I'm going to let you go free, with a warning. I will personally kill the first one of you to give any more trouble whatsoever during the rest of our time in the Wheorld."

Big Gus sneered.

"Can't you see me quaking?" he asked insolently.

"Well, maybe I can't. But I mean it—and, just to move temptation out of your way, I'll take over the keys to the armoury. From now on, you cease to have any contact with the guns and ammunition." He turned to Len and Bill.

"In case you two are under any false illusion as to your indispensability, it might interest you to know I hold degrees in engineering—and navigation is child's play to me. That's all. Now get out and let me get on with my work."

They were well clear of the captain's suite before any of the three spoke.

"Why weren't the others with us? They took part in it didn't they?" Len complained. "We ought to deal severely with Slim, what do you say, Gus?"

Big Gus stopped dead in his tracks, his ham-like fists clenched.

"You yellow-bellied bloody rat," he snarled, "don't ever talk to me again. From now on, when I want trouble, I'll make it for myself. I'm finished having it made for me and then being blamed for it. If you want to deal severely with Slim, go ahead and deal with him. Don't count on me. And the best of luck to you."

Chapter Ten

"THIS dreadful monotony is driving me crazy," Amy Fergusson complained. "Surely we must leave the Wheorld soon."

The others looked at her in some surprise. It was so unusual to hear anything from Amy. More often than not, she was sitting day-dreaming, with a faraway look in her eyes—dreaming, no doubt, of the day when she and Derek would be reunited. Perhaps it was the tantalizing nearness of the earth that roused her. For the past few weeks the Wheorld had circled it closer and ever closer.

"I seem to recall Captain Adams telling us that we'd have laws before we landed," said Lady Pamela. "Knowing him as I do, I can't see us leaving before he's told us something about them."

"He'll have forgotten all about them by now. Why, it's three years since he said that," commented Martha. "He hasn't even mentioned them."

"But he will, darling. I know Dick Adams. He's a very thorough man. He'll have left no stone unturned, no loophole through which an escaping word might wreck his idea. Every thought will have been analysed a thousand times before he committed it to paper," Lady Pamela replied.

"I wonder what he'll do about us. Surely he won't want to keep us separated from men for the rest of our lives. Or will he?" asked Molly.

"What's the matter, getting restless?" Martha queried with a laugh.

"No, darling, I'm not. But I'll soon have corns on my sit-upon, the way I'm sitting around. You haven't answered my question, Countess."

"I'd say that we won't be separated for any longer than is necessary. He'll have taken care of us all right. The only thing that worries me a little is the fact that we haven't been consulted. The padre said we would be, on matters relating to our position. He's leaving it a little late to ask us now—the Wheorl'd has just about had her full span up here."

"I hope you're right," Amy said wistfully. "Derek and I are going to be married as soon as we step on land. That's going to be the padre's *first* service—and it can't come too soon for me."

"We'll have to make you a wedding dress then—so's you can step out into the world just as if you were walking into a church to be married," Maudie said.

"I wish you would. A wedding dress makes such a difference. There's something about it that accentuates the holiness of the ceremony, something about it that makes the bride look humble, clean and wholesome."

"It's as good as ready then—you shall have one."

"Thanks, Maudie, it's very sweet of you. You'll never know how grateful I am," Amy replied sincerely.

"I bet you're thrilled to bits, aren't you darling?" Martha asked.

"Oh, yes, I am," answered Amy, running to her and putting her arms around her neck. "We've waited so long, dear. Now that it's drawing near to the time, I can hardly wait."

For a moment, Martha envied Amy her sweet innocence. Then she let her mind drift back to that day, more than five years ago, when the very name of Man brought hatred and fear to her heart.

"I understand exactly how you feel, darling. There was a time when I might have envied you your good fortune, but not now," she said.

"Why not now?"

"Because I just can't stand men."

"But why? It's unnatural for a woman, and especially a beautiful woman like yourself, not to like *some* men. There must be at least one among the nine upstairs whom you could like."

"No, darling, I couldn't," was the quiet reply.

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At precisely the same moment when Amy Fergusson chose to make her complaint about monotony, Dick Adams picked up from his desk a bundle of neatly-typed sheets of paper. As he did so, he smiled at his second in-command.

"The future, Steve, isn't going to be a bed of roses. These," he said, indicating the papers that he held, "are the proposed laws I was appointed to make. How many will be passed remains to be seen. In every unstance, I expect to meet with opposition from some of you. Because—and I'll be quite frank with you—each one has been made with the welfare, not of ourselves, the present generation, but of future generations uppermost in my mind.

"We fourteen, no matter how hard we try to hide the fact, will always belong too much to the past. Our very knowledge of it will keep us there. It's with the object of preventing that knowledge from being passed on to the next and future generations that the majority of these laws have been made.

"I know I asked you all to live only for the future. But we cannot hope to hide our true identities from ourselves, Steve. Lady Pamela could no more be a Mrs. Mullins than I could be a Len Kelly—and that's exactly what we're to try to accomplish as the inhabitants of the new world, under the laws I've proposed. However, it'll help neither of us by belly-aching to you, so you'd better get along and tell them to assemble in the main lounge. I'll see them all in there."

Steve nodded and left him. Ten minutes later found all the men, with the exception of Derek James, gathered together in the lounge. As soon as Derek received the news from Steve, he had rushed away to wash and shave and to comb his hair. He wanted to feel clean and to look fresh when Amy came up. He was thrilled, but not so much at the summons, for he had been expecting that to come any day. They all knew that the Wheorld could not be kept up much longer. He was thrilled at the prospect of being married to Amy in the very near future.

It had been such a long separation; yet, now that it was

almost over, he could feel no rancour towards his captain. The pleasures in which he would soon indulge would long since have been experienced. They would marry immediately and find some quiet spot in that vast new world in which to make a home. When that was done, they would raise a family, a big family.

Whistling for the first time in five years, he made his way to the main lounge.

"Hello there, Derek! Been getting out the old bow tie in preparation for the wedding?" Slim greeted.

"There's going to be no ruddy wedding," Big Gus growled. "If there is, he won't be a party to it."

He hadn't meant to let himself say it. Slim's greeting just happened to coincide with a vision he saw, of himself standing with Amy behind him, facing the lot of them and challenging them to come and take her away from him, if they dared. She was his. He was going to see that no one else got her.

Derek had had no idea that anyone else was after his girl until that moment. Normally inoffensive and easy-going as he was, Big Gus's words roused in him a cold fury. He clenched his bony fists and glared at the bigger man.

"I've taken more than a fair share of insults from you, including that cowardly knockout you dealt me. Many a man would have tried to kill you for that. It so happens that I made excuses for you—but get this straight, Gus: Amy is my life and I'd die for her. If you, or anyone else, tries to interfere with our marriage, I swear by God I'll murder you."

Big Gus stepped towards him menacingly. He would make mincemeat of this bag of bones, this apology for a man, this scrawny, shrivelled, monkey-looking lout whom he detested. He'd show him who was getting Amy.

"All right, you two, cut it out," Paul Brotherton said quietly but firmly.

"Why shouldn't they be married?" Slim demanded, almost at the same time as the padre spoke.

Big Gus swung around and glowered belligerently at the speaker.

"Because I want her, and I'll see to it he doesn't get her," he answered.

"But suppose the girl doesn't want you, what then?" Slim came back at him.

"To hell with that! If only two of us want her, and I'm

ready and prepared to stop him from having her, she hasn't much choice in the matter. I'll show you what then all right, once I get her away from you ruddy lot."

"They're marrying as soon as we land," the padre said.

"Over my dead body, they are!" Big Gus roared, his temper completely out of control.

Paul Brotherton realized this. He considered that it would be tactless to goad Gus further by telling him he would be powerless to prevent the marriage; but Doctor Wilson was obviously not endowed with an over-abundance of tact.

"We wouldn't stand by and see you ruin the happiness of these two young people," he said.

Big Gus's eyes narrowed and his face went livid. The padre saw in him an angry bull, frustrated, infuriated, switching from one antagonist to the other as the sword pricks stung. He leapt around now to face the doctor.

"If you don't keep your ruddy mouth shut, I'll shut it for you for good. I've told you I'm prepared to fight for what I want—and I will, even if it means having to kill the whole damned lot of you!" he shouted.

"Very interesting. Why didn't you tell me how you felt before this?"

All eyes turned on Dick Adams, standing in the doorway. He walked across to Big Gus and, without saying another word, crashed a fist into the enraged face. Big Gus roared in angry pain and leaped at him; but the captain leisurely side-stepped and stopped the onrushing figure with an uppercut that appeared to come up from the floor. For a moment, it looked as if Big Gus might fall on his face; but he rocked back on his heels and, once again, lay flat on his back, knocked out cold.

"Don't let the women in till we've brought this black-guard round, Doc," the captain said. "I don't want them to see him like this."

The doctor left them and Dick Adams asked Steve to bring him a glass of water. When it had been brought, he threw it into Gus Hardwicke's face. The big man groaned and opened his eyes. He tried to scramble to his feet, but his legs refused to support the great weight of his body. For a full minute, he was compelled to sit there, an object of silent ridicule to the others, whilst the captain lectured him.

"I warned you that I'd kill the first one giving me further trouble. I don't know why I haven't carried out that threat.

Perhaps it's because I'm not the murderous villain you would be, given the chance. Or, perhaps, it's just my way of punishing you for having made such a confounded idiot of yourself. I think it must be the latter, because you stand to gain a great deal more than you deserve from the laws which I've drafted. But, as yet, you're still subject to my orders, and you'll obey them—even if I have to break every bone in that brute body of yours!"

Big Gus climbed awkwardly to his feet. Giving them all a sullen stare, he walked across to a periscope window and looked out at the earth passing beneath them. He was still looking out when the women entered the lounge with Doctor Wilson. Lady Pamela noticed him standing apart from the others. She went over to join him.

"Enjoying the scenery?"

"No, I hadn't even noticed it," Big Gus replied truthfully, without turning his head to look at her.

"What *are* you seeing then?" Lady Pamela asked.

Big Gus turned his head slowly and looked at her for a little while before he replied.

"I was seeing a little bungalow surrounded by lawn, set in the centre of a paradise of flowers. I saw the clumsy, big, doting husband opening the gate to that paradise and the sweetest flower of them all rushed out of the bungalow and into his arms. He buried his face in her blonde curls, reveling in the exotic fragrance. Then he took her up and carried her inside the bungalow, to heaven."

"A poetic dream—with Amy?" Lady Pamela asked softly; but Big Gus shook his head and, for a moment, it appeared as if all the harshness had gone out of his face and eyes.

"No—Pauline, my wife," he answered simply.

"You loved her deeply, didn't you?"

"I worshipped the very ground she walked on. When I think about what she gave her young life to save, it makes me hate weaklings, the mental as well as the physical. When a man says he cannot do something, it makes me feel like tearing him apart with my bare hands," he ended up savagely.

Lady Pamela touched his massive forearm with the tips of her slender fingers.

"You're a strange creature, Gus. You act as if you were, and intended to remain, the most hateful and brutal man in the world. Yet you're capable of being as gentle as a lamb, and of a very deep and lasting love."

"Countess," Big Gus said coldly, "When the light went out of my life, the worm who caused that light to go out never so much as sent a flower to cover her coffin. Nor did either he, or his wife, extend to her one word of thanks when she saved his miserable life. Can you wonder that I've no love for people?"

"Tell me what happened, Gus."

Big Gus told her the story.

"Your trouble is that you're trying unsuccessfully to find a scapegoat for yourself. You know it's true," she insisted, when she saw he was going to protest. "You should have saved that man, and you wouldn't have lost your Pauline. You hate yourself, because you didn't. Once you accept, and resign yourself to that fact, you'll find that this mania for persecuting weaker people than yourself will disappear."

Big Gus turned his back on her and resumed his gazing out of the window. Presently, he turned again. He saw Amy and Derek with an arm about each other's waist. For a moment, his jaws clamped hard and his eyes flashed their hostility. Then he relaxed.

"You know, Countess, I believe you're right," he said. "But I wish that damn girl didn't look so much like my Pauline. Can't you see what I'm driving at? Pauline lost her life for a weak, undersized little shrimp of a man. Can you wonder that I don't want to stand by and see Amy lose hers—to *that*?" He pointed in Derek's direction.

"She may look like Pauline," Lady Pamela replied with a smile. "But her taste is Amy Fergusson's—and there's no accounting for taste, Gus."

Big Gus was on the point of asking his companion the reason for this sudden interest in him when Lady Pamela moved away towards the others.

"Come on," she said. "He's ready to start."

Dick Adams was standing behind a table, spreading papers over its surface.

Chapter Eleven

"LADIES and gentlemen. When we last assembled, three years ago, I wondered how many of us would survive to see the landing of the Wheorld. To be frank, I thought then some of our number might perish. I feared disease, boredom, melancholia and even madness. But, thanks to the good offices of the doc, and to your own meticulous adherence to his instructions, disease has been non-existent."

The captain paused and, with Padre Brotherton leading, they clapped in acknowledgment of the doctor's efforts.

"Boredom, at least in the case of the majority of the men, has been kept at bay, I venture to comment, by Slim's fanatical love of gambling. Indirectly, I expect this has kept away melancholia, too—since those who gambled with him have spent the greater part of their time making plans and laying schemes to get back the money they lost. But, to be serious, there have been occasional flashes of madness indicated by a hasty word or act. Thank God it was nothing worse and"—he looked at Big Gus as he spoke—"we won't dwell further on it."

"Thank you, kind sir," Big Gus said mockingly, but the captain went on.

"Now we've come to the end of our travels above the earth. Our food stocks are almost exhausted, the water and oxygen low. We've sufficient food for four days, and water for seven—but the last oxygen tank will be empty in less than three

and-a-half days. I propose, therefore, to take the Wheorld down to between ten and five thousand feet the day after tomorrow, and to test for radioactivity. You all know what to expect if it's present. The needle on the recorder dial will spin till we reach a clear area.

"If the atmosphere is clear, we'll land on the morning of the third day, at a time when we are over the new land joining Brazil to North West Africa. This will allow us a small margin of foodstuffs and a few days' water, while the doc carries out tests on the plant life and rivers. I have not lost sight of the fact that we are going down to something unknown, or that we could all possibly be dead within a few hours of landing. But I've not allowed that to influence me in the accomplishment of the task you set me three years ago.

"I have here the proposed laws by which we should live our future lives. Everyone take a copy. You'll find a space at the end of each proposal, in which—if you agree to that particular law—simply write the word "FOR". If this word doesn't appear, it will be understood that the vote is against."

Everyone, including Dick Adams himself, took up a set of the typed papers.

"Before you take them away to study them, I'll tell you briefly what they are about. The first subject dealt with is religion. We all belong to God, and to God only. There'll be no churches built—the world will be His house and we'll all pray in pubic."

"You can say *that* again," Big Gus interrupted. "If you think we're going to flop down on our bellies like a pack of dirty Arabs, you've got another think coming."

"Be quiet, Gus," whispered Lady Pamela, smiling at him.

"Quiet be damned! Since when was he entitled to tell us where and how to say our prayers?"

Padre Brotherton laughed, but Dick Adams continued as if there had been no interruption.

"For those of us accustomed to a place of worship, this will be a blow—and, for those who seldom, if ever, looked inside a church, the act of praying at all will be strange. But don't forget—and I can't stress this too strongly—it is not only ourselves we are interested in but the new mankind. Our laws can produce good or evil. I can't see them producing anything but good—if we know that every man, woman and child believes in, and prays to, the one God.

"There'll be no fixed form of prayer. No Bible or other form of publication to confuse the mind. No image, no

prophet—just God. Future generations will be taught by word of mouth that He will reward them in the after life according to their acts in this. Nothing more and nothing less will be taught about religion.

"In case any of you are already experiencing a feeling of revolt, let me add that our laws will not wholly contradict what we already know. This will be apparent when you study the proposed vocabulary and reflect upon the commandments. You will find that there is no such word as 'Hate'—and, therefore, there should be no reason to kill. We can't envy—and, therefore, we cannot covet. We can't steal, because everything is our own. We can't commit adultery—for no one woman shall belong to one man, but every woman shall belong to every man.

"No man shall be married to a woman in the sense that we understand it. There will be no selfish claims to children. No parents shall know their own child, no child its parents. To us fourteen of this first generation, this is an abominable cruelty; but, to the next and succeeding generations, it will be accepted without question and given no thought. I doubt whether the man in the *kraal* ever craved for an English castle—or, I venture to claim, for a Chinese junk.

"When a man desires a woman, or a woman desires a man, then he or she will go to the desired partner and, provided that there is mutual consent, the law will be satisfied."

There was another interruption from Big Gus.

"The man's a blasted saint—a Solomon!" he shouted with enthusiasm.

"He's a sinner," the padre added vehemently.

"But what a saintly sinner, Padre," came the reply.

"You're reducing us to the status of rabbits," Lady Pamela protested.

"Unfortunately, I am unable to do that," the captain replied with a smile.

A loud guffaw from Bill Spears and Len Kelly met with a cold stare from Lady Pamela.

"Can I go on?" Dick Adams asked. When the question went unanswered, he continued: "Women will have equal rights with men, but will be shown special consideration when bearing child. They will only be allowed to do the work of normal people at that time, if pronounced fit by a doctor.

"Work, for anything other than the provision of food, will not be done to any fixed schedule—but we will all work for as long as it suits us on any day. There is no need for hurry,

far less for worry. We are not striving to make any one person smile.

rich, or country more powerful. Time is no longer our enemy, but our ally.

"It will be the duty of every person to provide something for the cooking pots. If reasonable excuse is offered for failing to do so, then the community will go short. If no reasonable excuse is forthcoming, then the offender will eat only what remains after everyone else has been satisfied.

"When a child is born, it will be the duty of the mother to feed and wean it at the communal centre for infants, after which she will take no further part in its upbringing. All children, boys and girls, will be kept together, taught together and never separated. They will not be taught such words as hate, rights, jealousy, power, supremacy, envy and many other thousands of words known to us, but their language shall be confined within the limits of the vocabulary set out in the pages you are holding. It is short, simple and entirely free from ambiguity—no ifs, no buts.

"They will be taught nothing about progress, nor science, as we understand it."

"How about the Wheorld, with her intricate mechanisms and delicate instruments. They'll arouse curiosity, won't they?" Doc Wilson asked.

"The instruments, we can destroy. The Wheorld, I'm not so sure about. There are the pressure-guns of course—we could destroy the greater part of it with them. The remainder may just have to lie where we land till time takes its toll of it."

"I think you're being very stupid about the whole thing. Why put us right back in the Dark Ages?"

"It might have been better to have stopped there in the first place, Doc, than to have come through all our enlightenment to this."

"But, damn it, man, it can't happen again. There're no nations left to fight," the doctor argued.

"Then there's no need for speed, no need for guns, no need to know what's happening at the other side of the globe. No, Doc, if the vote is carried, we'll do it my way and destroy the evidence of our knowledge."

"To get back to the kids. I suppose they'll be taught something about sports?"

"Not on your sweet life, Steve. They will be taught no games. That doesn't mean that they won't be allowed to play

but our new world will find its own way to sport. Rivalry creates jealousy and jealousy breeds hatred. We'll have no part in sowing seeds of that kind, nor of reintroducing those words into our vocabulary."

