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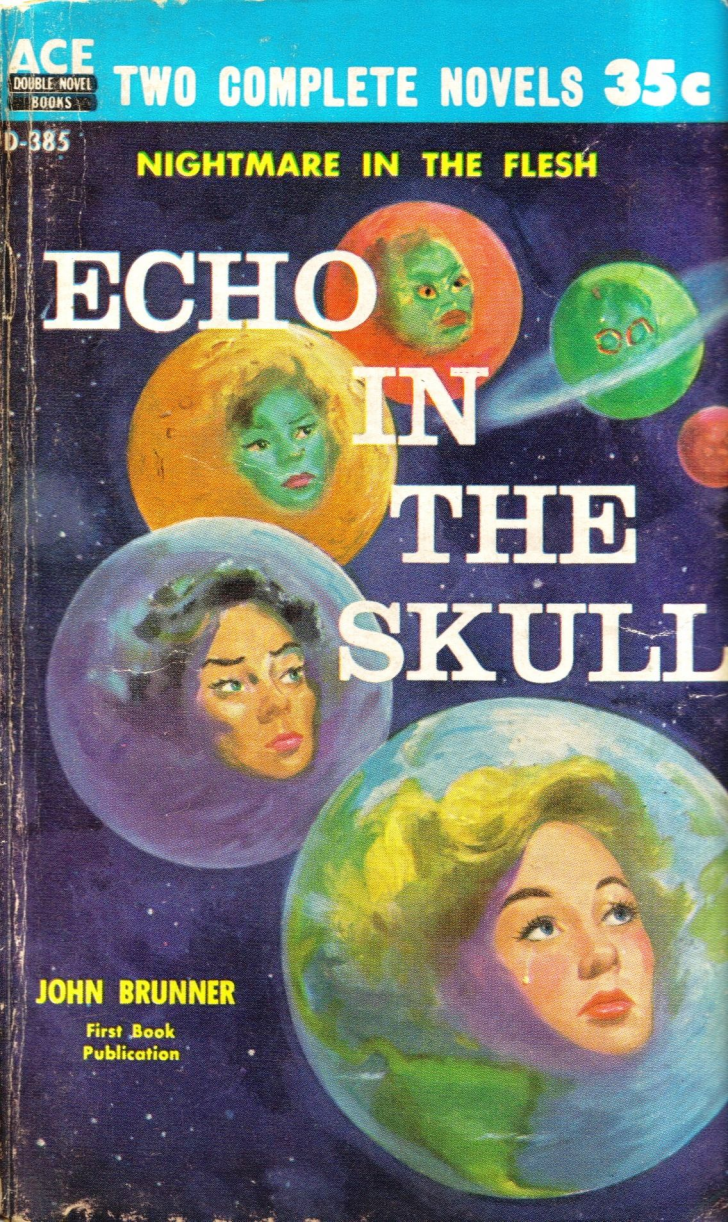
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**NIGHTMARE IN THE FLESH**

# ECHO IN THE SKULL



**JOHN BRUNNER**

First Book  
Publication

## RECALL HORRORS!

She thought her name was Sally Ercott. But if there were any other Ercotts related to her, she couldn't remember them. Nor could she remember where she had lived before, or where she had gone to school. She couldn't remember . . .

But then the image came. She was in the mountain cave of a horrible unearthly monster. She was pleading with the creature, begging it to take her life instead of Iwys'. The creature was waving its tentacles, coming closer. She could feel her flesh crawl at its touch . . .

Screaming with pain, the girl called Sally Ercott snapped back to reality. But the room in which she found herself was not as real as the cave in which she had just died. This memory, this frightening, painful experience, was not a dream—it was a warning! She had to find someone who would believe her story — and find him quick — or all the people in the world would become victims of THE ECHO IN THE SKULL!

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second complete novel

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### Sally Ercott

Her trouble wasn't so much losing her memory — as finding a memory that wasn't hers.