"You're not forgetting cards, I hope—nap, brag, solo, pontoon, etcetera? Life wouldn't be worth living without them," Slim said jocularly.

"There won't be any cards," Dick Adams replied with a smile.

"What, no cards! Then how am I going to earn my living?" Slim asked with a seriousness that brought laughter from all but Amy and Derek. They were thinking of that no marriage law for which, they were unanimously agreed, they would not vote in favour.

"I repeat, no more cards, Slim. Every pack will be left in the Wheorld when you leave."

"Well, get a move on with your speech-making—you're wasting valuable money-making time. I'll give all you birds I.O.U.s in the time we have left."

"No—more—cards," the captain insisted, amid laughter.

"A pity, you know. Gus and Steve are still in the money. I could clean them out if——"

"Get out of here!" Dick Adams shouted at him; but he was laughing, too, and, as Slim turned to go, he called him back: "Come back here, you fool." Then he went on, "There'll be no money either—so you can get rid of every cent you possess."

Slim looked askance at him.

"But I've got a small fortune! Won it from these mugs in honest deals. I could start off in business," he protested.

"There'll be no money. Money won't be a word any more—so, as you understand it, it will be worthless."

"I wonder what you'd have said if you'd won it all."

"You're incorrigible, Slim. Let me get on," answered Dick Adams and he addressed them all again:

"If our way of life should result in disease, or in defective offspring, then we'll have to amend and reconstruct our laws to adjust things.

"Now, one last word. The new world will be one family with no distant relatives. It will grow as a circle grows, pushing out from its centre on a radius. As the radius lengthens, so shall the circumference and the area populated. No mountains, or other obstacles, will be allowed to separate us. Nations, as such, will never be allowed to exist, and only one language will be spoken. Fighting each other will not be pos-

sible, because a third party will always decide a dispute. There'll be nothing belonging to one that doesn't belong to the others—no rich, no poor.

"Before voting for any of the laws, I would draw your attention to the last one. It deals with law-breakers and makes it quite clear that the penalty for breaking any of our laws is death. Evil must be ruthlessly rooted out and destroyed right from the very beginning—and we are that."

Dick Adams paused and waited for some comment, but none came.

"Well, that's all there is to them. I suggest you now go away and study them. If you feel that improvement can be made, bring them up before the vote is cast. We'll assemble here again at ten o'clock in the morning of the day after tomorrow. I am sure the ladies won't object to a further segregation of the sexes for a few more hours," he ended up with a smile.

Amy Fergusson and Derek had remained quiet throughout. However, as the others started to walk away, Amy gripped Derek tightly by the wrists.

"Oh, darling, I hope they don't vote for his no marriage law," she said tearfully.

"So do I, my love. But I don't think that there's need for fear. I cannot see the doc, the padre, Steve, or Slim voting for anything so filthy. Then there are us two and, I feel certain, the Countess. That makes a total of seven, even without the support of any of the other women. We only need one more to vote with us and that law's had it," Derek replied confidently.

"I could never love any other man, darling. The others must be persuaded. They *can't* vote for it. They couldn't be so cruel, knowing that we were planning to get married."

"They won't, my love, have no fear," reassured Derek, kissing her before she left him to return to the lower floor.

She found the other four women in serious consultation; but they stopped speaking as she approached and Mrs. Mullins retired to her room. Each of them felt that Amy was going to suffer most as a result of the new legislation.

"No man will marry, indeed!" she said as she joined them. "I wonder who he thinks he is. Derek is fuming."

"How about you, darling—what do you feel about it?" Martha asked kindly.

"I'd rather kill myself than submit to anybody but Derek. He's the only man I love," Amy replied.

"I can't say I've any love for any of them. Not even for your Derek—but I'm damned if I'm going to kill myself. So far as I'm concerned, a man is an absolute necessity," said Molly. She paused then added:

"I think the captain's idea is quite a good one. Any alternative may result in some of us getting a life partner we don't want, and no end to the fights between the lucky men and those left out. Let's be fair about it, Amy darling."

"But surely you're not saying that you'll vote for a law like that!" Amy cried despairingly. "You can't possibly admit that you'd like all those different men."

"Probably not. But I'll soon get to know which ones I *do* like," Molly answered with a smile.

Amy showed her disgust.

"I thought you were a chaste woman," she said.

"*Me!*" gasped Molly. Then she laughed. "When I was that high—she placed her hand at a level with her waist—they called me the perfect little flirt. I just adored men, and loved being with them. Hell! That's what we were put here for, isn't it?"

Lady Pamela smiled; but Amy's answer took her smile away.

"You're worse than Martha ever was!" she napped.

"Yes, I believe I am," Molly answered unperturbed. "It's easy to fall below the standard set by an angel."

Amy realized her *faux pas* immediately and, flinging her arms around Martha's neck, she burst into tears.

"I'm sorry, Martha dear, I wouldn't hurt you for the world," she sobbed.

"Forget it," Martha soothed. "I know you didn't mean anything."

She led Amy off to her room. When they were gone, Lady Pamela spoke to Molly.

"You're the most amazing creature, Molly. I'd never have dreamed that you'd decide to vote for that law. That's why I was so reluctant to suggest it to you before Amy came in."

"Why, dear, do I look the cold type?"

"On the contrary. I think you look and act as a flirt would. But my experience of *them* is that they encourage men up to a certain point, and then drop them flat. I could best be described as the cold type."

"Yes, there are times when you could—especially when you're sitting contemplating. I've often watched you."

"If the truth were told, perhaps we've been contemplating the same thing," Lady Pamela replied with a laugh.

"Impossible, my thoughts are mostly lurid. I am, on the whole, a pleasure-seeking woman."

"Aren't we all? Or, at least, we will be when we vote, won't we?"

"You can vote against. It's all right for me—I lived very much the same sort of life before I came up here. I got what I wanted and enjoyed it," Molly replied.

Lady Pamela turned and looked at the door through which Amy and Martha had gone.

"I think I'm going to enjoy it, too," she said. "I hope Amy won't be too frightfully shocked."

"She'll be disappointed, no doubt. But it would have been a miracle if Captain Adams had managed to satisfy all of us. I'm glad it's happened this way, if only for Martha's sake. Nobody can say anything about her now. After all, in our New World, there won't be any of that sort of thing—we'll all be respectable unmarried wives and mothers without children."

Chapter Twelve

BEFORE PADRE BROTHERTON retired to his own room to study Dick Adams's proposed laws, he told the others, when they suggested an open discussion, that he had listened to the captain's brief outline with a patience which he was not aware that he possessed. He had no intention of entering into any discussion about them until he had studied them thoroughly.

"They're clear enough for me," said Steve Ronson. "I'm voting for the lot."

"So am I," added Bill Spears.

The doctor looked at Derek, a dejected, miserable figure huddled in a chair in a corner of the lounge.

"Why is it the weak are always made to suffer? Can you wonder at it that, when they'd been driven to the end of their endurance, like worms they turned? Here we are at the very beginning again, with the power to make everybody happy, but our own selfishness and the knowledge that our actions are backed by a majority will prevent us from doing that. Frankly, I believe we should vote for all the laws, but with one amendment to the No Marriage law. There should be a clause in it that would allow any two people to live together permanently, unmolested by unwelcome requests or advances from others. Then we might say that there would be no cause for complaint. If we don't make some such amendment, then

at least one of our company is going to be made to suffer."

"To hell with that Doc," Big Gus protested. "It wouldn't be fair to give one man a decided advantage, would it?"

"It would be equally unfair not to, so what?"

"At least, we're all in the market the way things are," said Len Kelly. "If we gave way to Derek and Amy, it wouldn't be long before all the women were tied up. Then what would happen to the other four men?"

"You've a point there," Doc Wilson replied.

"A good one, too," Slim added. "I wouldn't support an amendment. After all, the mutual consent clause gives Derek a one hundred per cent claim on Amy if his love is reciprocated."

"Somebody once told me there couldn't be love without marriage. As a doctor, Slim, I think I understand the truth of that. Love is very much more than just an act. It's the natural instinct of a male and a female to think, feel and act for each other."

"Then, if marriage is confirmation of love, how do you account for divorces?" asked Big Gus.

Doctor Wilson smiled.

"You will have your little say, Gus. Well, since you ask, I'll try and explain, though I warn you I'm no divorce judge. I'd say divorce was impossible if the marriage was prompted by love and not mere infatuation, as so often happens. If one of the parties contemplated unfaithfulness—and he, or she, was really in love with his or her partner—then, provided the three factors in my definition of love are present, the mere act of thinking, as the wedded partner would think, would bring with it the feelings of that partner and the act couldn't possibly take place. There are other, in fact innumerable, causes for divorce—but you can't tell me one that doesn't revolve around these three factors, thinking, feeling and acting for each other."

"I think I know what you mean," Big Gus said uncertainly.

"Then let's be united and agree to an amendment."

Derek had heard the arguments for and against. He realized that it was about him and his personal well being that they argued. It angered him. He was thinking of Amy, not of himself. He saw a mental vision that tortured him; eight other men making demands upon her. It was all wrong—the poor girl would be disgusted. But what if she should choose somebody else? Supposing, for instance, Big Gus ap-

proached her? He knew now that Big Gus wanted her. Would she refuse him? Gus was a magnificent specimen of manhood compared with himself. It would be a thorough test. But could he take that risk? Wouldn't it be better to second the doctor's amendment and guard Amy jealously against the advances of all other men?

Big Gus's reply broke in upon his thoughts:

"I'm damned if I'm going to second an amendment that might cut me out with the one woman in this world that I want."

"I don't blame you."

It was Derek's defiant gesture to Gus Hardwicke and to the others. They all looked at him as if they hadn't believed that he had said it.

"Don't be a fool Derek. Second the amendment yourself," Slim advised, but Derek shook his head.

"No, I'll be in the market with the rest of you, Slim. If Gus and me go for Amy—well, I guess it's up to her to make the choice," he said firmly.

"That's what I call being sensible," Slim replied with enthusiasm. "I understand exactly how you feel. If it was me, I'd be eating my heart out with jealousy. Must have inherited it from my mother. My old man knocked around a bit—he was a great believer in a change being as good as a rest. Who knows, son, you might appreciate the chance of one yourself when you tire of Amy."

"God forbid," Derek said sincerely. All the same, he spent a restless forty-eight hours in which he saw Amy tiring of him and making signs of welcome to a leering Gus Hardwicke. Time and again, he blotted out this mental vision to join in the fun and laughter Dick Adams's idea of good legislation produced. Nevertheless, it kept recurring and, only when Amy herself threw her arms around his neck and kissed him at their next meeting, did it finally go.

"Darling Derek," she murmured, "the women are voting for everything that the captain's proposed. But don't worry, I'll never want anyone but you."

"The men are for them as well, sweetheart. I don't know about the padre, but the rest are, including the doc. And did you know that I had a rival in the field?"

"Oh! And who is that?" Amy asked.

For a moment, Derek felt as if his world was crumbling about him. However, when he told Amy who it was, the look

of scorn on her face was sufficient reassurance for him.

"That ape! That bear! That ignorant, bullying, boasting beast! I'd sooner die!"

Fortunately, they were the first two in the lounge; so none heard Amy's outburst except Derek. He smiled his content and, taking her cheeks between his palms, kissed her tenderly.

"Now I couldn't care less about their votes," he said. "You'll always be mine, sweetheart."

He was still kissing and holding her when Big Gus entered the lounge. The picture they presented was like a slap in the face to the big man. He stopped and stared at them, his eyes flashing anger and hatred. Then, as it had come, so the feeling passed and, for some unaccountable reason, he was telling himself that he had no love for this blonde who reminded him so much of his Pauline. He felt that he only wanted to hurt her. She had no right to remind him of *her*. Pauline was dead; she had left no substitute behind; there never could be another Pauline.

"Exchange them?"

Big Gus started. He had not heard Lady Pamela's approach.

"You wouldn't appreciate them," he said.

"Who knows? I might," she answered in a low, husky voice.

"Yours first," Big Gus suggested, looking away towards Amy and Derek again.

"All right. I was thinking of a man not unlike yourself. He was a big man, a strong man. His name was Paul, and he killed a man because of his love for me. He got ten years and I never enjoyed the pleasure his love might have given me. I met another man when Paul was in gaol, a man of Derek's stamp. I cannot think now, how I believed myself to be in love with him. It must have been more pity than love, because I know in my heart that I've always wanted a man of Paul's calibre—big and strong, quick-tempered and brutal, yet gentle as a lamb with those he loves. I was thinking if everyone voted for Dick Adam's proposals I'd look for a man like that."

"What makes you think that I could love you as your Paul did?" Big Gus asked bluntly.

"I'll answer that when you tell me yours," replied Lady Pamela, still in the same husky voice.

"I was thinking that I've been kidding myself for years I wanted that damned blonde over there—just because she was like my Pauline. But, somehow, there's a difference. Pauline

wouldn't cling to a man the way she does, you had to cling like hell to Pauline. She'd leap into your arms—but, from then on, you had to fight every inch of the way. Then she'd give way. Can you see that blonde having just one-tenth of her resistance? Or with just one-tenth of her desirability? Hell, they're not in the same street. She's so insipid it makes me sick to think that she could even look like Pauline."

Lady Pamela smiled.

"It's as I said, Gus. There's no accounting for taste."

"Making excuses for your own?"

"No, just for Amy. I never knew Paul as your Pauline knew you," was the quiet reply.

"Queer coincidence, don't you think—Paul and Pauline?"

"Is it not more than coincidence, Gus?"

"But damn it all, you're a lady! There's the Old Man for you. I am and always have been a guttersnipe."

Lady Pamela's eyes flashed angrily.

"To hell with Dick Adams! D'you think a position makes a man any more attractive? D'you think I'd come to you—if Dick Adams were the man I wanted? D'you think I don't know he knocked you out, and why? I know it all, Gus, but I want you just the same when it comes to a choice of—let's say—partners. You don't have to accept unless you want, but I'd hoped——"

"Countess—Lady Pam, I hope you mean it," Big Gus stammered in a hoarse whisper, and Lady Pamela gurgled with girlish laughter.

"You big fool!" she said, but she was thinking of Paul when she said it. She'd always put him off with those few words, and he was too much of a gentleman to argue with her. So was Big Gus, until she added, "Of course, I mean it."

"You make me feel almost human again," he replied.

Meanwhile, Slim, Bill Spears and Len Kelly were having a discussion. Slim started it. He was in a mischievous mood and saw an excellent opportunity for annoying Len—a pastime in which he delighted when not otherwise engaged playing cards.

"You know, you birds, there's always the chance you won't get fixed up with the lady of your choice at the first time of asking. You've got a nine-to-five problem to get over no matter how the voting turns out," he said.

"I reckon I won't have nothing to worry about," Bill Spears commented.

"How's that?"

"Well, as I said before, I ain't fussy. A woman's a woman—and that's all I want."

"It doesn't reduce the ratio, Bill," Slim replied with a smile.

"Who'd want Maudie?" Bill asked seriously.

"Gawd Almighty!" Len Kelly gasped. "I'll say you're not fussy."

"You might be glad of her yourself," said Slim.

"Never!"

"Don't you be kidding yourself. You want the nurse, I know. Big Gus wants the blonde—but, if he doesn't get *her*, you can take my word for it that he's going after Molly, and he'll get her before you do. Apart from him, doc happens to fancy Molly, too—and I believe Steve's keen on her. So you're going to be damned lucky if you get fixed up there. Given a second choice, you'd go for Martha, you told me so yourself. Did you know that the padre had an eye on her, and that she'd be the doc's second choice?"

"The nurse is mine. The rest can go to hell," Len snapped irritably.

"But it has to be mutual consent. She might fancy one of the others. She's definitely sweet on doc. The rest of us are spoiled foods as far as she is concerned—except Derek of course, he's the only other single man. No Len, you're going to be unlucky."

When Slim ended up with a smile, Len Kelly's irritability gave way to a show of temper.

"Slim, you're a devil! You've just set yourself out to aggravate me again!" he shouted.

"I cannot be one of them—it ain't a word in the Old Man's vocab," Slim replied, unperturbed.

"I suppose you'll just throw down a cape for Lady Muck to walk on, eh?" Len sneered sarcastically.

"More or less," the other agreed.

"And what about Captain blinkin' Adams? What will he do, eh?"

Slim laughed.

"He'll carry her over the cape. But he's got to drop her some time, you know. You see Len, I don't expect to reach paradise with the flash of a wand. I'm quite content to wait a while."

Len was beaten for an answer.

"Let's get to hell out of here," he said to the smiling Bill Spears.

"Yeah—to paradise."

Slim laughed at Bill's incongruous simile.

A similar discussion was still in progress on the lower floor. Lady Pamela had walked out long before its finish; that is how she was presented with the unforeseen opportunity of meeting Big Gus more or less alone, since Amy and Derek were both unaware of his presence, or her intrusion on that presence. It had all started when Amy rushed off in advance of the others of her sex to meet her Derek.

"She's all right," Molly grumbled. "She knows who she's going to get. But how about us? None of us has a clue. There's that brute Big Gus—he looks mean enough to kill a woman. There's the padre—he'd probably beat a rhythm of the twenty-third psalm. There's Len Kelly—he's so ordinary I just couldn't see anybody wanting him. Slim is so disgustingly thin, and doc so damned flabby. Steve is too blasted old and I expect the countess will go for Captain Adams. As for Bill Spears, he's too tiny for my liking."

"I won't go for Captain Adams, Molly," Lady Pamela replied. "Go for him yourself."

She didn't tell them that, since her operation, her mind had drifted persistently to thoughts of Paul. Cyril Phillips had no part in them. They were passionate thoughts of strong man and a receptive woman. Paul had been big and strong; the sort of man to be stranded with on a desert island; protector, provider and companion. Big Gus, of the nine males in the Wheorld, most nearly resembled him in physique and, since that little talk they had had by the window, she knew in her heart he was also the perfect man. To her, he was a much more desirable partner than Dick Adams would be. If he came for her, she would consent; but there was no reason for telling the others how she felt, or that the feeling was so strong upon her that, given the opportunity, she wouldn't be afraid to offer herself to him.

"There's no need to be churlish, darling," Molly replied. "You know damned well he'll make for you. He'll be after his own class. He'll want to keep his dignity."

"You know you're being very catty, Molly. I'm 'Lady Pamela' only by accident of birth."

"I'm sorry," Molly apologized. "But you really are such a

ladylike lady. None of us will blame Captain Adams for choosing you."

"If he does, then I'm afraid he's going to be awfully disappointed."

"I think he would be," said Martha. "Do you think it would be fair to him? After all, you are the only two of a type."

Lady Pamela did not attempt to hide the fact that she was fast losing her patience.

"Martha dear, when we leave the Wheorld, Dick Adams will cease to be any more than just one of nine men. As far as I am concerned, I am—and for the past five years have been—just one of five women who are all of the same type, just one of five female astronauts. I never have been different to any of you really, so why try to make out that I am now?"

"Mainly for the sake of Captain Adams," Martha replied quietly.

"Why be anxious on his account?"

"You seem so well-matched," Molly answered for Martha.

"I think that is what she means."

Up to then, Mrs. Mullins had been a silent listener; but it occurred to her that these others were overlooking the fact that a no marriage law provided absolute freedom for everybody.

"You know, ladies, I can't for the life of me understand why any of you should be anxious about the man you might get. So far as my limited intelligence allows me to interpret the meaning of the law, I'd say, in time, that you'll each have the same nine. Don't run away with any fancy ideas that you'll have one, and one only. Men aren't built that way. Every one of them will fancy a change at some time or another, and they'll come to each of you in turn—just for the hell of it. It was only the law prevented them from doing that in the world we've lost. The Koran provided an easy divorce law, and up to four wives and a harem. That Mohammed was no mug; he knew how to draw the believers. These nine pin-ups we've got will prove no different to the Mohammedans."

"I couldn't help noticing you left yourself out, Maudie," Molly observed.

Mrs. Mullins laughed.

"Honey, I was past it before you started. Men don't look for a near fifty when there's twenties and thirties to be had

just for the asking. Mind you, I'm not going to say one or two of those bright boys won't be satisfied till they ask me, too—you know how they are, try anything once."

"I shouldn't think you'd had an affair in your life," Molly chided.

"Maybe I haven't dear, but there's a lot to be said for experience."

Lady Pamela left them then, Molly's laughter ringing in her ears as she made her way to the upper main lounge. She didn't hear what Martha had to say on the subject:

"I think we're all putting far too much emphasis on passion and insufficient on love. I've nothing to fear—nobody will want to fall in love with me—but I'd tremble to think that I was in your shoes, Molly, or the countess's. Some, if not most, of those men upstairs are going to fall in love with you and—despite the fact that the new vocabulary has no such words as murder, jealousy or hatred in it—there'll be the possibility of struggles to the death between the men over you, and possibly over Amy as well. Maudie understands why I don't include her—as she says, there are twenties and thirties about."

Molly became serious for a moment.

"You *are* a morbid creature, Martha darling. Your trouble is that you don't look in the mirror often enough. Apart from your very charming nature, men go for looks as well, darling—and, when it comes to them, you leave us all in the shade. If I was a betting woman, I'd gamble on you having more suitors really falling madly in love with you than the rest of us put together."

"You're just trying to flatter me," Martha said, blushing.

"When you blush like that, you make me wish I was. You're really very beautiful, darling."

"Don't be silly, Molly dear," Martha replied impatiently.

"She's only telling you plain facts, love," Maudie confirmed. "With your looks and figure I'd clear the decks with them men."

"So will I if any of them come near me," Martha answered with a laugh.

"Somebody's bound to. You wouldn't chase them all, would you?" Molly asked, disbelief in her eyes and voice.

"Yes," Martha replied.

"But you can't do that, not once we've voted. It wouldn't be right, either to the men or to the rest of us women."

"Well, if I must agree, they won't stay long. I'll be as cold and dead as a cod on an ice slab."

"Think how much sweeter and more desirable you'll be, darling," Molly replied, and Mrs. Mullins thought the time had come to change the subject. Molly had Martha helplessly embarrassed.

"It's time we went up there," she said, pointing at the ceiling with a cocked thumb. "It's nearly ten o'clock."

Chapter Thirteen

STEVE RONSON collected the voting papers and handed them over to Dick Adams. Thirteen of the sets were completely for; the fourteenth was unmarked.

Dick Adams told them the result and thanked them.

"It's of little consequence that one has voted against," he said, "because it hasn't affected the result. It's regrettable, of course, to think that we are not unanimous in our acceptance of things as they will be. When a person is not in agreement with the law, he either suffers it in passive silence, runs off to another country—or fights it.

"In this instance, the person who is in complete disagreement with the rest of us will have no choice but to suffer our decision in silence. We have decreed that we will be one family with no distant relatives. None will be allowed to break away from us, nor will we tolerate the breaking of our laws. It's a pity, and I'm sorry. I'd hoped that we would launch out on this great venture with a happy community in absolute harmony."

"Is it not your conscience making you sorry?"

They all looked at the padre. He smiled at them.

"Yes, I voted against," he said. "I question the right of any man to make a religion, or to alter the one we were taught. Or his right to take a child from its mother, and to deny that child knowledge of her. I question his right to dispense with the biblical law of marriage and to make every child born illegitimate. Because the children themselves won't know that's what they are, is not going to alter the effect on the parents."

"Paul," Dick Adams interrupted him, "you appear to have overlooked the fact that there is a clause allowing for changes to be made."

"I hadn't overlooked it. I ignored it. You knew, when you put that clause in, that changes would have to be made. Your Christian heart told you that, so why waste lives to prove what you already know? It's against all the principles of my religion."

"Your religion is dead, Paul. With the exception of us, the world is dead, and its many and varied beliefs died with it. Thirteen of us believe only in God—we accept nothing else. When our children come into this world they will need no proof that He exists, no story of Christ who tried to confirm it to a race wilting under the heel of the pagan Romans. They will be told that God IS. So, Padre, get your own conception of religious teaching right out of your head."

"As a priest, I cannot condone sin. You are creating it. Wholesale free love, such as you have agreed to make legal, can't be considered anything but."

Dick Adams smiled.

"Is your mind so narrow it cannot see this thing as it really is? Do you not recall that some races resorted to these measures in our old world? They believed, as I do now, that it was essential to both healthy reproduction and the happiness of the community. I'm afraid, Paul, you will have to accept things as we want them. You know the alternative, of course."

"Idle threats," Paul Brotherton snapped contemptuously.

"No, Paul, I'm serious. We cannot have you teaching, or preaching, to suit yourself. Our children and their children will be taught no wrong, so it should be impossible for them

to do wrong. They'll be innocent babes from the cradle to the grave. They'll be innocent of the world that's gone, innocent—in their ignorance—of their parents and of their parents' sins, so it must follow they'll be innocent in the eyes of God.

"You've got to remember that, Paul, even though it contradicts your own religious views. Kill the natural development of the minds of those babes and you will have started the rot right in the beginning. In which case, without any compunction, we will kill you and those whose minds you corrupt."

"So I'm to be the teacher?"

"That was the general idea. You're the only priest and—as it's going to be the job of the chief priest to appoint future teachers from among the children—you would appear to be the only one suited for such a task."

"If it means saving the children from your pagan ministrations, I have little choice—though I'll be sore tempted to quote from the New Testament."

"You won't. Not when you realize that you are the first chief priest in the new world."

Padre Brotherton made no reply. Dick Adams's words were echoing in his brain. *The first chief priest*. He hadn't thought of it like that. The new Abraham. After all, why else had he been saved along with this nucleus of the new world's inhabitants, but to teach their offspring the Word. In the ages to come, biblical history would be traced right back to him, the father, the first of the teachers, the first messenger of God.

He felt his was a mission with a purpose: To prevent sin, by telling only what comes of good. Dick Adams was right. Why try to show the punishments sin will bring to babes who know no sin? He would tell only of the rewards to be gained from good; and future man would be his own judge as to how much of that reward he had earned.

"Now that little matter's settled," Dick Adams went on, "we'll carry out our programme, as planned. But, before going to your stations, let me remind you that the laws we have just passed take effect from the time the last man leaves the Wheel. Till then, I give the orders."

"After our descent to five thousand feet and when the results of the radio-activity tests are known, I expect the ladies

to return to their quarters till the time of disembarkation. Steve will be the first to leave the ship, after grounding. He will be followed by the ladies. The doctor and the padre will head the remainder of the crew. I will be last. When we do leave, no man or woman will step off the Wheorld with any personal possessions, or clothing. There will be no false modesty in our new world."

There was a chorus of "Ohs!" from the women; and ribald laughter and dubious remarks, together with some disapproval from the men.

"Absolutely unnecessary," was the doctor's expressed opinion.

"Lower than a beast to the end," growled Big Gus.

"That'll even things up in the matter of size," said the short Bill Spears.

"I hope my eyes don't pop out," was Slim's contribution as he mentally undressed Lady Pamela.

Len Kelly and Derek laughed, Len raucously, Derek nervously. The padre neither said nor did anything. Like Steve, his mind dwelt for a few moments in the past. However, his eyes never left Dick Adams's face. They *hadn't* met at the university. Perhaps that was just as well; as, otherwise, Dick Adams might have learned something of that shameful episode in his life. It had all started following upon one of those delightful rides in the country on the old cycle. He had called at the pub down by the river and met the pretty little dumpy barmaid. His intentions had been honourable, but the flesh is weak; and she had a child, poor girl. She didn't press for marriage. Her parents warned her not to marry a man who did not want her. He let her go, with his own child, to die in the great fire that ended the world.

Dick Adams had been well known, as is everyone in the university who has a habit of getting involved in every controversial topic. He was a leader, a go-getter; and, above all, he was sincere. It was his sincerity that saved him from expulsion on one occasion; and it was knowledge of that sincerity that prevented the padre from condemning him now as a sadistic maniac.

"To stations then," Dick Adams instructed. "We'll make the descent. I don't think your services will be required, Martha—so, if you wish, you can go to the viewer with

Derek. I'll be there, too. Or you can help Amy, in case the crew need anything. Lady Pamela can tag along as well, or join doc and the nurse—it doesn't really matter."

"Where're you going to put her?" Bill Spears asked.

Dick Adams gave a bearing and pointed on the rough chart he had made.

"We'll hover just here," he said. "At zero, Slim, fire the final force jets and switch on the cooling plant at the same time. That'll be something for Big Gus to do. We don't want to risk being frizzled having come so far." He turned and spoke to Len Kelly:

"Stop revolutions at fifteen thousand feet and let the props take over for our helicopter descent as soon as Bill gives our position. Don't take her down below five thousand feet. When we're positioned, start the testing motors—and you, Slim, see that the equipment is properly connected for our radio-activity tests."

A few minutes later, the slight vibrations told those not engaged in the actual engineering, or piloting, during the descent, that Len Kelly had braked the mighty wheel that was the Wheorld and brought the hovering engines into use. The giant telescopic wings would now be extended from the long spokes, taking the weight of the whole structure and gently lowering it. Presently, Derek reported the landing position within the viewer. The onlookers heard him describe what he saw:

"Reporting viewer position at five thousand feet. Area covered: Eight miles by six. Flat ground appears to be grass-covered. River cuts north-west corner of view. Woods, or jungle, extend full length eight miles and one mile deep. No sign of life, nor habitation."

Dick Adams and Martha closed up with Derek, in order to see the picture for themselves. It might have been a typical old world country scene.

"Rays out, Slim. Eight by six."

"Rays out," Slim confirmed almost immediately, and Dick Adams anxiously watched the recorder. The pointer did not so much as quiver.

"Extend the view, Derek. Treble it."

"Twenty-four by eighteen," Derek reported when the automatic focus adjustment revolved and stopped, giving a natural

colour picture of a very much larger area of ground in the viewer.

Slim was ordered to make three tests over this new area. After a few minutes, during which time Dick Adams kept his gaze riveted upon the recorder dial, the third set of rays had been shot and, for immediate requirements, the tests were complete. The captain now knew that, at least, an area of twenty-four miles by eighteen of atmosphere and ground were free from radioactivity. He continued to test, however, until he had reached the maximum range of the rays and to a view covering one hundred and fifty by one hundred and twelve and a half miles. All with negative results.

The varying views provided some measure of entertainment to the onlookers, after the anxiety each had felt about the possible presence of radioactivity had been removed. It appeared as if this country in which they were going to land was predominantly grassland, with rivers running from the north-west, where there was a long, narrow line of hills, to the south-west through rolling plains and wooded country.

Chapter Fourteen

THE WHEORLD was grounded. The hazards of space had been met and conquered. Acceleration force, gravity, heating and cooling of man and machine in space had been overcome. The concentrated efforts of the world's greatest scientists was in the mighty machine. However, not one of those scientists was there to receive it on its return through the various spheres of the atmosphere to the troposphere. They had achieved the inevitable reward of their labours, advancement to the point of destruction.

Man had used the products of his fertile brain to carry out that destruction. Only the Wheorld remained to show how far humanity had progressed in the old world. She had come to rest not three hundred yards from the edge of a forest to the north, and the same distance from a wide river to the west.

The women were preparing to leave. They were silent and thoughtful. Only Maudie made a poor attempt at a joke.

"I'm going to look funny wobbling along without my armour on," she said.

"Never mind that, how about your smalls? That's what I'm going to miss most," Molly commented.

After that short exchange, they fell silent again. It was the same with the men, until Slim emerged from his room and entered the lounge a couple of minutes after Len and Big Gus. He gave the latter an admiring glance, then looked down at his own comparatively-slender body.

"Wish I'd taken that 'Let's Make You A Man' course. Look at my ruddy skinny legs," he complained wistfully.

Len laughed.

"That's what I am looking at. But I reckon you'll be a front ranker just the same."

"Women go for muscle and brawn," Slim replied, pointing at Big Gus.

It was Len who answered, however.

"Don't kid yourself, Bill!" he shouted.

Bill Spears rushed into the lounge. He was a small, thin, bony-looking specimen. Len pointed at Slim.

"Take an eyeful of that, and he says he wants to look like a man."

"Hell!" Bill Spears gasped, "I don't blame him. With ears to match, he'd be mistaken for a donkey."

Slim grabbed a cushion from the nearest settee and flung it at him; but Bill dodged away, laughing, and went back to his own room. The cushion did find a target however; it caught Derek in the midriff just as he stepped into the lounge.

"Sorry, Derek," Slim apologized.

"Oh, that's nothing," Derek replied. "It's this," he said, brushing his hands down his thin body. "It's a disgusting idea altogether. We should protest. Showing off our physique to those poor women. I think it's terrible!"

"Get the hell out of here, you ruddy spoil-sport!" said Len, with a smile.

"He's only jealous," laughed Slim.

"Jealous be damned! I'd think I was deformed if I cut a figure like you."

"Trouble is, you are, son. That's why you don't want to show yourself."

"You mean I'm too damned respectable to enjoy it. That's more than can be said for some of you," was the indignant reply.

"You said it."

Derek snorted and slammed the door on his way out, leaving the three men laughing after him.

That was just a few minutes before Steve, thick-set and hairy, opened the landing lift and descended to the ground, the first man to step into the new world. From their own floor, the women saw him go.

At precisely ten o'clock, Maudie, as the leader of the women, followed Steve. As she reached the ground and stepped out of the lift, Steve gave a gasp of astonishment. "For one wild moment he thought that he was seeing things. In that moment, Maudie brought back poignant memories to him.

"Don't just stare at me like that! Tell me where to go, if you don't like the look of me. But don't be rude about it!" said Maudie indignantly.

"Sorry, didn't know anyone could remind me of my wife again."

"And I did?"

"Uh-huh."

"But surely she wasn't like me, Steve?"

"It's a different face, that's all. I wonder I hadn't noticed it before."

"And the face, is it *so different*?"

"Vastly, but don't get me wrong. If it *hadn't* been, I'd have noticed you before. I don't mean by that I don't want to notice you now. On the contrary. My own dear wife wasn't as good looking as you, but she was a good mother and an excellent wife."

Maudie lowered her eyes.

"Nobody ever told me I was good-looking before," she said in a low voice. "My man married me because I could cook."

"Well, you are," Steve replied simply.

Her hands went upwards.

"I do feel silly without my things," she said.

"I never felt more comfortable and free," Steve replied truthfully.

"You are a good man, Steve," said Maudie—and, in this, she was right.

As the two sylph-like figures of Amy and Martha emerged from the lift, his gaze was quite impersonal. He noted that Amy looked somewhat thinner than her beautiful companion. That, and no more, passed through his mind! Then came Lady Pamela, with Molly. The former appeared to Steve to be rather flat on top, but that fault may have been accentuated by contrast with the nurse.

The men followed, Doc Wilson just ahead of the padre. Both of them joined the women as unconcernedly as if they were fully-clothed and no comments were passed. True, Molly was agreeably surprised at the muscular development of Paul Brotherton. Doc was, as she had expected him to be, a close resemblance to a frog; long, thin legs, slightly bowed, supported a short, well-rounded body, with a thick neck and large head.

Then came Big Gus—tall, confident and of admirable proportions. He was strangely quiet as he joined them. He smiled

at Lady Pamela and nodded to the remainder, then he and Lady Pamela withdrew for a few paces. Derek and Slim came next. Derek hung back nervously behind his companion as they joined the others. Seeing him do so annoyed Amy. She felt ashamed on his account. It made him completely lack that personality which was the one thing, she tried to convince herself, that she so admired about Slim.

"Hello, darling," Derek greeted her, laughing nervously.

"Oh, hello, Derek," she replied. Then she ignored him and devoted her whole attention to Slim.

"She might be the youngest, but she's got grown-up ideas all right," Molly whispered to Martha.

"Jealous?" Martha whispered back, her eyes twinkling humorously.

"No," Molly replied seriously. "I'm sorry as hell for that boy Derek," she added in undertone.

"Going to mother him?"

"Mother him, my foot! I like him. He needs teaching."

"If he made the choice himself, he wouldn't find a better teacher, Molly darling," Martha came back at her, shaking her head.

Molly didn't stay long enough to reply. She had spotted Len and Bill approaching, so she hurriedly darted towards Amy, Slim and Derek. Her knowledge of human nature was such, however, that she didn't so much as speak to Derek. Her heart ached for him in the sadness, bitterness and disappointment she knew he must be feeling. All the same, she also knew that this was neither the time, nor the place, to attempt to heal those open wounds. She was angry with Amy for having slighted and hurt him, but she was glad he was now going to be hers to look after. She couldn't think of him as other than an adolescent. He was what she had always wanted—someone to nurse and yet love, someone she could make love her in return.

Dick Adams was not far behind the last two. Seeing Martha standing alone, he made a bee-line for her. As he approached—before the astonished eyes of Len and Bill, who had lacked the courage to approach her themselves—she felt her knees tremble and her heart beat a violent tattoo. It seemed to her then that she had lived this moment before and, instinctively, she knew that this lean, muscular and agile man was hers. There was no hate against men in her heart at that moment, only terror and love, strangely intermingling

The terror was the result of her thoughts, of uncertainty about her own reactions, if and when he should speak to her.

"Hello, Martha, my dear. I'm glad to find you all alone. It stills the fears that passed through my mind as the others left."

"What fears, Captain Dick?" Martha asked nervously.

"Thinking that you might have been snatched from my grasp by one of them. And, from now on, just plain Dick, if you please. I'm no longer the king-pin, just one in the crowd—a crowd of kings and queens."

"You elevate me and I'm honoured," Martha answered, her voice barely above a whisper, and reflecting her nervousness.

"What's more to the point. Will you honour me?" he asked anxiously.

Martha bowed her head and nodded slightly. Then, witnessed by all twelve of the others, she was grasped in two strong, steel-hard arms as Dick Adams kissed her.

"From now on you are mine, right?"

Martha's knees no longer trembled. That kiss had made her feel a queen. She stood erect, a perfect figure, radiantly beautiful and smiling happily.

"Right, Dick," she replied.

"I'm the luckiest man alive," he said, taking her by the arm and leading her towards the river.

When the others started to follow, he turned to them.

"I hope this isn't a question of follow-the-leader. I gave up my responsibilities when I left the ship," he said.

"It was just a case of someone making the first move, that's all," Doc Wilson replied. "I'm going down to test the river water."

Where the Wheorld had landed, the ground was rock strewn and pebble covered; but, as they approached the river what had appeared from the air and the landing place to be just grass, proved to be the tips of massive, fleshy, grass-shaped leaves. They discovered this after walking a hundred yards, when the ground fell steeply away towards the river bank. There, the leaves were shoulder high.