### Nick Jenkins

He was an inventor, but he never invented anything as amazing as the things that happened to him.

### Arthur Rowall

He had plans for Sally Ercott — when she got desperate enough to fall in with them.

### Bella Rowall

She belonged to what they say is the oldest profession of all, but she wasn't in it for the money.

### Clyde West

At first afraid to be accused of interfering, he was later ashamed of not interfering earlier.

### Inspector Dougherty

It took something that exploded in his hands to convince him of the truth.

# ECHO IN THE SKULL

by

JOHN BRUNNER

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ROCKET TO LIMBO

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## CHAPTER I

BY-PRODUCTS of the solar phoenix reaction, deprived of the majority of their ultraviolet components by the ozone layer in the upper atmosphere, punched yellow through the gaps at the edge of the curtain. The highest of them was six inches below the patch of damp on the peeling wall. Overhead, there was clattering as Mrs. Ramsey limped and tottered to get her garbage pail out of her kitchen.

Hunched in the flimsy cover of her one remaining coat, Sally Ercott woke up.

Her first reaction was to look at her watch. It wasn't on her wrist, of course; it had been pawned six weeks ago.

She looked at the irregular pattern of sunlight on the wall, and the knowledge of the solar phoenix reaction flashed through her mind. It was chased away by the recognition that from the angle at which the rays slanted it must be noon. Oh, God . . .

It was always like this on waking; the drop from the warm—or at least tolerable—comfort of sleep into the harsh reality of day was as terrifying and unnerving as an actual physical fall from a precipice.

For a minute or two she struggled to escape back into the darkness of not knowing; then Mrs. Ramsey started to drag her pail down the stairs, crash, crash, crash, on every step, and it was impossible to flee from it. Angrily, hating herself, Sally got up.



She staggered a little in a fit of dizziness, and put one hand on the mantel to steady herself. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was tousled and got in her eyes; she made an ineffectual attempt to brush it back with her hand. The hand was filthy.

She took hold of the mantel with both hands now, willing herself, forcing herself, to look into the mirror propped there. For a long moment her blue eyes remained shut, refusing to face the facts. A line from one of Kipling's poem drifted into her mind from somewhere in the far past of three months ago. She opened her eyes.

First she looked at herself, deliberately, with loathing. Her hair, rat-tailed, knotted, tangled; her eyes, red at the edges and bleared with sleep; her wide mouth, chapped with cold and bearing a mustache of the soup she had had last night. She didn't need to look further than that; she had worn the same dress for three weeks, her stockings were in shreds, and her shoes had lost both their high heels. Not that she had her shoes on at the moment. She rubbed at the trace of soup on her lips and saw the brownish mark replaced by a grayish one. During the night she must have beaten on the floor with her hands to make them so dirty.

Then she looked, still in the mirror, past her own shoulder. There were the four ripped cushions oozing their sour flock stuffing. There was her coat. The magazine. Her shoes. That was all, except for the dust.

Oh, yes—and the testimony to last night.

She turned round and picked up the coat; half a peg survived on the back of the door, and she put the coat on it. There between the cushions, where she had hugged it to her like a beloved doll, was the empty bottle of gin.

She could have paid off part of the back rent with the cost of it; she could have eaten regular meals for a week; she could have bought a blanket or two to keep her warm at night. Instead—

"Dear God!" whispered Sally. "But I needed it so badly!"

She had stubbed out a half-smoked cigarette directly on the floor beside the pile of cushions; now she picked it up and straightened it out carefully before fumbling the box of matches from the pocket of her coat. She had lain on the box during the night; it was crushed and broken open.

She forced herself to make sure there were no loose matches going to waste in the pocket before striking one and lighting the cigarette butt. Her hands shook frighteningly as she tried to bring flame and tobacco together.

So long as the cigarette lasted, she managed not to think of anything at all.