"What do you make of it, Doc?" Dick Adams asked.

"Grass, that's all—just giant grass."

"Can we eat it?"

For answer, Doc Wilson prodded one of the blades with a hypodermic syringe.

"Disobeyed orders to bring this," he said with a smile.

"What's that supposed to tell us?"

"Whether or not it's radioactive, or affected by it. If it isn't, in ten minutes time I'll be eating some. It'll be quite a change from the diets we've had for the past five years. If the top turns reddish brown, it's inedible."

Anxiously, they watched the great blade; but nothing happened and the doctor nipped off the tip at a height of five feet and ate it.

"Delicious!" was his enthusiastic comment. "It tastes the same as melon. Has the texture of mango."

With the exception of Dick Adams and Martha, all made a rush to nip off the tips of the long blades.

"Any reason why the remainder should differ from the tips, Doc?" Dick Adams asked.

"The rest may be more fibrous, and the outer skin or covering tougher, but I doubt if the taste will be different. The whole thing is definitely food."

Dick Adams gripped the large blade from which doc had taken the tip. Giving it a quick wrench, he tore off a length to the centre vein about a foot long. Breaking it in half, he gave one piece to Martha and kept the other himself.

The outer covering peeled off quite easily, revealing a near-white, juicy interior. This they ate and found it to be, as the doctor said, fibrous, but with a distinct melon flavour.

"Well, Doc, at worst, this solves the food problem," Dick said, when he had eaten.

"We don't have to worry about the water either. It's a safe bet that the roots of this stuff are being fed from the river."

"Then there ought to be fish in it," Martha said.

"Not necessarily, my dear. Everything depends upon whether some eggs or spawn, survived the great destruction. I doubt it very much. Nothing in the living world could have survived, I can assure you—and only by a freak chance, or miracle, would anything unborn have been saved."

A scream interrupted any further conversation. Molly had wandered away towards the river, and was fifty yards ahead of the remainder, when she saw the terrifying spectacle that made her scream. Big Gus and Lady Pamela, together with Dick Adams pulling Martha along with him, were the first on the scene. She was staring, petrified, into two eyes, not unlike huge crystal balls, which were stuck to a large and pointed shell-covered head. The head itself appeared to be

fitted into an elongated body, supported by six long, shell-covered legs. This was followed by a knife-like tail, also of shell. Whatever it was, it made no attempt to move at the approach of the others.

"The damned thing looks like a mammoth shrimp," Big Gus observed quietly. "That colour's unmistakable."

"Maybe that's what it is," said Dick Adams. "But what an ugly-looking specimen. No wonder you screamed, Molly."

"It scared the wits out of me. I came upon it eating one of these long blades of grass. It just stopped eating and looked at me the way it's doing now," Molly replied, composed again.

"How do you think we should dispose of it?" Doc asked with a touch of sarcasm. "I told you it was foolish to go right back to the Dark Ages."

Dick Adams walked back towards the Wheorld and picked up a boulder weighing about forty pounds. Taking it with him, he went right up to the motionless thing and brought the boulder crashing down on to its head. The long legs collapsed and the tail swished from side to side, cutting down four blades of grass with each vicious slash. Then it was still. The others crowded around whilst Dick Adams pulled at one of the legs. It came away from the body without much effort. Doc Wilson took the limb and examined it.

"We only need boiling water to turn this into a lobster leg big enough to feed the lot of us," was his verdict.

"Lobster?" the padre queried. "It's got no claws!"

"Nevertheless, Paul, if this isn't lobster meat, I'll eat my hat," and, as everyone roared with laughter, he hastily corrected himself: "I'll eat the damned thing myself."

"As I see it, the Wheorld with its atom kitchen, lights and pressure cookers is ours to use, so why not use it? Adams is no longer her captain. She belongs equally to all of us. It's ridiculous to fumble around in the darkness in ignorance as to whether the food we catch is edible or not. Let's find these things out before we leave the Wheorld for good," Slim suggested.

"It would be folly to go back," Dick Adams protested.

"It would be a greater folly not to," replied Doc. "We've everything there for testing and the necessary medical supplies to treat ourselves if we make a mistake. I must agree with Slim."

There followed a chorus of "So do I" from the others and Dick Adams shrugged.

"As you say, I'm no longer the captain," he said resignedly. Martha gave his arm a gentle squeeze and smiled at him. She knew what it cost him in pride to utter those words. He loved the Wheorld, and couldn't bear the thought of the rest of them taking her from him.

Len and Bill picked up the carcase of the thing they had killed and, with the doctor carrying the leg and leading, the three of them made their way back to the Wheorld. Maudie turned to Steve.

"There isn't a pot to take that monstrous thing," she said. "I think I better go back and give them a hand."

"Right, I'll go with you," agreed Steve.

"Scared?" she asked with a giggle.

"No, but I don't trust Len with a woman about."

The remainder broke up into three parties: Dick Adams, Martha, Big Gus and Lady Pamela formed one; Bill Spears and the padre another; whilst the third consisted of Derek, Amy and Molly. Each party set off in different directions for the river. It was Bill Spears who first saw, in a clearing, the bush with the branches six inches thick; but it was the padre who first grasped its orange-like fruit.

"It might look like orange, but it certainly doesn't smell like it," he said disappointedly.

Between them, they collected sixteen, almost stripping one side of the bush. These, they carried back to the ship.

Meanwhile, down at the river, Big Gus nearly trod on a four-foot-long creature with the body of a fish, but moving on land on outsize flappers in much the same way as a seal. He quickly bent to grasp it; but, with one whip of its tail, it plunged past him into the river, to disappear from view. They were still trying to locate it when the familiar cry of a toad caused Dick Adams to leap in the direction from which the sound came.

"There's a feast in them there frogs," he said frivolously; and, after chasing it, he managed to grab it by one of its hind legs—which stretched out to a full eight inches and was three inches across its widest part. Accompanied by Martha, carrying some of the long blades of grass, he took his exhibit back to the Wheorld for testing, along with the other catch.

"What a pity that fish escaped you, Gus," Lady Pamela said, when she and Big Gus were alone.

"It couldn't be described as a fish. It was on land."

"To me, it looked like a salmon. Except for the fins, of course—they were outsized, I must admit."

"I wish we could see it again. I'd soon find out what it is."

"I've caught lots of salmon," Lady Pamela said thoughtfully.

They were having this discussion sitting down, Lady Pamela was holding on to one of Big Gus's hands. Suddenly, she squeezed it hard.

"Don't move!" she whispered excitedly. "It's coming out again."

Slowly, very slowly, Big Gus turned his head. He was just in time to see one of the outsized flappers heaving the long body out of the water. For a moment, the thing lay quite still, as if either exhausted or listening cautiously. Then Big Gus threw himself on it. It writhed and struggled, lashed its powerful tail about and used its fins; but two strong hands had it firmly grasped beneath the gills and, carrying it in this manner, Big Gus and Lady Pamela joined the others in the Wheorld.

The remaining party, Amy, Molly and Derek, just talked. However, it was Amy who did most of the talking and what she said was directed at Derek. She blamed him for pushing Slim on to her. She told him it was all his fault that they hadn't been married when the padre took them to the captain. She said had he spoken up like a man, Dick Adams would have married them. She accused him of acting unmanly, just because he was told to cast off his clothes. Molly stood aside and listened whilst Derek made attempts at excuses, cut short by Amy's tongue. Even a woman's tongue has its limits, however. When Amy's was still, Molly turned to Derek and asked him to come along with her. Derek gladly accepted the invitation and, by the time they reached the Wheorld, he was looking forward to the night when he would be alone with his charming and jolly companion. By comparison, he told himself, Amy was a dead loss. He felt that he was going to have no regrets.

Back in the Wheorld, and in the capable hands of Maudie, the strange catches took the form of food. The mammoth shrimp, to the doctor's delight, proved to have a taste and texture much the same as lobster; whilst the sectioned legs of the huge toad would have whetted the appetite of any connoisseur of such delicacies. The fish-like creature was a strange mixture; the body could quite easily have been passed

off as salmon, yet the flappers cooked up like pieces of skate.

It was the grass that gave greatest scope for inventiveness, though. Maudie cut off a section and baked it in its skin. The result was a delicious vegetable dish. Another section, she boiled and the result was equally delicious. She repeated the processes with the thick skin removed, but not with the same success—the result was a messy, sloppy substance in each case the only difference being that the baked portion swallowed up the fat, whilst that which was boiled swallowed up the water.

The fruit the padre and Bill Spears had collected was impossible to classify under any one name. With a skin the colour and texture of an orange, the fleshy fruit was almost the same as a peach; but, whereas a peach has a stone in its centre, this particular fruit contained a liquid in the same way as does a coconut. Unlike the coconut, however, the liquid tasted bitter and would have been thrown away but for the fact that Doc Wilson pronounced it not only fit for human consumption, but as an aid to health. The flesh itself was sweet and firm; everyone enjoyed the taste of it.

"Well, folks, now that we know enough to keep ourselves alive and fairly well fed, I'm quite prepared to fall in with Dick's wish and leave the Wheorld behind in favour of a venture further afield. But I believe it would be showing sound common sense to take with us as much as we can carry that would be of future use to us. I refer to the cooking utensils, my medical supplies and the surgical equipment."

All had enjoyed a well-cooked meal and, without exception, they agreed to the doctor's proposal.

So, once again, the fourteen left the Wheorld. This time, they were each carrying something that would be of use to the community. They reached the river and followed it downstream for many miles, keeping a sharp lookout for any other signs of life. Eventually, they came upon a small clearing. It was about a hundred yards long and thirty yards deep. As they entered it, the sounds of splashing water told them that they had disturbed some kind of life; but they saw nothing to give them a clue as to its identity.

The floor of the clearing was covered in short, normal grass, such as might have been found on any lawn anywhere in the old world. It was soft, springy turf. By common consent, each one feeling tired and hungry, they decided to make it their first bivouac.

After eating the remainder of the food which Maudie had prepared before they set out, they sat around until the short twilight turned to night, when the herd instinct gave place to the desire for privacy. Couples slipped away until only the four unmatched men remained. These sat together and talked until well into the warm night.

Chapter Fifteen

RELUCTANT to leave the clearing, they decided to make it the hub of the world's only human inhabitants. There was food and water in plenty and, although the former left much to be desired in the way of variety, it was hoped that extensive hunting might provide other strange, or even normal, creatures with which to improve the diet. The first few days, however, were spent settling in: Trench fires and a field oven were erected; sanitation taken care of; sleeping quarters and an extensive lean-to built.

The giant grass—which, as far as could be ascertained from their position, stretched for many miles—was an invaluable utility medium. As grown, it provided food for the huge lobster-like creature as well as for themselves. When dried, after being interlaced to size and shape, it provided excellent building material, drying out and setting as hard as wood under the hot sun. The thick centre stalks, when bound together by the thinner veins, became excellent and sturdy posts.

Similarly, the thick branches of the bush producing the orange-like fruit were put to use. The straight branches made useful spears, when sharpened, and the remainder was used as fuel. Not indiscriminately, however; although there ap-

peared to be a super-abundance of these bushes growing along the river banks, careful pruning was carried out for the provision of the fuel.

It was in these early days that Dick Adams persuaded the remainder to fall in with his wishes and destroy anything that might lead to scientific discovery in the Wheorld. He asked to be appointed to the task himself and, once this had been agreed, he returned to do it, accompanied by Paul Brotherton. Everything capable of being stripped, they took out of the ship and buried. The sectioned walls of the compartment rooms, together with their furniture, they dumped in the river to rot. The viewer, the recorder, and all the radio equipment, were burned to ashes; the instrument room was turned into a shambles and then set on fire. The helicopter engines were dismantled as far as possible and scattered far and wide. When nothing remained that could show the way to progress, Dick Adams gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"Well, Paul, now that that's finished, I feel as if I've done a good deed for future mankind. By the time the next generation is old enough to understand, and should it travel this way, it will turn an inquisitive eye on this old wreck. But it won't be able to put together one single piece of equipment inside of it. When the generation after that is grown, I fancy age and the elements will have taken their toll of the mighty shell," he added.

"What a pity man should have progressed so far. This Utopia that is ours might have been every man's, along with the product of his genius. But he deliberately advanced to destruction. From the remote Dark Ages to the final civilization, his greatest contribution to advancement was in the improvement of his weapons of war. If only that effort could have been employed in strengthening faith in his neighbours, to kill suspicion, to create harmony and to cure ills, the old world would have gone on for ever, a happy place to live in," Paul Brotherton philosophized.

Leaving the Wheorld, they ventured as far as the edge of the forest, in the hope that they might be able to take back to the clearing evidence of other life. They found none though, not even an insect. After the search, they went down to the river. Paul Brotherton sat by a sixteen-foot-high, smooth-barked tree. As he talked to his companion, he dug a sharp, dagger-shaped knife into it and carved his initials, 'P.E.B.'

"Takes me back to the old university days," he said wistfully. "I used to sit by a tree, on the lawn in front of an old pub, and, as I gazed at the river winding its leisurely way to the sea, I'd carve my initials just as I am doing now."

Dick Adams took up the story:

"Yes, and the tame rabbits played at one's feet, the pigeons cooed in the tree one worked on and the coot darted across the river, uttering that peculiar cry of theirs. When one's gaze wandered to the opposite bank, the statuesque heron would be in his place, poised on one leg on the top of that skeleton of a tree that never grew any leaves. The publican's charming daughter would pick up the bunnies and cuddle them. She'd tell one all about them, their names, when they were born, how she knew each one of them, just as a young girl will."

"And she'd ask when you were finished carving, 'What do those initials stand for?' and it was the practice to tell her," the padre added.

"Yes, Paul, it was a delightful, innocent world she lived in. But it crashed about her long before yours and mine did. The light went out as far as she was concerned very soon in her young life. When, in fact, a young man destined to take Holy Orders betrayed her, allowing her to be sacrificed to save himself. Her father, the old publican, was a very dear friend of mine. He worshipped his daughter. Not long before he died, he showed me the initials in that old tree, carved by the man who had caused his heart to break."

"And they were?" asked Paul Brotherton, but Dick Adams did not answer immediately. He was watching with what ease and to what depth the padre was carving into the wood of the tree.

"By jove, Paul!" he exclaimed. "That wood's as soft as balsa. Let's try and cut the tree down."

In a very short time, using knives little bigger than Scout's knives, they had cut right through to the hard core of the tree; but this was only a few inches thick. A few deep cuts, together with the combined strength of the two men, and the trunk snapped as a branch might under a heavy weight. Cutting away the foliage and the umbrella-shaped top, they lifted it with ease and placed it by the water's edge; where, for the rest of the day, they worked on it, shaping it into a canoe. When it was finished, Dick Adams surveyed it with pride.

"Well, Paul, as in that other beginning, man progresses. To what end this time, I wonder?"

"To the beginning again and on to destruction," Paul Brotherton replied ambiguously. But his companion didn't ask for an explanation. He thought, perhaps Paul meant that man has to destroy to move forward, and he will go on doing it until in the end, he destroys everything, including himself; then, through the agency of another Adam and Eve, the cycle is repeated all over again.

They had arrived back at the clearing in their canoe and were sitting at the upstream end—where Dick and Martha's living-quarters were built—when Paul Brotherton mentioned the subject of the publican's daughter again.

"You didn't tell me what those initials were," he said quietly.

"I didn't think it would be necessary, Paul. They were 'P.E.B.'—yours," his companion replied.

"Yes, they would be. But, since the old publican obviously talked I'm rather surprised my sinful episode didn't become public knowledge."

"Not all the people in the old world had the tongue of a Mrs. Mullins, Paul."

"No, thank God!"

Neither man had heard Martha's silent approach, and she could not help overhearing their conversation. Despite this, she burst in gaily upon them, running the last few yards to give the impression that she had come some distance whilst they were talking.

"Who's for the Mayflower? First stop the new world!" she cried when she saw the canoe.

The two men laughed. Paul Brotherton was soon serious again, however.

"It will come to that, I suppose. After a few generations, this area will be without food, without room and without tolerance. Man will look farther afield, and others will oppose him. They will fight, and the defeated who are still left alive will flee. The hunt for food will cause rivalry. Some will lay claim to areas of food-producing land just to prevent others from getting it. They will be accused of depriving man of his right to share God's earth. Then each to arms and on to hatred and to bloodshed. On to nations and to wars and to empires and bondage. On to the inevitable destruction again."

"With our laws, it cannot happen that way, Paul. That's why we made them," Adams replied.

"You are wrong, Dick. Jealousy, hatred and temper among other things, are born of man's instinct. Their mere omission from a vocabulary, or threats of punishment for showing them, neither prevent their birth, nor guarantee their extinction," said Martha.

"Maybe not. But, if everyone who shows them is dealt with as drastically as I've suggested, then, by this process of elimination, the world will eventually be inhabited only by good-tempered, and good-natured people. It has always been held that evil is born of the root and spreads in the branches. Cut out the roots to prevent the growth and evil *must* die," Dick Adams answered.

"If that contention is correct, then we fourteen are the least fitted to be the roots of the new world," Paul Brotherton said quietly.

"There is an old saying, Paul. Think no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. If practised, evil will die even in us."

"We'd have to be a family of Rip Van Winkles, darling. With no memory of what's gone before when we woke up," Martha said.

"Not necessarily so," Dick replied. "Don't forget, our children will be under the guidance of one man only. So far as they are concerned, he will be their root. His thoughts, his actions, his teaching, alone will influence them. Should the effect of our evil linger, we can only hope that it will become weaker in succeeding generations until it eventually disappears altogether."

"I'd like to think that you were right. What a wonderful world this would be to live in fifty thousand years hence," was Paul Brotherton's comment.

"It would indeed," the other replied. Then he changed the subject: "We had better go and hand over the canoe."

Chapter Sixteen

WHEN the necessary amenities had been provided in the clearing, a party set out to explore the river in search of other life. However, although they found plenty of the strange fish that came out of the water to rest, and apparently to breathe, and of the giant lobster-like creature which appeared to live wholly on the long grass, together with the huge toads—whose food they could never determine since there didn't seem to be any other life and they could never catch them in the actual act of eating—the first few days of hunting produced nothing else.

Then came the day when a shout from Big Gus brought Dick Adams and Bill Spears running to the riverside. They reached it just in time to see the big man dive into the water and, with powerful strokes, head for mid-stream. They watched him dive beneath the surface. After what seemed to be an alarming time for a man to remain submerged, he reappeared again and headed for the bank, dragging something with him.

"Here, catch!" he shouted. With a backward swing of one of his arms he flung an object through the air in the direction of the watchers. Dick Adams caught this, but it was so surprisingly large and heavy that he almost dropped it.

"In God's name, what is it?" he gasped; but, even as he spoke, a great bill snapped across his forearm and he dropped the thing. He immediately dived on to it and crushed the bill into the ground. Bill Spears meanwhile manoeuvred himself into a position to be able to stand on its neck. Then they were joined by Big Gus.

"Well gents, there you have it—the living definition of a well-plucked duck," he said with a laugh.

"Duck be damned, it's bigger than a swan—and it's featherless," Dick replied.

"I know, and it weighs about thirty pounds. I saw it swimming along there under water—that's when I shouted. God alone knows what it is. It fought like hell when I tried to

catch it. That bloody bill's like a clamp and the webbed feet have a kick in them like a mule. I went for its neck in the end and that took some holding, believe me."

"I do," said Dick Adams, with a wry smile.

"It's wriggling like a blooming snake," Bill complained.

Big Gus took one of the spears and stabbed the thing behind the head. The result was a violent flapping of the featherless wings; and, when the spear was withdrawn, a flow of dark, red blood followed it from the wound. Another stab and both Dick Adams and Bill Spears stood aside.

"I believe you're right, Gus. Looks exactly like a giant licked duck."

"But ducks don't live under water," said Bill.

"Lobsters don't live on grass. And fish don't come out of the water to breathe," was Big Gus's reply.

"Everything seems to be of such outsize proportions," Dick Adams commented with a puzzled frown.

"I'm not grumbling. I sincerely hope that there are plenty more of these." Big Gus pointed at the carcass. "The bigger, the better. I'm partial to a juicy roast duck."

With their catch, they paddled the canoe back to the clearing. Although they followed the river upstream for about twenty miles, they saw no more of the strange creatures. Doc Wilson was encouraging. After telling them that it was definitely some kind of a duck, he said an examination of its interior showed it to be a laying bird, and it was fertilized. That meant there must be male equivalents where the female came from; and, most probably, eggs, large eggs with giant yellow yolks. The flesh was delicious and it was unanimously agreed that a hunt for more must be made.

The hunters returned to the scene of the first catch. This time, Len Kelly accompanied them. He was a very good swimmer, being reputed to have held several underwater championships, both for time submerged and distance covered. In a search for the eggs of this underwater bird, it was considered he would be invaluable to the party.

For two days they searched a mile stretch of the river, downstream from the spot where Big Gus had made his catch. Bill Spears and Dick Adams carefully examined every inch of the two banks, while Len Kelly and Big Gus swam along opposite sides of the river bed, but without results. Then, on the morning of the third day, after several dives each by Big Gus on the one side and Len on the other, Len

went down again whilst Gus was taking a breather.

"He's a glutton for punishment," Dick Adams observed as Len dived.

"Never seems to get out of breath," Big Gus replied. "Each time I go down, the resistance of my lungs becomes weaker and weaker. I need a good breather this time, and I'm having one."

"I don't blame you. You're still panting."

They chatted about the prospects of finding further duck, of the likely places in which to look for the eggs and the size and shaped that the eggs might be, if found. It was Bill Spears who brought them back with a jerk to Len.

"Hey! You two!" he called from the opposite bank. "Len hasn't come up yet. He's been down there a heck of a time."

Big Gus dived away and swam to the opposite side. Then he, too, disappeared from the view of the other two. However, he had to surface twice before finally locating Len Kelly. Len was dead, having been prevented from drifting downstream by a sharp cluster of bone-like objects sticking out of the river bed as if they were growing from there in the form of a bush. The features were unrecognizable as Len's, Noseless, eyeless, a great gaping hole in one cheek, and the throat and shoulder terribly lacerated, the body was not a pretty sight. A weaker man might have panicked, but Big Gus was only roused to a reckless fury. Gripping the corpse by the legs he pulled it clear. He was on the point of making for the surface with it, when, too late, he saw the giant creature coming at him.

In that first moment of recognition, a number of thoughts passed through his mind in rapid succession: He must have air very soon; his chest was aching; his ears were ringing; and his heart was throbbing violently. This vicious-looking counterpart of the featherless duck he had caught earlier must have attacked Len at just such a critical stage of his underwater search, just when he was ready to rise—otherwise Len would have mastered it. He must also have been taken by surprise, attacked when his attention was fixed upon something else. On what else would his attention be fixed that would draw the vicious attack of this creature coming at him, with webbed feet spread and great bill snapping? The eggs! Len must have found the eggs. They must be somewhere close at hand.

The next few seconds saw Big Gus fighting for his life.

When the great bill was only inches from his face, he had to let Len's body go in order to defend himself. Jerking his head quickly to one side, his hand shot out towards the bill just as it snapped shut. By the luckiest chance he managed to seize it. With great presence of mind, he grasped the monster by the neck with his other hand. By that time, however, the giant webbed feet were pressing into him and pushing him down towards the river bed again. He felt his back touch the slimy silt, his lungs felt as if they must burst, his arms ached and seemed as heavy as lumps of lead. Had it not been for the fury that raged within him, he must surely have succumbed.

However, Big Gus Hardwicke was intent only upon murder; this thing had killed Len Kelly and it was not going to get away with it. He lashed out savagely with his legs and—although he could feel the drag as the creature curved its wings and used them as a brake against the water—he rose steadily until his head broke the surface and he gave a gasp of relief. From that moment, it is doubtful if an alligator could have beaten him. Letting the bill go free, he squeezed the neck hard with his other hand and with several overarm swings, he smashed the great creature on the surface of the water. Legs, wings, body and head writhed and struggled; but Big Gus held that neck in a death grip and, as if in acceptance of defeat, all resistance on the creature's part ceased.

Meanwhile, Dick Adams was manœuvring the canoe towards the spot. When he reached it, Big Gus handed over the apparently lifeless thing to him. Then he lay on his back and floated, inhaling welcome lungfuls of fresh air. However—as the fast running current showed signs of carrying him too far away from his starting point—he swam to the bank and lay for a few minutes until the feeling of exhaustion had passed. He joined the others just in time to see Dick stabbing the giant water duck in the back of the head.

"The damned thing wasn't dead," Dick said with disgust, "gave me quite a time just before I landed it. What happened to Len?"

"It gave him quite a time, too. Took off his nose, put out his eyes, holed his cheek and neck. Poor devil, he couldn't have had a chance with it," Big Gus replied.

"But where is he?"

"I should imagine he's well on his way to the sea by now, Bill." Big Gus went on to describe how he had located Len's body.

"Poor old Len!" Bill said, with feeling. "He only asked for one thing in this new world of ours—and even that he was denied, and now can never have."

"What was that?" asked Dick.

"Molly Jordan. She kept on putting him off, but he told me she'd made him a promise—if he came back with an egg."

"There was every chance he would have done," said Big Gus. "I'm taking a look in that thing that was stopping his body from drifting downstream—there may be some there."

"I'll come with you, and—just in case the male bird, or whatever it was, is in the vicinity—we'll take our prodders along. I've a feeling that I wouldn't like to meet one of those devils unarmed," Dick Adams commented.

Side-by-side, they swam to the bottom and Big Gus guided the way to the spot. At first they saw nothing; but, when Dick gripped one of the bony stems and pulled, the slight movement showed up something slightly paler than the silt. Putting his head inside, he pulled out a huge egg. Big Gus dipped his hand in, too, and he also pulled one out. There were more in there, and throwing caution—in the shape of his prodder—to the current, he collected another. His companion followed his example and, together, they made for the surface with their invaluable collection.

"What do you make of that nest?" Big Gus asked when the eggs were safely deposited at their feet.

"I think it's a skeleton of a breastbone and ribs, buried there by these creatures to use as a laying place—or, perhaps, uncovered when the river cut its way to the sea."

"Skeleton of what?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Dick said with a laugh. "After all, that thing may have been buried beneath the seabed itself for several thousand years before this strip of land was brought back to the surface. A dinosaur could be a recent discovery by comparison. But, whatever it is, you'd be well advised to leave it alone. To disturb it might well result in frightening these creatures away. It appears to me to be a common laying place."

"You're probably right—I reckon there's at least another eight eggs inside it."

"That's at least eight more days of delicious food—with the prospect of many more to come. Shall we call it a day and take these back to Doc?"

Triumphant, though sad at the loss of their companion, they loaded the giant duck and the four dark grey eggs into the canoe and headed back towards the clearing. There was none to mourn the passing of Len, and news of his death was accepted philosophically. If Molly had any qualms about it, she failed to show them. Big Gus was careful not to mention that the egg hunt had been responsible for Len's death, or that he himself had been attacked. He didn't want to alarm Lady Pamela. All the same, the story did reach her ears via Martha and—although she felt nothing but pride in Big Gus—she implored him not to take such a risk again.

Doc Wilson was delighted with the huge eggs, each measuring four inches in diameter and six in length. He asked for a description of the place where they had been discovered. Then, with the aid of the branches from the fruit-bearing bush, he constructed a crate. This he placed in the river, its bottom awash with silt and two of the eggs lying in it. The other two he covered with long grass, keeping it damped with river water. Every day, he examined them.

On the morning of the twelfth day after their recovery from the original nest, one of the two eggs in the grass broke, an ugly large head popping out of it. Doc quickly helped to break the remainder of the tough shell, revealing the scrawny body of its inmate—which collapsed, as if exhausted, as soon as it was freed. Within an hour of this happening, the two shells in the submerged crate burst open, producing two more youngsters. After a few minutes, these two beneath the surface of the water stretched themselves out like fish and slid forward a few inches.

Doc broke up some pieces of the long grass into tiny fragments and dropped them into the crate. The inmates swallowed them voraciously. He repeated this for the one hatched on land, but it was incapable of movement, so he opened its bill and pushed the pieces to the back of it. After a few attempts, a little at a time, he again placed some in front of it and, to his satisfaction and delight, it made an attempt to pick them up itself. After being taught with the aid of Doc's hand, the fourth soon followed the example of the first and was feeding itself.

Experimenting still further, Doc took the crate out of the water and allowed its inmates to lie exposed in the sun. For five minutes they flapped their featherless wings as a fish

would its fins, wriggling as a fish does when taken out of the water. Then one of them lay quite still.

Doc picked this up and tried to revive it by putting it back in the water, but it was dead. He was about to put the other one back, still inside the crate, when, to his amazement, it adopted an upright position and waddled across its prison. He took it from the crate and placed it with the other two.

There was a marked difference in them. The first hatched showed signs of a down-like covering; the one from the crate had a covering of skin, not unlike a fish; whilst the last hatched was as yet uncovered and had a pale grey colour.

An enclosure was quickly erected for Doc's treasures and in a very short time, he was the proud possessor of three giant young ducklings, feather-covered as ducklings, feather-covered as ducklings should be. They thrived on the same foods as their human owners and grew into massive birds. Doc made one more interesting discovery, and that was that one of the three was a drake. With luck, they had the nucleus of a feathered race in the world . . . and with the doctor's devoted attention, the luck held.

Chapter Seventeen

AS time passed, it became increasingly obvious to everyone that Dick Adams and Martha were as man and wife, and that they were extremely happy and very fond of each other. In this respect, they had much in common with Big Gus and Lady Pamela; and with Steve and Maudie. Everything was not as serenely quiet and peaceful with the other two pairs, however. Molly was, as ever, high-spirited and a flirt. The younger, more serious-minded Derek longed secretly for Amy—even though in his heart he felt he would never be able to forgive her for having chosen, and lived with, Slim.

He tried to console himself with the thought that Molly loved him. Although, when he caught her in the act of trying to encourage Paul Brotherton, and, later, Doc, he was not so sure. He watched both men very suspiciously after he heard Molly tell them that they ought to drop in and keep her com-

pany when feeling 'a wee bit lonely'. Particularly as the invitation was accompanied by her tantalizing wink and a girlish laugh. However, either the two men had no wish to take advantage of the offer—or they had a better understanding of Molly's jocular comments than had Derek—because they kept away from her, except when in the company of others.

This did not quiet Derek's fears that Molly wanted somebody else. He began to brood, and to imagine all sorts of things, when he was away hunting for food. It was on one of these expeditions that he learned that all was not well between Slim and Amy.

"You should have heard him going for her," Bill Spears said.

"What was the cause of it?"

"You were. Somehow, you'd cropped up in the conversation. She was telling him what nice folks you had, and what a lovely girl your sister was. She happened to say that she'd stayed a few days at your place, and that she'd had a smashing time.

Bill paused.

"Yes?" Derek queried expectantly, eagerly.

"Well, he turned on her and told her he'd cut her heart out if she ever mentioned you again. He was sick to death of her harping about you. He said she had no right to throw herself at him after giving everything that mattered of herself to you."

"The dirty swine!" Derek growled. "I never took advantage of her."

"That's what she told him. But he didn't believe it possible, her having stayed at your house. He said, if he'd known about it before, he'd have sent her packing right at the start. He told her he'd have gone for Lady Pamela. That maddened Amy. She said she wished you'd been a bit more forceful—you would have appreciated the fruits of an innocent woman and you've deserved them."

"Strange people, women. She turned me down flat for him. I thought she didn't want me," Derek murmured.

"She wants you all right. I've noticed the sweet way she smiles at you when you happen to talk to her. Only, with you being all eyes for her, you don't see the way Slim looks at you like he'd fancy strangling you."

"How could I go to her now, Bill? There's enough trouble

between them as it is. And there's Molly to think about."

"Oh, Molly's a sport. You don't have to worry about her. She's not the jealous type—and I know you're not. That's why I don't mind telling you she's the only one that's given me any consideration."

"You!" gasped Derek, surprised.

"Sure, nothing wrong in that," Bill replied candidly, and Derek had no answer.

Nevertheless, he promised himself that, on his return, he would act within the law in so far as his desire for Amy was concerned—and to hell with Slim! If he needed any further strengthening in this resolve, Bill Spears's next words provided it.

"Slim's enjoyed himself, too, when you've been away. Molly's type just couldn't resist him. He's such a cheerful, full-of-fun son of a gun, with all the women except his own. She's the one he's jealous of all the time. He's a queer cuss really."

"How about the other women?"

"Oh, they're all right. They take a joke and it ends there. I can tell you this: Nobody's going to interfere in Martha's love affair whilst she's got ruddy Dick Adams. And, knowing Big Gus, law or no law, it's a bit too risky saying anything out of place to the Countess. I don't know about Maudie yet."

"How about Doc and the Padre? They don't appear to trouble at all, do they?" asked Derek—but he knew he was only fishing for evidence of further unfaithfulness on Molly's part.

"They're both sworn thingmebobins—what the hell's the word again?" Bill gave up searching his mind for the word he wanted and went on. "They wanted me to take an oath and be one, but I told them not me. So long as there's a chance of me outliving some of the other chaps, I'd rather live in hope than swear against it."

"Celibates," suggested Derek.

"That's it. That's what they are. Daft giving up as easy as that," Bill replied with feeling.

Derek passed no further comment. However, he made a secret vow: Somebody had done him wrong and, when it was all sorted out in his mind, he was going to make that somebody pay. Back in the clearing, he waited for Slim's turn to go off for food. He did not have long to wait. His

opportunity came the day after his own return, when Slim, together with Dick Adams and Steve, went off for two days. From the time of their departure, he watched Amy's every move.

In the late afternoon he saw her go towards the river and disappear in the long grass at the upstream end of the clearing. She had gone to bathe. She would dive into the river and be carried downstream beyond the clearing to a point where the bank jutted out almost to midstream. He would meet her there.

Amy saw him waiting for her and, to say the least of it, she was pleasantly surprised. She accepted his proffered hand and clambered to the bank. In the next instant, she was being violently embraced.

"You always did belong to me, and mine you're going to be from now on," Derek said determinedly. Then he kissed her hard.

Amy was genuinely thrilled. This was the Derek she had known before they went up in the Wheorld. Before he had lost that quality of manliness she had so much admired in him. She didn't resist.

"From now on, Slim's out," he said roughly.

She laughed. Then a thought occurred to her.

"I'm having a baby, Derek darling," she said coyly.

His reaction was to become immediately gentle and apologetic.

"I'm sorry, my love. I wouldn't hurt you for the world," he whispered, stroking her gently, too gently—and Amy knew then that she didn't want him any more. She wanted only her Slim—jealous, cruel, hard and thoughtless Slim. Slim, who was so desirable to other women and yet so insanely jealous of her. Slim the fool, that is who she wanted, not this slobbering makeshift for a man.

"You'd better leave me alone, Derek. I must stay with Slim now—it's his baby," she said quietly.

Derek fawned over her until she thought she must scream; but all things come to an end, and, although she promised that she would see him at the same spot on the following afternoon, she was careful not to go bathing that day. She spent the evening and night in the company of Martha and Maudie. Frustrated and bewildered, Derek watched Molly's every move.

Meanwhile, Bill Spears, who had no love for Amy—she

had treated his advances with contempt—was telling Slim what he had seen on the afternoon of the latter's departure.

"Wouldn't surprise me if that kid she's having wasn't yours at all. If it could happen once, it could have happened before. You know she was mad on him up there," Bill said solemnly, pointing up at the sky.

Slim thought Bill was a louse; but, instead of telling him so, he went straight home to Amy and chastised her. He would have hit her again, had not her screams brought Paul Brotherton running.

"If I ever catch you doing that again, I'll see that you get what you deserve. You know that fighting is forbidden, and you know the penalty for breaking the law," he said severely, after dragging Slim away from Amy.

"To hell with you and the law!" snarled Slim. "No woman's going to make a fool of me."

The padre looked at him with disgust.

"Slim, you're no better than you could be. There's already one poor woman whose soul was tortured and tormented on this earth by your foul and filthy accusations. You're not going to do it to another. Even if you were a man of sound morals, a one-woman man devoting his life to a woman who went astray, you'd have no right to take the law into your own hands. But you are not, Slim. You're a brute!"

Slim had calmed down by the time the padre finished. The words stung him.

"Okay, Padre. Don't rub it in. It won't happen again. But, listen—why don't we do something about getting these stupid laws amended? If we knew we were married, and not open to be cast off at any time, there wouldn't be cause for all this trouble. It's against the dictates of religion to carry on the way we are doing."

"It's against the dictates of *my* religion, Slim, but not yours. You turned away from yours to accept what Adams had to offer. I don't blame Dick for it. He only made the laws—you others passed them."

"That's beside the point. It doesn't alter the fact that they need amending."

"I agree with you."

"Good. Then let's bring it up at the next meal, and see if we can get something settled."

The padre thought that this was an excellent idea. It had, in fact, been a thorn in his side, this free love—with all its

attendant risks—that passed for marriage. As the next batch of men to go on the never-ending hunt for food were not due to leave until the following day, all were present when he raised the question. Four of the women were delighted with the idea. Only Molly objected.

"As I understand it, this particular law was introduced because trouble was envisaged if we five women were not left free to the nine men. Dick Adams thought he was being fair to all and, when we women discussed it, before casting our votes, we thought so, too. I still believe he is, so let us go on being unselfish," she suggested.

"What happens to me if they don't?" Bill Spears asked with some concern.

Doc stood up to answer.

"Ladies and gentlemen, so far as we are concerned—I know I speak for Paul—we are not interested in disturbing the marital relations that have developed between you. It occurs in every community that some are more fortunate than others. In this one, Bill will just have to be one of the unfortunates. If the remainder of the men will think it over and give a decision, we should, I think, draw up a marriage law and pass it when next we are all together. That should be this day week."

"There's nothing to think over," said Big Gus, and Lady Pamela squeezed him gently by the arm.

"It suits me," said Steve.

"And me," Slim added.

Dick Adams heaved a sigh of relief. With all his heart, he loved Martha. He wanted her, and her only, to be the mother of his children. But his mind went back to the long days in the Wheorld, when he had pondered this question of marriage. Molly was right; at the expense of Derek and Amy, he had tried to be fair to a majority. It was a pity he had not let the pair be married. He was glad a vote was not required of him. Nine had agreed and, now, there were only thirteen. He wondered how Len Kelly would have voted.