When it finally burned down to her fingers, she was forced to drop it and put on her shoes to trample it out. Then she pulled her coat on—it showed the ravages of long wear less than her dress did — and cautiously looked out through the door to see if anyone was on the stairs. From street level came the sound of Mrs. Ramsey clanging her pail down the last few steps.

The bathroom was up half a flight of stairs; when she had climbed them she felt as exhausted as if she had climbed Everest. Shuddering with delayed nausea from the gin, she slammed the door and went to the grease-coated wash-basin. She had nothing to put in the gas meter for hot water; in her present state, she told herself, it would probably do her good to use cold.

Someone had left a thin sliver of soap on the edge of the bath; gratefully she took it and rubbed it over her hands and face.

For a moment she considered stripping completely and making some effort to get rid of the sweaty smell from her whole body, but the dirt permeated her underclothes and by now probably even her dress, so what was the good? Sighing, she compromised by pulling her dress over her head and rinsing her neck and arms. Then she managed to



wash one foot before the tiny bit of soap slipped from her grasp and fell down the drainpipe.

Outside, Mrs. Ramsey was heaving herself upstairs again; every few steps the now empty garbage pail rang resoundingly as she set it down to rest.

Sally waited till she heard the bucket slammed back into its home beneath its owner's sink, which was always the loudest noise of all; then she peeped out, having put her coat and dress back on, to see that the stairs were clear. Out on the street she couldn't help people noticing her degradation, but they were strangers and their looks of amazement and pity could be borne. Here in the house she knew she would meet the same looks from the same people, so she hid, scurrying like a rat from cover to cover.

No one in sight; no sound of footsteps. She took a chance and hurried down the stairs.

Once back in her own room, she threw herself full-length on the floor and began to cry, dry, racking sobs that rasped her throat and brought no tears.

How had it come to this?

Now, remembering the bathroom and the bath, she tried to calculate how long it had been since she washed all over in luxurious warm water. Weeks? Months, maybe. There was the gap between *then* and *now*; *then* was made up of adequate money, pretty clothes, boy friends, theaters, books, music; *now* consisted of a squalid unfurnished room in a dirty Paddington backstreet, and she owed rent even on that.

But *how*?

Sally sat up abruptly and crossed her legs in a squatting posture. Yes, *how*? Now that she came to think of it, she could not even recall the nightmare of yesterday; she could not bring back to mind the horror which had driven her to seek escape in that empty bottle of gin. How? Why?

For a moment it seemed to her that this was the *nightmare*; that she could pinch herself to wakefulness and *find* a soft

bed beneath her, a wardrobe of clothes awaiting her choice, a good-looking young man coming to take her to a concert.

The illusion passed, and she stood up with her mouth set in a line of grim determination. Now, this very moment, she was going to start on the way back to the past.

And then she remembered she had said that yesterday, and the day before, and probably the day before that, and each time she had run up against the horrible facts: she did not even have enough money to put in the gas meter and kill herself, and she had no way of raising any. Except—

She thought of obliging Mr. Rowall, the landlord; she recalled how friendly he had been when she had to confess to him yet again that she could not pay the rent this week. She recalled what she had seen in his eyes, heard glossing his placid voice. No, not that. No!

But despite her revulsion she could hear a cynical little voice saying inside her head; *Not that. Not yet, anyway . . .*

She had not quite believed in the way Rowall supplemented the income he wrung from his shabby tenants. When she first arrived here (she could not even remember clearly how long ago that had been, nor what had dragged her down to this slum), she had still been presentable, and blonde, loud-mouthed Mrs. Rowall had been cheery and friendly enough—too much so, Sally had thought, to be what she was. It was not until she had curiously watched by the window one evening, and seen the succession of men accompany Mrs. Rowall to the door, that she stopped blinding herself to the obvious.

Rowall would greatly appreciate the chance of adding her to his list; he thought he had only to wait to be obliging about the rent, and sooner or later . . .

Yes, sooner or later. Sally felt a stir of sickness turn her guts over; if there had been a square meal inside her, she would have thrown up.