"Aren't you voting for the amendment, darling?" Martha asked, fear gripping her heart.

"Of course, sweetheart. But they already have a majority, and mine isn't required," he replied.

Martha closed her eyes and offered up a silent prayer in thanksgiving for the love of this great man who was hers.

Meanwhile, bitterness, jealousy and anger were eating into

Derek. He saw Amy as a bad woman, Molly as something unspeakably worse. He knew now that he could never hope to replace Slim in his former sweetheart's affections, and that had the marriage law been allowed in the beginning he would have been happily married, he would never have known Molly as he knew her now, nor Slim that lovely, that only girl, Amy. To think that Dick Adams alone had brought him all this misery—needlessly, wantonly throwing away the happiness of two people; two people who had meant all the world to each other.

Derek clenched his fists and stared moodily at the pile of food in front of him. It was still untouched when, with the others, he withdrew. Consumed with hatred, self-pity and a burning desire for revenge, he had no appetite.

Chapter Eighteen

IT was five days after the vote had been cast for the reintroduction of the marriage law when Dick Adams was found against that part of the river bank where Derek had met Amy. It was in the early morning and he was quite dead. Nor was he a pretty sight. Strangled people never are, and he had been strangled. It did not require the services of an experienced detective to reconstruct the crime; the evidence was there for all to see.

He and Martha lived at the upstream end of the clearing. He was an early riser. Before the grey had turned to sunlight he would have had his morning swim, and, as the self-appointed morning caller, would have awakened those due to go out on the hunt. The morning of his death was no exception. He had gone to the river bank and had there been strangled, his body being dragged to and pushed into the river. Either by accident or design of the killer, it had lodged where it was found four hours later, a few minutes before the communal breakfast time. So much was there for everyone to see—but who had done it, and why?

Martha raised the alarm. She arose without the usual shake

and the feel of his strong lips pressing against hers. There was no welcoming, flattering voice to bring her from slumberland. "Come on, beautiful! It's the dawn of another day," that was his usual greeting. Her world was empty—where was Dick? Why had she dared to awake without him as part of the day? Ever since that first memorable morning when she had roused him and, startled, he had leaped to his feet to tell her to go to sleep again, she had felt an undying faith in his strength. She had relied upon him for her every want, and it had been provided—even to the desire for him to wake her from her slumbers. Life with him was a wonderful dream, a dream she hoped would never end.

"Dick, Dick!" she called, but there was no reply.

Something was wrong. Something *must* be wrong. Dick would never allow her to awake and have to call him. He would know that she would worry, and, on no account, would he have her worried. Cold fear gripped her heart and chilled her blood. She raced along to find Doc; together, they collected Paul Brotherton and began their search. It was Paul who suggested starting at Dick's first movements. That was how they came upon the trampled grass and the evidence of the dragged body. However, Martha just could not, and would not, believe that her man had met with a fatal accident.

Something was wrong, yes, he was not with her, but surely no serious harm could come to him? He was almost a superman. Yet why had she called the doctor? Why conduct a search? Why hadn't the search revealed his whereabouts? Martha felt suddenly faint and Paul Brotherton's arm supported her as she slipped away into unconsciousness.

She was not present when the body was found, and it was only after considerable persuasion that Doc reluctantly allowed her to see it. Contrary to expectations, she did not faint again. She looked with horror at the terribly distorted features for a long time. Then her face set hard, her eyes fixed, staring down at him.

"Whoever, or whatever, did this to you is going to die. By my own hand, my darling," she said. Then she turned away, and her frame shook with heavy sobs.

The padre tried to comfort her, but she told him to go away and leave her alone.

"You can best help me now by finding out who, or what, killed him." Scarcely above a whisper, she added, "If it was

a human, I want to know why. For that information, I will be grateful."

The only other men in the camp, Big Gus and Slim, both realized the implication when Doc told them of the recovery of the body from the river. Without being asked, they informed him that, unless they were going out on a hunt in the early hours, they slept until about half an hour before breakfast time. Each man confirmed that he had been awakened by his mate. Lady Pamela and Amy corroborated this. Derek, Steve and Bill Spears had set out with the coming of the dawn in their search for more meat.

Molly and Maudie volunteered the information that their menfolk had awakened, had kissed them farewell and then gone. The time? They weren't sure—both had fallen asleep again almost immediately after their partners had left—but the light of dawn was in the sky. Paul Brotherton—himself an early riser—said he had heard Bill Spears humming a tune and Steve and him talking in low tones as the dawn was breaking.

Doc appointed himself criminal investigator and no one offered any objection. He sifted the evidence, further questioned when in doubt, and arrived at an analysis that might have been a credit to the infinitely better equipped police forces of the world in which he had been born. The women, he concluded, must, for the present, be considered innocent. Unless their menfolk disturbed them, they slept soundly through, until long after the time at which Dick Adams met his death. Disturbed at approximately that time, they simply turned over and went to sleep again.

Supposing that were not, in fact, true? Then Maudie and Molly would be awake before the first light of dawn. So would their menfolk though. It is unlikely, since both lived well downstream of Martha and Dick, that, unobserved, either could have reached the spot where the murdered man had met his death. Lady Pamela and Amy both confirmed that the waking of Big Gus and Slim was sufficient to disturb them; and neither had been disturbed, but had slept on until the normal time.

Had either Big Gus or Slim strangled Dick, they would not only have risked discovery by the three men due to go out hunting; but they would also have had to risk waking their partners if—in the unlikely event of their getting away from them in the first place—they returned, as they would

have to do to remove suspicion from themselves. For the same reasons, Lady Pamela and Amy must be excluded from suspicion.

The men on the hunt were all presumably roused by Dick Adams. When the last was called, there would be three people able to see anyone returning with him to the spot where he was murdered. If, however, he only called one, and that one, for reasons best known to himself, persuaded him to go back practically to Martha's feet and there murdered him, then he would have to return to rouse the other two men. In which case, their evidence would prove his guilt. That, however, would have to wait till the return of the food-hunters.

Paul Brotherton could be ruled out, if Bill and Steve confirmed talking in low tones within his hearing; and if Bill agreed to having hummed the tune which the padre had heard. As for himself, there were no witnesses, but he had only been awake for a bare half an hour when Martha came to him. By that time, Dick must have been dead for at least three hours. Again, why should he want to kill a friend? And what motive could have driven one of the others to kill him? Dick had not once interfered in anything by assuming an authority to which he was not entitled; nor had he either flirted with, or forced his attention upon, any of the other women. He had lived quietly, apparently very happily, with Martha. Together they were respected and loved by the whole community, or so Doc had thought.

Was he murdered? The mark was there of the thing that had strangled him, something not much thicker than a piece of string, or slightly thinner than an ordinary lead pencil. A serpent, or reptile? Possible; but this was improbable, since none had been previously seen. Doc gave it up until the men returned from the hunt.

When they did return—with a bag of six river eggs, two of the giant 'shrimps' and an enormous duck with a four foot wing span—Doc, by common agreement with the remainder, was the first to interrogate them concerning their movements on the morning of their departure.

Derek said he was called by Dick Adams and went straight to the river to bathe. He returned after about ten minutes and passed Steve and Bill making their way towards the river to bathe. He returned after about ten minutes and passed Steve and Bill making their way towards the river.

He went directly to Molly and, after waking her, told her that he was going. He saw Steve and Bill return from bathing. He heard Steve pass some jocular comment about Bill humming a tune. It was to the effect that the community would wake to something more doleful than the Dead March if Bill didn't shut up. Bill ceased immediately and they talked in undertones, or Steve and Bill did. He just listened.

Steve said Dick roused him and they chatted for a few minutes. Then together they went across to wake Bill. Their caller bid them happy hunting and left them. They went off to bathe. They passed Derek, who was returning from the river. They returned after being in the water for about five minutes and saw Derek standing by Molly's place. He joined them. He agreed that Bill had been humming a tune and they joked in low tones about the sound of it.

Bill said Dick woke him up. From that point, onwards, his story was a complete corroboration of Steve's.

Molly confirmed that Derek had awakened her to say farewell after he came back from the river.

So far as Doc could see, there wasn't a loophole anywhere. In one sense, he was disappointed; but he was thrilled at the prospect of there being other life about, even if it was in the form of choker snakes, or some such thing.

Martha was prostrate with grief and was not present when the meeting to pass the marriage law was duly convened. Subsequently, the padre married Steve and Maudie, Big Gus and Lady Pamela, and Slim and Amy. Molly refused to wed Derek until he himself asked her to marry him. Derek refused to ask her until she gave him a promise that she would stop teasing and winking at the other men. Molly knew her limitations, so they remained as before—partners, but unmarried.

When Martha eventually pulled herself together, her great sadness gave her an added, a more ethereal beauty than before. Paul Brotherton could not help but notice it and, at every available opportunity he sought her company. He was not encouraged, however, Martha had one object in life: To find out who, or what, had killed that lovable man to whom she had given her heart, that man the heartbeat of whose child she could feel in her womb. The cost to herself, she refused to consider. Dick Adams must be avenged. With this end in view, she attached herself to Doc. He was the one who had asked all the questions; and he was the one who had all the answers.

An unregretted breaking of his oath, followed by a renouncement of it, and Martha was in possession of as much knowledge as Doc in relation to the death of her former mate. Nor did she regret having paid for the information. If it led to Dick's killer, it would have been obtained cheaply. . . .

Chapter Nineteen

THERE are intervals in a woman's life when it is desirable that she should be partially covered, and even such covering needs support. Molly had been the first to realize this. She kept at hand a plaited cord, made with the aid of a little duck's grease and the veins from the long blades of grass. This, with a plentiful supply of leaves from the fruit-producing bush, served the purpose admirably.

After some time it was practised only by Molly and Steve's wife Maudie. To Doc, the conclusion was obvious—as it must have been to the remainder of the community. However, it must be remembered that Doc's was a purely professional interest.

One morning, Molly ran along to Martha and, after telling her she had lost her cord and had immediate need of one, she asked if, now Martha no longer required one for some months to come, she could borrow hers.

"Yes, you can have it," said Martha. "After all, it was you who made them for all of us. You can make me another."

"Thank you, dear," Molly replied, being greatly relieved at having her immediate requirements met. "I can't for the life of me think where mine could have gone."

"When did you see it last, Molly?"

"To tell you the truth, I haven't bothered about it since the last time I wore it. It's just one of those things one takes for granted. I always keep it handy, hanging on the wall nearest me. But the only time I really notice it is when I want it."

"You are quite certain you wouldn't put it somewhere else?"

"Absolutely, darling. Where else would I keep it? I see you keep yours there, too."

"I suppose it is the only place," Martha replied quietly. Dozens of questions she wanted to ask Molly flashed through her mind, but she remained silent. So far as she could bring herself to believe, one among eleven people had killed her man. Until she knew which that one was, they were all under suspicion. To ask any one of them awkward questions before the time was ripe, could only result in putting them on their guard. That a reptile, or serpent, had killed Dick, she refused to accept. Every one of them had trampled the clearing and wandered through the long grass hundreds of times in the past months, but none had seen other signs of life.

To Martha's way of thinking, it was unlikely there was any. Furthermore, to reach Dick's neck it would have to be of considerable length and out of all proportion to its diameter. Unless, of course, it came upon him when he was lying down, which was most unlikely at that time in the morning. And being so thin, where would the strength come from to drag the body to the water after strangling the life out of it? If it was of the terrific length pictured in her imagination, it would not easily hide itself anywhere other than the bottom of the river—in which case, it could have strangled any one of them on any day, or more likely, it would have been seen by anyone of them when they were bathing.

Doc continued to ply her with his attentions, but she refused to have anything more to do with him. Instead, she gave her whole-hearted attention to Paul Brotherton. She gave him an open invitation to come and keep her company at night. If the padre took advantage of the offer, this was not suspected by the community. All the same, it was certain that, during the day, they were seen a great deal together and spent a long time by the river.

Then, one day, Martha approached Big Gus. She knew he had a reputation second only to that of the late Len Kelly as a swimmer. She asked him, in front of Lady Pamela, if he would do her a favour.

"Just name it, Martha," said Big Gus.

"I want you to search the river bed, near to the place where Dick met his death. I want you to look for one of those things," she said, pointing to the slender cord hanging on the wall.

"But, surely, you can make another, Martha," Lady Pamela suggested.

"I know," Martha replied grimly. "But I want the one that killed Dick Adams."

"So you definitely think he was murdered?" asked Big Gus.

"I am certain of it."

"And the murderer?"

"I hope to know that soon."

"Right. I'll help all I can to bring the killer to justice," Big Gus said sternly.

Diving at a spot indicated by Martha, he went down to the river bed. In much less than a minute he was back. In his hand was the missing cord, Molly's cord.

"This what you want?" he asked and, as Martha nodded, "Couldn't miss it—slung around that spiked stone down there."

"That's what I thought. Thank you, Gus," Martha said, and the two watching her saw the tears come to her eyes as she took the cord in her hands.

"I wonder who did it?" Big Gus said to Lady Pamela later.

"She knows."

"Yes, I think she does," he agreed.

"I feel so terribly sorry for her. She had such a brief spell of happiness. They simply adored each other."

"Like us," replied Big Gus, taking her in his arms and kissing her.

For a long time, Martha just sat in her grass-walled apartment staring at the thing she held in her hands.

"Oh God! Why did he have to kill him?" she cried.

Then she went to Molly. Derek was with her.

"Here, Molly, this is yours," she said in a flat voice.

Molly just stared at the cord which Martha proffered.

"Where did you find it?" Derek asked.

"At the bottom of the river, not far from the place where Dick was strangled with it," Martha replied quietly. Then she walked away and left them.

After that incident, the word soon spread to all the others that Martha was going to accuse someone of murdering Dick Adams. However, none but Big Gus and Lady Pamela could believe she knew who had done it. They discussed it one day over lunch, in the absence of Martha—who had become almost hermit-like in her habits.

"I can't see how anyone could be charged with the crime," said Doc. "Evidence points to the innocence, rather than to the guilt, of any one of us."

"You obviously haven't heard of woman's intuition, John," said Paul Brotherton.

"Intuition is not evidence," was the reply.

"Nor vengeance justice."

"You mean?"

"I mean whoever Martha accuses of the killing is the person who is going to pay the penalty, guilty or not guilty."

"Nobody is going to pay any penalties without trial by the whole community."

Murmurs of approval followed this remark of Doc's.

"Unless a man choose to go to his own executioner," said the padre.

"You're speaking in riddles, Paul."

"The puzzle was never solved that wasn't set," came back the answer, much to Doc's disgust.

The subject would have been dropped there; but Big Gus wanted to know what made Doc so sure that none of them had committed the murder.

"The evidence, Gus, the evidence."

"Ever heard of an alibi?" Big Gus asked.

"Of course, I have. But the only person who'd need one in this case would be the person with a sufficiently strong motive to have wanted to murder Dick."

"Then *I* needed one," Big Gus replied frankly. "I never allowed myself to forget how he knocked me out cold. But it wasn't that made me want to kill him. It was the fact that you told my wife that he'd done it, and the reason why. Every time I gave it a thought, I felt that I could not only have murdered him, but you as well."

Doc ignored Big Gus's last remark.

"At the time Dick met his death, there were at least four people about," he said, "Steve and Bill can account for Derek. Derek can account for them, and the padre has corroborated what the three of them told me. Nothing bigger than an ant could have escaped without being seen by at least one of them. You could scarcely be described as an ant, Gus."

"Nor could the one who murdered Dick Adams. But whoever it was managed to get away unseen. You've got to accept the fact that somebody did kill him—strangled him with

an inanimate object which, without the aid of some living force, would remain harmless for ever."

"Agreed, but *what* living force?"

"How about Derek?" Slim asked surlily.

"What about him? Haven't I said that his evidence has been thoroughly vetted?"

"Maybe you have. But he had the motive. He was about when you say the crime was committed," Slim replied.

"What was the motive?" Doc asked sarcastically.

Before Slim could reply, Derek himself answered.

"He's going to say I wanted to kill him for introducing the no marriage law. But, believe me, if I'd wanted to kill anybody, it wouldn't have been Dick Adams. It would have been him. He took Amy from me."

"But you got the best bargain," said Bill Spears. For which he received a charming smile from Molly, together with a scowl from Amy.

"It's a good thing Amy and I understand each other," laughed Molly, in an attempt to remove the embarrassment.

"That little skunk's only peeved because I'm not as receptive as Molly," Amy said cattily.

"Wouldn't come near you with a barge pole," Bill growled.

"Then why did you try to persuade me?" Amy demanded indignantly, at which Slim leapt on Bill Spears.

Fortunately for the little man, Big Gus got between them and pushed Slim back in his place with ease.

"The way this party's developing, we'll all be potential murderers," he said.

"I'll deal with you later," Slim snarled at Bill.

"You'll do nothing of the kind. It was when he was as entitled to me as you were that he asked *me*. I wish now he was still allowed to," Amy said viciously, adding, "I'm sick of you, you jealous beast!"

Slim felt like hitting her, but held himself in check. She was only putting him to the test. She knew he was notoriously jealous-natured, and some women love nothing more than to keep the kettle boiling when jealousy bubbles inside it. Although they condemn it as hateful, their vanity is never quite satisfied unless they have two hooks to the line, with at least one jealous lover caught up on one of them.

Still, Slim couldn't be really jealous of Bill. Amy had made it clear there was nothing to fear from him. Derek, on the other hand, had been seeing Amy behind his back. Derek

had advertised the fact to all of them that he would kill whoever tried to prevent his marriage. The 'no marriage' law had been made by Dick Adams. The idea of them not wearing any clothes—another factor in the loss of Derek's attraction to Amy—was also Dick Adams's. If anyone had had a sufficiently strong motive to murder him, it was Derek. He had tried to pump him for information concerning his movements on the morning of the murder, but had met with a snub.

Bill Spears had been a little more informative than Derek; but Bill's word couldn't be relied on—it was he who had so completely turned Slim against Derek. From Steve, he received a fatherly pat on the shoulder and advice to forget his rancour against the younger man.

"The investigation is in the quite capable hands of Doc. You'd be well advised to leave it there, Slim," he said.

After that advice, Slim pulled himself up with a jerk. If he continued to ask everyone about Derek's movements, he was going to make it quite obvious he wished to see him dead. Supposing Derek *did* die—the victim of just such another attack as that made on Dick Adams? Who would be the Number One suspect? Who was doing his utmost to have Derek put to death? He decided to alter his tactics, to get even with Derek and to play Amy at her own game at the same time. That is what took him to Martha.

"Why don't you shake out of it and join the community again?" he asked, after they had talked for a little while. "It grieves me to see such beauty going to waste," he added.

Martha smiled, but shook her head.

"No, Slim. I know you mean well. But, till Dick's death has been avenged, I could never trust any of you—with, perhaps, the possible exception of Big Gus," she replied.

"Surely you don't suspect all of us? There must be one among us who had a good enough reason for wanting to kill him?"

"You mean there must be one with a stronger motive than the rest? Young Derek, for instance?"

"Are you satisfied that he didn't do it?"

"No, but I've sifted the evidence, Slim. I cannot prove he might have done it," Martha replied.

"Two heads are better than one. Let me go through it all with you. Believe me, Martha, I don't want to see a murderer left at large among us," Slim said harshly.

"Do you mean you don't want to see Derek getting away with it, because you're insanely jealous of him?" Martha asked candidly.

As Slim was about to protest, she added, "Don't deny it Slim. You've made it so obvious. But if you can convince me that he, or anyone else, killed my man, your personal feelings towards him will be of no consequence to me. I'll be indebted to you for the rest of my life. But I very much doubt your ability to prove him guilty. Had there been just one mite of evidence against him, I'd have found it, Slim. In all these hours I've sat and done little else but study the facts again and again."

She told him—very slowly, so that nothing might be missed—every word of the evidence taken by Doc. At first, it appeared as if Slim was at a loss for a solution; but then he suddenly remembered something. Molly was a very heavy sleeper.

"Derek must have done it," he said, more in hope than with conviction. He came back from the river, passed Bill and Steve going. Dick would be coming this way to you, Martha. He'd be in Derek's view. All he had to do was to run to Molly's place, grab the cord—he would know where to find it, without asking—and then catch up with his victim. A few casual remarks and, without warning, he sprang at him and slung the cord around his neck. Or, maybe, he came upon him unawares, from behind. There would be a struggle; but, with a choking cord around his neck, it would soon be over for Dick. There'd be no other sound beside the scuffle.

"Steve and Bill would still be in the water, eighty yards lower downstream. The light would be that dark grey just before the break of day. All Derek had to do then was drag the body to the river and push it in, throw the cord in after it, and return to Molly again. This time, he would wake her and tell her that he'd just returned from his bathe and was ready to go off on the hunt. He'd still be in time to see and hear the evidence of the others."

Martha was silent for a while.

"How do you know he wouldn't wake Molly when he ran in and grabbed the cord?" she asked doubtfully.

"Because nothing short of a rough shake *will* wake her," was the prompt reply.

"*You* should know," Martha replied dryly.

"I asked for that," said Slim. "But it's true, Martha."

Chapter Twenty

FOR a long time after Slim had gone, Martha sat coolly considering the best, and the most cruel way, to put a man to death. She dared to think that, if she had the physical strength to take the risk, she would strangle him in the same way as he had strangled Dick. Even Derek's puny build would be difficult to overcome in her present condition, however. The terrifying thought occurred to her that he might overpower and strangle *her* instead. Had she been her normal self, she would have been more than a match for him—yet she was presuming that he had found strength to murder that veritable tower of strength, that man whose every move sent a wave of muscles rippling. It seemed impossible. All the same, there was no flaw in Slim's reconstruction of what might have happened in those last few minutes of her man's life. It had shown her that Derek *could* have done it; and Derek had motive, so he *must* have done it.

She was glad to think it was him, and not the one whom she had at first suspected. She had not told anyone how she had arrived at her first conclusions, which now seemed to be ludicrous. Common sense, she had thought, was her dictator. Only two men in the whole community had the physique and the human strength to match that of Dick. They were Big Gus and the padre. Of the pair, it must be accepted that only one was awake at the time the murder was committed, and that was Paul Brotherton. Big Gus might have had a motive to kill him, but she doubted it very much on the grounds that he had gained a great deal in the new world as a result of Dick's ideas.

Paul Brotherton, on the other hand, had opposed those ideas; but, despite his opposition, they had been accepted. Dick had also defied him to teach the religion to which he had dedicated his life. Then there was that conversation which she had overheard, and the padre's words concerning that little episode in his life, known apparently only to one other person living. Could it have been of such vital import-

ance to him that it demanded that none but himself should know about it?

Then, after Molly came to her to borrow that cord, she had conceived the mad idea of searching for the missing one. She had found it on the river bed. It was looped around a long, white, spiked rock which was sticking up quite close to the bank. It was then that she had gone to Paul Brotherton and played up to him. Her suspicions were further heightened when he came to her as a thief in the night, then begged her not to let it be known. He was ashamed of his own weakness, ashamed of her, jealous of his reputation.

She didn't tell anyone; but, in return for her secrecy, she had asked him to try and find the cord for her. Nevertheless, even though forced by her to the spot where *she knew it to be lying*, he dived again and again, only to come up empty handed. To her, the inference was obvious: *He had had no wish to retrieve that cord. Why?*

Only one more pointer to Paul Brotherton's guilt remained. Would the other man with the physique capable of mastering Dick's be able to find that cord? Big Gus answered her question at the first time of asking and, up to the time of Slim's intervention, all her thoughts had been directed towards putting to death, not Derek, but the padre. What would have been her reactions if Big Gus had not found the cord? Her suspicions, she told herself, would have been unfounded. Even supposing now he was really guilty? Would he let an innocent man die, so as to save his own skin? With this thought in mind, Martha went to Molly.

"How much do you love Derek, Molly?" she asked. Molly laughed.

"Don't tell me he's making eyes at you as well?"

"What do you mean, Molly, 'as well'?"

"No offence, darling. But it's generally known that all the men have an eye on you, now Dick's gone."

"Don't be foolish, Molly! It isn't the men who are after me. I've been doing all the chasing. But now, thank God, the chase is at an end. I know what I want to know. Now, tell me, Molly, do you, or don't you, love Derek?"

"If you want him, darling, you take him. He's a nice boy, but his heart isn't with me. I'm just a good substitute when he's feeling depressed and thinking of his Amy. I can always tell, he gets so sloppy and sentimental, but he never fails to mention her name. It makes me sick."

"How would you feel if he came to serious harm?"

Molly looked into Martha's large, hazel eyes. Instinctively, she knew why the question had been asked and fear gripped her heart, relief her mind. Somewhere inside her, a small voice whispered, telling her that it wouldn't matter much if she lost Derek to the executioner. Slim would probably leave Amy then; he only clung to her because of his insane jealousy of Derek. Then, with Derek out of the way, there would be no rival to keep that jealousy alive, so Amy would be as a thing without life to Slim. He would find it impossible to live with a woman of whom he couldn't be jealous—for, to him, that was the zest in life. Nor could she see Slim letting Amy get away without cruel punishment, the punishment in this case being the loss to her of both his rival and himself. Slim would move, and with Derek gone he would move to her. She could keep him jealous and she could fight him. There would always be plenty of good bait—the padre, Bill Spears and who knows, maybe one day Doc.

"If he is guilty, take him, Martha. I want no murderer to live," she replied.

"It is you who must decide whether or not he is guilty, Molly."

Molly looked her surprise.

"Me?"

"Yes, Molly dear. Tell me, and remember that on your answer hangs the life of Derek. Has Paul Brotherton called on you in Derek's absence?"

For a brief moment, Martha thought that Molly's gaze wavered; it was as though the mind behind the eyes would rather turn away from, than answer, that question. However she had to let it pass as a figment of her imagination when the answer came in an unwavering voice.

"No, he hasn't."

"Then it would be true to say that at no time could Paul Brotherton have taken possession of that cord which you lost?"

Again, Martha thought that Molly hesitated.

"It would be true to say that, darling," came the reply.

"Then I shall denounce Derek as Dick's murderer and I shall demand his trial, conviction and execution."

Molly turned away from her and Martha was sorry. Nevertheless, she felt as if the spirit of Dick was by her side, urging her to go on and take a life for a life. She went straight

to Doc. She found him with his giant ducks, all feathered and as tame as those of the smaller families that existed before the destruction. He pointed to three that were sitting.

"Eggs under each of 'em. If they go on like this, we'll have roast duck for ever," he said enthusiastically. "They'll be losing that fishy flavour soon. I'm feeding them on the giant seeds from our grass. I've noticed something else, too. The last hatching was smaller and leaner than its predecessor. I believe we are witnessing evolution all over again—but to what end, or what perfection, I wouldn't even hazard a guess."

"Their only objects in life seem to be eating and reproduction," Martha said.

Doc gave her a keen look before replying.

"They ought to be ours, too. We came here, fourteen souls who are now reduced to twelve. True, there are prospects of at least three additions in the near future. But we are still a selfish lot, wrapped up in ourselves. If anyone hurts us, we at once look for an opportunity to retaliate to the point of destruction. I visualize that, by the time the three are born, we'll still number not more than fourteen inclusive. You've only come to me because you want to reduce our number by another one, haven't you?"

"Yes. It's what I want. A man was murdered and his killer must die," Martha answered without hesitation.

"But supposing the one who dies is not the killer?"

"That's for the community to decide. Once a verdict of guilty is returned, our conscience will be clear," she replied firmly.

"On the evidence, there's not one who could be convicted."

"That remains to be seen. I demand that Derek be brought to trial and that, in the name of justice, he be found guilty and put to death for the murder of Dick."

Doc thought she was being extremely foolish; but, under the existing law, now that she had made the charge, he, as the community's chief justice, was not authorized to do more than put to the vote whether or not the accused should be put on trial. When the vote was being cast, he could advise the voters for or against; but the decision to put on trial must be made by the community as a whole.

"All right. It'll go to the vote," he said quietly.

"Is that all?" Martha asked, moving very close to him.

"What else do you want?" he asked hoarsely.

"You, John darling. I get very lonely since Dick was taken from me."

"And the price?"

"Dick's killer must die."

"I think he will. But we must be discreet."

"Don't worry, John darling, I won't tell anyone," she answered with a smile, and as she turned to go she whispered, "See you tonight—when the rest of the world is asleep."

"Tonight," he replied, but his conscience pricked him. After that night there would be no more nights, if he failed to sacrifice Derek. In his own mind, he couldn't condemn the man; his evidence had completely satisfied him. Bill or Steve might just as easily have done it in the time available to them. They would, in fact, have had more opportunity than Derek—since they, like the murdered man, were moving towards the river, whilst he was going away from it, towards Molly's hut. All the same, no one would be so crazy as to accuse them.

He felt sorry for Derek; but if it were going to be a choice between letting him live and living with Martha, then his conscience must be ignored and Derek would have to die. Martha meant more to him than did Derek to any others of the female population. Weighed in the balance, the insignificance of the younger man couldn't touch the scale. Who would suffer if he was made the scapegoat? There was Molly, lovely, vivacious Molly. Surely Derek meant nothing to her! Amy? She had already given him the cold shoulder. It was easier to think that the victim would be getting a happy release.

Derek himself didn't think so though. When the vote was cast and he was ordered to stand trial, he said that he had nothing to be afraid of.

"I had reason enough, God knows, to want to murder him, as you must all agree. But I am human. Over and over again, I asked myself why Martha should be made to suffer. She had done me no harm—so Dick Adams was safe from any attempt on his life by myself. Had he left Martha, I think I would have tried to kill him. But he didn't. Put me on trial—I'm not afraid," he ended up boldly.

Doc Wilson—who had advised the community to vote for a trial, on the grounds that the evidence which he now had in his possession was sufficient to warrant one—felt the strength and the truth of Derek's words. He was ashamed,

angry at himself and at Martha, and his conviction that Derek was innocent was stronger than it had ever been before. After the meeting, Paul Brotherton came up to him.

"Why have you done this, John, when you know he is innocent?"

"Someone killed Dick Adams. Someone must die for it. It's as simple as that," Doc replied.

"He is no more guilty than you are yourself, and you know it. No more guilty than Martha might be."

"How does she come into it?"

Paul Brotherton smiled.

"How do we know Dick Adams hadn't made advances to Molly, or Amy, or Lady Pamela, and that Martha had caught him? How do we know she wasn't waiting for him that morning as he came back from his swim and his early morning calls, a cord in her hands, ready to slip it around his neck? Who would be less suspect?"

"Martha wouldn't kill a fly—you know she loved that man with all her heart."

"There is such a thing as killing for love," Paul Brotherton replied quietly.

Doc knew he was listening to logic. He knew, too, that Paul meant well. Despite this, to agree with him, to go now and to say he had overlooked something, to withdraw the charge, would bring down an impenetrable curtain between himself and Martha—beautiful Martha. To hell with Paul and Derek and all the rest of them! Was he to forgo so much, to make them more secure?

"I'm doing the right thing, Paul," he replied.

"Well, if I have my way, Derek isn't going to die for a crime he didn't commit."

"Only a miracle could save him."

"We are at the beginning of an age of miracles. Let's hope one will save him," said Paul, and he left Doc a very troubled man.

He was yet more troubled when, after all the evidence had been given at Derek's trial, the padre asked permission to address the community, the whole of which constituted the jury.

"Is it in connection with the trial?" Doc asked.

"It is."

"Is there any reason, now that the evidence has been given, why you shouldn't wait till sentence has been passed?"

"There is every reason why it should be made known. Derek should never have been brought to trial."

"Indeed! That should be interesting," Doc was surprised into saying.

"It is," Paul Brotherton replied, and he faced the others.

"Ladies and gentlemen, before you decide whether or not to sacrifice Derek's life to a lust for vengeance, I want to show you that the charge has been brought against him, not on the strength of the evidence—which has been with Doc since forty-eight hours after the murder was committed, and to which no direct evidence has been added at this trial—but as the result of a conspiracy between Martha and Slim, on the one hand, and Doc and Martha, on the other.

"We have all witnessed Slim's reaction to jealousy. He will stop at nothing. The circumstantial evidence put forward in this case was a product of his imagination, born of brooding for revenge against the accused. He went to Martha with it. When she acted upon it, he gloated over the fact to his wife, Amy. He wanted to see how she would suffer under that type of mental torture.

"Martha went to Doc and conspired with him to use Slim's wild imaginings as evidence to secure a verdict of guilty. She is obsessed with the one idea that guilty, or not guilty, somebody must pay the supreme penalty for Dick Adams's murder. I used the word 'conspired' deliberately.

"This morning, in the early hours, I had need of Doc's services. I went to his place, but he wasn't there. Before the dawn, I saw him emerge from Martha's home."

Big Gus leapt to his feet.

"What does Doc say to this?" he demanded. However, Doc stood mute, with eyes only for Martha.

"It's a pack of lies!" Slim shouted.

"Shut up, Slim—it's the truth," Martha said firmly. Then she went over to Paul Brotherton.

"Sorry, Martha, I couldn't see a wilful miscarriage of justice," he said with a smile. "One day, you will thank me for it."

"There was a little episode in your life, Paul. The publican talked," she said in a low voice, so quiet that none of the others heard her words. Nevertheless, they saw the smile disappear and the blood drain from the padre's face.

Martha couldn't fail to notice the effect of her words; and she, too, smiled, going back to her former place near to Slim

Meanwhile, Steve and Maudie were demanding that the charge should be withdrawn and there were murmurs of agreement from Big Gus, Lady Pamela, Amy and Molly. Doc looked helplessly across at Martha, before submitting.

"The charge is withdrawn," he said.

"Let's have justice!" Slim growled, but his was the only voice raised in protest.

"Have no fear, Slim. I'll see that justice is carried out now," Martha said—and she was looking at the retreating back of Paul Brotherton when she spoke.

Chapter Twenty-one

FOLLOWING the untimely end of Dick Adams, the padre had assumed the role of early morning caller. For the past week, there had been none to call, reserves of stores being sufficiently high to warrant a period of relaxation for the hunters. They were due to resume on the third morning after the trial, and it was as the dawn was breaking on that morning that Paul Brotherton shook Molly awake. She lay with her back towards Derek.

"Don't look round Molly. Just move outside and go straight to Doc. Tell him there's been another fatal accident."

Molly, however, did look around, and one glance was sufficient to leave her face contorted with horror. Hardened nursing sister though she was, a piercing scream escaped her. It was not the ugly sight that met her eyes which made her scream, it was the realization that she was lying near to a corpse, a corpse with the horribly distorted face of one with the life strangled out of it. Still screaming, she raced for Doc. However, she had to be given a sedative before she became sufficiently coherent to explain what had happened.

"I felt the cc-old clic-lamminess of him," she said with a shudder. "Oh God! It was horrible!" she cried, burying her face in her hands.

"All right, my dear, you'll feel better in a few minutes. Sit here meanwhile. I'll go over to Paul."

Less than a minute later, he was examining the corpse.

"About two hours ago. I wouldn't give it earlier. Same thing as before, one of those"—he pointed to Molly's cord; hanging in its place on the wall again.

"Don't have to look far, do we?" asked Paul Brotherton.

"Slim?"

"No, Martha."

"Don't be a fool, Paul!"

Paul Brotherton looked Doc straight in the eyes.

"I'm not a fool, John. Everyone heard her say that she would see justice carried out now. This is her idea of justice."

"I won't ruddy-well believe it!" Doc exclaimed.

"But you will charge her."

It was an order rather than a question, and Doc didn't take kindly to orders from anyone.

"I won't. If I charge anyone, it will be Slim. He hated Derek."

"I hate Martha," said Paul Brotherton, in a calm, quiet voice.

"Jealous?"

"Partly that."

"Of her and me?"

"Of you, John, no. She was only playing a little game with you so long as you were useful to her."

"That's your opinion. However, we'll confront Slim first. If nothing comes of that, we'll go to her."

Slim, though, had no intention of being confronted by the two men. Molly's scream had brought him from his sleep with a start. He leaped up and, leaving Amy asleep, made his way to Molly's place. He approached it from the rear and so he had heard every word that passed between Doc and the padre. Morbid thoughts passed through his mind. Who would believe him if he said he hadn't left Amy's side throughout the whole night? He had left her now and she was asleep; and he could have done the same thing at any time during the night. Doc would draw attention to the fact that he had demanded justice against Derek, even after the charge against the other man had been withdrawn. Everyone knew he had been embittered against the latest victim.

He heard the two men move out into the open. If they saw him, he was lost. The truth would hold no weight. Before he could make up his mind as to the best course of action to take, the padre and Doc moved around the side of the hut and headed for his place. They would find Amy

asleep, and alone. That would, in itself, be damning evidence. What a mess! He wouldn't stand a chance of survival if put on trial. But why should he be? Why should an innocent man be made to suffer for a crime which he hadn't committed? Why should Martha get away with it? He could, at least, implicate her.

No sooner had the thought entered his mind than he was sprinting towards the spot at the upriver end of the clearing where Martha lived. Looking in at the open front of the hut, he heaved a sigh of relief. She was lying down, and she was asleep. He shook her awake.

"Whatever do you want, Slim?" she asked sleepily.

"You better get up quick. They're coming for you. Derek's been murdered," Slim replied.

"Derek! Good God, Slim! Why did you do it?" Martha gasped in a startled voice.

"We haven't time to sit around here and argue about it. Come on, we've got to clear out quick—and don't try to pretend to me. You know I didn't do it."

"Neither did I," said Martha firmly. "What happened?"

Slim told her how Derek had died, and that they were both suspected. Martha remained silent for a little while after he had finished. He became impatient.

"Don't just sit there! You've got to come away with me!" he said fiercely.

"I'm not leaving here, Slim," was the calm reply.

To that, Slim had no immediate answer. He felt the nearness of his pursuers and was overcome by a strong desire to put as much distance between himself and them as possible. At the same time, he knew that Martha must go with him. He had come to her certain in his own mind that she would have to go. Nevertheless, the reason why she would have to was not quite clear in his mind.

"Go back to Amy, Slim. If you didn't do it, you've nothing to fear," she said.

"Go back! Go back! Are you a fool? They've already been there—and, now, they're on their way here. You know what that means. They'll find me with you and we'll both be guilty."

Martha remained quite calm.

"I am innocent. They cannot harm me."

"So was Derek, according to the law, but he's had it. Somebody killed him."

"I wonder why?" Martha asked, and Slim again became impatient.

"Listen, Martha, he's dead and we're being blamed for it. You might want to be a martyr. Frankly I don't, and I don't think that unborn child of yours would appreciate it either. Give it a chance and come away with me now. Be fair to Dick's child."

Mention of the child threw Martha into a panic.

"Get out of here. Go away yourself. Go back to Amy, go anywhere, then they won't touch me. Why drag me into it? I didn't do it!"

"Neither did I. And, knowing you wanted Derek dead as much as I did, I don't see why I should take any more blame than you for his murder."

Martha stood up.

"For the child's sake, come on," she said suddenly, and, when they were heading upriver through the long grass, she added the first words that passed between them on the journey. "When my child is born, I'm coming back. Then those that hate me will die for this."

"What did you do to the padre to make him hate and be jealous of you?" Slim asked. "I could have believed it of anyone but him."

"Truthfully, I don't know—and I refuse to allow myself to guess. Nor will I stop to ask when I return. I'll kill!"

"I never dreamed that you had such a blood lust," Slim commented. He felt his own blood chill as he said it. The idea occurred to him that he might have been more secure back in the clearing. He dared not go back now though.

For hour after hour, they headed upstream, making for the cover of the forests and the hills beyond. Occasionally, they stopped and Slim listened with his ears to the ground for sounds of their pursuers; but he heard none. Shortly after noon, they rested and ate some of the long grass blades. From then until sunset, they maintained their previous fast pace; and, before resting for the night, they moved inland for about a mile, away from the river. The grass was shorter there, but they were screened from view by the dense growth along the river bank and progress was much quicker.

Late on the following afternoon, they reached the cover of the forests. Tired and weary, they slept through until the following morning. Then the need for food sent Slim into the

long grass again, and down to the river for water and anything else he could find.

It was then, when Slim had been gone for more than an hour, that Paul Brotherton came upon Martha. She sat in a forest glade, her back to him, an easy target for the huge kitchen knife which he held in his hands. When he and Doc discovered that Slim was not with Amy, they shook her awake. She told them that Slim had been with her when she retired, and that he had gone to sleep before her. The padre wanted to go straight to Martha's after that, but Doc insisted upon finding Slim. He suggested a visit to the river.

"We might be jumping to conclusions, Paul. Let's make sure he's not just having his morning bathe."

"All right, have it your way. We'll probably find him there and he'll equally probably tell us he's innocent and hasn't even heard of the crime."

"If he does—and always supposing we're satisfied that he's telling the truth—then we'll pay Martha a call," Doc answered with a smile.

When they did eventually reach Martha's place, she and Slim were a good ten minutes' march away, and well-concealed in the long grass. Paul Brotherton suspected that the two of them might have gone away together, but he could only guess at the direction which they had taken. He suggested an upriver pursuit.

"They can't be far away. And the only place I can think of where one would flee from justice is the cover of the forests and the hills," he said.

"Quite likely, Paul. "But we're not going after them. If there's going to be a man- or woman-hunt, it's going to be properly carried out. As you say, they can't be far away, so another couple of hours won't make much difference. If they've gone downstream in one of the canoes, and you and I go on a wild-goose chase upstream, we'll only be wasting time and manpower in a fruitless search."

Paul Brotherton had to agree. It was three hours later—when everyone else had been roused, a conference held and the canoes checked—that, after much persuasion, he was allowed to take the upriver route in pursuit.

"Why do you consider yourself to be the most suitable person to bring them back?" Big Gus demanded, when the padre suggested he should be chosen to go after them.

Paul Brotherton smiled.

"My responsibilities began in earnest when we left the Wheorld, Gus—when men and women came together. Before that time, you played as little children—friends today, enemies tomorrow, then friends again. I prayed to God that no evil would befall us, and I thanked God that none had when we came from the Wheorld together, none the worse for our five years of incarceration. But then the best and the worst in all of us showed itself. We came together and evil, in thought and in deed, was released.

"Our number is now sadly depleted. It will be depleted still further if any but myself follows Martha and Slim. You, Gus—or for that matter, any of you—would be treated as an enemy seeking nothing but revenge in the form of justice. Furthermore, Gus, it wouldn't be wise to leave Lady Pamela alone in her present condition. Steve and Bill are due to go off hunting. The doctor will be required around here. To think of the ladies going off in pursuit is both undesirable and unreasonable. That leaves the task to myself."

"We could send Bill, and I'll go out on my own," said Steve. "I know a grand little spot down-river where there is so much food that it only needs collecting."

The padre looked at Big Gus, not at the speaker, when he replied:

"Martha wouldn't trust herself with any men other than Slim and myself. Slim wouldn't come to terms with Bill."

Through the mind of Big Gus flashed those shameful moments of weakness when he had broken into the women's quarters and been confronted by Martha. He remembered again those vicious punches which he had received. He gave Lady Pamela a sideways glance and noticed the happy smile on her face.

"Well, Padre, it's O.K. with me," he said loudly.

Doc passed no comment. He gave Paul Brotherton only a cold stare, but the remainder agreed with Big Gus that the padre should go after them and, for the first time since leaving the Wheorld, Big Gus leered.

Not long after the padre had gone, he called all that remained together. He gave Lady Pamela instructions to tell Amy to collect everybody and to bring them to him. All came but Doc. After a few minutes' wait, Big Gus himself went to find him; and, to the complete humiliation of the doctor, he was dragged by the scruff of the neck to where the others were assembled.

"From now on," Big Gus snapped, "I am the law. All decisions will be made by me. If any of you feel you'd like to set out by questioning my right to rule this outfit, step out now and we'll make it a case of the survival of the fittest."

"A self-appointed king, I presume?" Doc asked sarcastically.

"To whom you'll answer for the future health of this community and for any other odd jobs I happen to give you. As for the rest of you, all you have to do is what you're told. I've taken this drastic step to stop the rot. From now on, we'll grow in strength, not perish to the last man as we looked like doing. I'll ruthlessly over-rule your own desires by making you responsible to me. For a start, we're all going under one roof—my roof. We'll build a house big enough to accommodate the lot of us. You, Steve, and your wife, you'll feed us all. You, Molly, and Doc, look after the health side. You, Amy, you'll do all the general scivvy work about the place. Bill, you'll see that any orders I give are put into effect, carrying them out yourself, if and when necessary. If the padre returns," he added with a sneer, "he can look after our souls."

As they were dispersing, leaving him unchallenged, he told Bill Spears to remain behind. Lady Pamela showed signs of remaining, too, so he told her to go and give Amy some work to do.

"It'll keep her mind off Derek and Slim," he said, and, with a smile, he added: "After all, you're the queen, you know."

Without a word, Lady Pamela obeyed, leaving him and Bill Spears alone.

"Bill, you'd like Amy, wouldn't you?"

Bill Spears gulped hard.

"You know I would, Gus."

"But you'd hate Amy to know you were grovelling at Martha's feet that night we broke into the women's quarters?"

"It wouldn't help things, would it?"

"That's what I thought. Now, listen, Bill, the only three people besides us who know about that night are Slim, the padre and Martha. Slim and Martha are fugitives, and the padre's gone to bring them back. All you have to do is go after them and make sure that *none* of them come back. Do that and you can have Amy. It's a promise Bill—just order Steve to give you some food and go after the padre.

You've my authority to order what you like. That's what I meant when I said you would carry out my orders, see? You're a man of importance now. It'll always be that way, if you do as I want."

Bill Spears looked somewhat awestruck.

"How could I kill the padre?" he asked. "He's a tough nut, Gus."

For answer, Big Gus stepped inside the grass-walled hut which he and Lady Pamela occupied; almost immediately, he emerged again, carrying a small automatic.

"I retrieved that before the Wheorld went up in flames," he said. "I always did intend to rule this outfit one day." He handed the revolver to Bill. "Don't hesitate to shoot. And don't forget, I am the law, the judge, the jury, the prosecution and the defence. None of them must come back here. Can I rely on that?"

Bill Spears smiled grimly.

"With Amy at the end of it, you certainly can," he said.

Chapter Twenty-two

INSTINCT plays a leading part in the preservation of life. Sensing imminent danger at the crucial moment, one looks around and—scarcely realizing it—leaps to safety in the nick of time. So it was with Martha. She felt the shiver darting up her spine, ending with a tingling at the nape of her neck. The blood drained swiftly from her face and her limbs tightened involuntarily. She heard no sound and saw no movement, but she knew instinctively danger was near in the form of some unseen presence. She wasn't afraid, but she shivered as if with cold—and it was warm, luxuriously warm.

Alerted and tensed, she quickly turned her head and, before her brain had time to translate into meaning what her eyes had seen, she flung herself sideways. In that same in-

stant, Paul Brotherton, with his whole weight behind it, plunged the knife he was holding into what would have been her back. He overbalanced and fell headlong to the ground. Then Martha realized what had happened; how near she had been, and still was, to death. Paul Brotherton intended to murder her!

Her first thought was to scream. However, she was so fascinated by the speed with which her attacker fell and then recovered, that she found him standing before her, smiling, the knife still in his hands, before she had uttered a sound. She knew then that the slightest noise from her would bring instant death. Gazing into the pale blue, steady eyes, she quaked. She saw there only intensity of purpose. There was no hatred, no apparent villainy in the look he gave her. He might have been the appointed slaughterer of a sheep, or even a fowl.

"Why are you alone? Where is Slim?" He asked evenly.

Martha thought quickly. There was just a chance he did not know that she had run away with Slim. If she could bluff him, and keep him talking, Slim might come back and save her.

"If he has any sense, he'll be at home with Amy," she replied easily. She was aching to ask him why he had tried to plunge that knife into her back; but she feared that this would draw his attention to the weapon sooner than was necessary; and she was glad she hadn't mentioned it when she saw the look of surprise that he gave her.

"Didn't he run away with you?"

"Good heavens, no!" Martha said, affecting genuine astonishment that he should think so; but it required an almost superhuman effort to hide the growing terror which she felt.

Paul Brotherton looked distinctly relieved.

"That makes my task much simpler," he said. "I don't have to tell you that I came after you to kill you. But now, I don't have to be in such a desperate hurry. You see, Slim disappeared at the same time as you did, after Derek was murdered. When I saw you sitting here, I thought I would have to act quickly, in case any slight sound brought him running to the rescue. With you disposed of, he would have presented no real problem."

"But why do you want to kill me, Paul?" Martha asked, a look of pleading in her beautiful eyes.

Paul Brotherton's jaws clenched hard and his eyes flashed angrily.

"I don't," he said harshly. "I have to. It is a duty, an obligation that I owe to posterity."

"But why?" Martha repeated.

"Because a publican talked and, because of love for you. I can know no peace of mind while you still live."

"What the publican said is a secret that died with Dick. I don't know what he said. As for your love, what useful purpose can I serve you when I'm dead?"

"You can serve me better dead than to offer me a body that is dead, the heart of which beats only for Dick Adams."

"That is why I came away, Paul. It's true my love is only for Dick—I couldn't give it to another. But I'm glad I have yours. It will always be a precious memory—one I'll never share with another living soul."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"Because, until you came, I was alone—that is how I intended to remain, with my memories. You say Derek has been murdered. That should be sufficient reason why I cannot go back. I demanded justice at his trial, and now I have run away. That is your surety, Paul. If I go back, they will charge me with his murder. That is your guarantee that I won't see, or talk, to another living soul—that I'll never re-join them, ever again."

It was Martha's last hope. If it failed to master his doubt, then she was lost. She had wanted to go on talking in the hope that Slim would come back, but words had failed her. She felt the trembling of her legs and, try as she would, she could not control it. Her heart thumped violently and the butterflies in her stomach refused to be quietened.

"But, one day, the children of the future may come upon an old woman and they'll accept her hospitality. Years of loneliness, years of bitter thought, the presence of humans again, and she'll talk. She'll tell them that their great preacher is none other than Paul Brotherton, the man, the brute who sacrificed a young girl after he betrayed her—the villain who tried to murder her. They'll believe her. Humans will always believe only the worst. They won't concern themselves with his years of repentance and mental torture. Even though each had sinned to ten times the extent of him accused, they will demand retribution, and not to God, but to them." Paul Brotherton dropped his voice to barely above a whisper. "I'm

going to be the first prophet. Should I be robbed of my glory? Should I be denied that beauty of soul which only a prophet can possess?" He raised the knife. "Not if I can prevent it!" he screamed hysterically.

Transfixed, Martha stared in horror at the glistening blade. There was no time for prayer, no time to leap to safety. Instinct had met its master. There was a noise that sounded like the double crack of a whip. She saw the knife descending and she screamed. She felt it plunging down inside her body and she was falling, falling, into a yawning abyss. There was no sharp pain, indeed there was no pain at all, just a mingling of darkness and light, and this sensation of falling.

When the sensation passed she was conscious of the fact that she was lying on the ground, her head resting as if on a cushion. She saw Slim first, then Bill Spears. Slim was kneeling by her side, holding her head up with one hand. Bill was standing and both were smiling.

"Come on, kid, you fainted. You're all right now," Slim said tenderly.

"Yeah. Just to make sure I didn't miss, I had to hold the damned thing with two hands to keep it steady. Only just in time though—that knife was only inches from you," commented Bill with a forced laugh; and Martha thought she could appreciate the effort it had cost Bill to fire the shots that had saved her life. He would feel as if he were sticking the bullets in with his fingers and experience more pain, perhaps, than Paul Brotherton himself.

"Is he—dead?" she asked, but a groan from the prostrate man gave her the answer. She went over and knelt by his side.

"You were a fool, Paul," she said quietly.

"I know—you know—I killed Dick." He raised himself on one elbow and groaned again. "You would have come back—to kill me. I hated Dick—he knew my fault—one mistake—thought he might tell you. That morning—saw Derek return to Molly—and——" a startled look came into his eyes and Martha feared the worst, "I'm dying—aren't I?" he gasped.

"You most assuredly are," Martha answered, and waited.

"Dick approached me—I asked if he'd told you—he said no. The only witness—I had to kill him. You knew when I didn't find belt——" again that startled look came to his eyes as he asked, "I will die, won't I?"

Martha nodded.

"Wanted you to die for Derek—I killed him. You shouldn't have mentioned—publican—made me kill again. Might have won—I was shot. Saved you—from me. Saved me—from you."

Martha stood up and walked across to where the knife had fallen. She picked it up and, before either Bill or Slim realized what she was going to do, she plunged it deep into the body of the padre. She saw the look of startled horror in his eyes as the knife sank into him, but it roused no feeling of pity or remorse in her.

"Die for Dick," she said savagely.

As she spoke, Paul Brotherton died and Martha laughed hysterically. Both Slim and Bill were a little afraid of her and gaped at her in silence until the mad laughter ceased and she sat down. She held her head between her hands as violent sobs shook her body. Only then did the two men approach her.

"Good for you, Martha," Slim coaxed, patting her gently on the shoulder.

"He deserved it," Bill said.

"And now we can all go back—we heard his confession," added Slim.

Bill Spears moved away a few paces from them, the revolver still in his hands.

"You can't go back, Slim, ever," he said.

"Don't be a damned fool! We're not staying here all our lives."

"Slim, for Christ's sake use your loaf! You don't think I came out here on a pleasure-hunt, do you, with this?" He indicated the weapon.

"I don't get you, Bill."

"Christ, I wish I didn't have to tell you. But listen. Back there in the clearing, there's no law now. Big Gus has made himself ruler and everybody that's left works for him. That's what I'm doing right now. He doesn't want his wife to hear about that first night he broke into the women's quarters and you and the padre stepped in. So, when you two skipped and the padre went after you, he pushed this gun in my hand and said none of you must come back.

"You can come if you like, but there's no law, no protection. Big Gus wants you and Martha dead, and he'll kill you himself if he's in the mood, or he'll make me, Steve, or the

Doc, kill you for the murder of Derek. He'll say you're guilty, and that will be that. There's nobody to stand up to him now that Dick Adams and the padre are gone, so don't get any daft notions. He wants your blood and, if he knows you are alive, he'll have it."

"Tell me the set-up," Slim said quietly.

Bill Spears told it to him just as Big Gus had explained it.

"So that little cow's at his beck and call after all," said Slim with a laugh.

"She was never any good to you, anyway," consoled Bill.

"I know that! I'm just thinking of that set-up: Lady Pamela, Amy, Molly—and the Great Henry the Eighth, I am. What a damn joke! I can see Steve as his king's creeper, crawling around on all fours, keeping an eye on you and Doc like a watchdog. And God help you if he catches you with the women! On reflection, I'll stay here with Martha, if she'll have me. And, provided you keep that a secret, then if ever you get into difficulties with Big King Gus you'll always have a place to which you can retreat. That's a good thing to bear in mind, Bill."

Bill Spears made no attempt to hide his relief.

"That's grand, Slim. I'll go back and report you all dead. I'll tell Big Gus the padre killed you two and I killed him. I'll tell him he confessed to the murder of Dick Adams and Derek after I'd shot him. Later, when I can get away, I'll come out here to you and Martha to keep you informed of the position down there."

"Yes, do that small thing," said Slim with a smile. "Be the first spy in the world as Big Gus on the one hand, and me on the other, will be the first to found nations."

After watching Bill Spears until he was out of sight, Slim turned to Martha.

"Martha, love, will you start all over again, with me?"

Without looking up, Martha nodded.

"Thanks, love. One day, we'll have a grown-up family. Then we'll invade the land of Big King Gus and set the people free," Slim said.

"You'll do no such thing. They may not want your kind of freedom. You're certainly not going to use our family as cannon-fodder to prove whether they do or not," Martha replied spiritedly.

"But we can't leave the poor devils at the mercy of Big Gus!"

Martha gave him a look of utter contempt.

"Have you forgotten the Communists, the Nationalists and the Imperialists, so soon? Each affected that same mistaken outraged righteousness, that same desire to bring freedom to the supposedly enslaved peoples. But if those people wanted

to be free, why did they destroy the world—in *defence of their lot?*"

"They couldn't help it—they had to do as they were told," Slim said, shrugging his shoulders.

"*Who* did—all of them? The Communists, the Nationalists, *and* the Imperialists? In which case, who were the free?" Slim made no attempt to reply, so Martha went on, "No, Slim, you and I become man and wife on one condition only."

"And that is?"

"My family lives as good, honest, peace-loving human beings. That was the way Dick wanted all of us to live."

Slim felt the pangs of jealousy again. He knew he could never replace Dick Adams in Martha's heart. He would see him in her first-born, see him reflected in her love for it. But he could try; he *would* try. Successful achievement there would be far more satisfying to him than an equally-successful meddling in the affairs of Big Gus.

SPLIT WORLDS

by

TYRONE C. BARR

The red flash disappeared as quickly as it had come and became, as that on the right, a mushroom of coloured cloud. Dick Adams's first thought was that a fire had broken out simultaneously in New York, perhaps, and somewhere near the Baltic. Even as the thought occurred to him, however, there were several similar happenings in Britain, France, Spain, in the Atlantic itself, and between Norway and Sweden. Then Derek came in to report,

'Bombing in progress,' he said in an agitated, frightened voice.

Dick Adams's heart sank. His first impulse was to descend at once, to get down there and find out what the hell it was all about.

SPLIT WORLDS

Tyrone C. Barr