No, please God, today, somehow, somewhere, she would



find the key to unlock her from this prison of circumstances.

The shafts of sunlight crawling over the wall had gone; a cloud had blown up across the sky. Sally ordered herself to hurry, in case the cloud brought rain. She looked hopelessly around the room.

She had still had a few belongings when she came here, but hunger and the need to drown the nightmares had deprived her of them one by one. Last night someone had given her a pound for the pawn—ticket on her watch; search as she might, she could find nothing to show for it except the empty bottle of gin. There had probably been ten cigarettes, and there had also been the soup that had still smeared her mouth when she woke. That was all.

There was nothing back on the gin bottle; she hid it after a fashion among the cushions. She had her coat, but she must keep that, surely! It was good quality material; for a moment she toyed with idea of trying to exchange it for a cheaper one at a second-hand clothing store, and get a few shillings allowed on the trade. But that was for desperation, and she was trying to convince herself she wasn't desperate yet.

And there was the magazine. Puzzled, she picked it up, and looked at the garish cover with a frown. Science fiction. That was why she had had those phrases about the solar phoenix reaction running through her head when she awoke—there was an article here about it.

What on earth had driven her to spend money on it? Two whole shillings! Almost enough for a meal; plenty for a snack. Her stomach cried out in protest against her own mad extravagance. Now it came back to her, that she had sat here last night, reading by the light of a street lamp through the window and sipping at the gin till she could not see the print any longer. Why?

The magazine was scarcely marked, and it was probably a current issue. April, it said—it must be April by now, or

maybe it was still March, from the cold and the sharp, warmth-lacking sun. There was the magazine dealer's next door — maybe she could get nine pence back on it, enough for a cup of tea and some bread and butter.

She thrust it in the pocket of her coat and looked for the pocket-comb she had managed to keep by her until lately. It was not to be found; last night had probably accounted for that, too.

Timidly, hoping no one would see, her, Sally Ercott slipped from the room and tiptoed quietly downstairs.

## CHAPTER II

The tolling began in her head when she was only halfway down the first flight. A moment before it started, Sally could not have said how it was she knew one of the attacks was coming; the instant it came, however, she knew with a terrifying certainty that this was the herald of a fresh visit from the horrors she tried to run from.

"Tolling," she called it to herself. She could time it by her heartbeats; every four beats and the sound rang out again. It was not like a bell, but rather like a bass-voiced scream issuing hollow and monstrous out of an infinitely deep well. There were echoes following each sound, not quite dying away before the next one came, so that in a moment there were clanging reverberations shaking the very bones of her skull in an insane resonance.



She clung to the banister-rail, breathing hard, keeping her eyes wide open and staring; closing them would help to break her hold on reality. *Fight it!* she ordered herself. *You've got to fight it!*

Another step down the stairs, carefully deliberately; she emphasized to herself the messages from her muscles which told her she was placing one foot after the other on the step below. Mist came up before her eyes, so that the dingy stairwell swam and distorted itself.

She reached the hallway with the tolling thunderous in her head; she almost expected to see the walls shiver and crumble under the impact of the tremendous noise. The dark-painted, stained walls seemed to arch together over her head, like the roof of a cavern. There was the handle of the door, tarnished yellow brass, waiting for her to reach out and turn it, waiting for her to go out on to the street beyond.

Because she was in the cavern, the tolling redoubled in fierceness; the hard rock walls threw it back at her from all sides, so that now the echoes ran together and united in a wild cacophony. Why, this was like the time when—

And her resistance broke. She knew what it was she remembered, a scene so like the one she was living through that the two episodes had become merged in her mind. This reminded her of the time when she had gone down into the heart of the mountain, down the irregular twisting pathways of the caves, looking for the man Iwys.

*She stopped, irresolute, within a few paces of her goal. The vague light was so poor, this far from the surface, that she could barely distinguish the walls of the tunnel.*

Now that moment was here, she could feel the desire to turn back, give up, follow the advice her well-meaning friends had given her when they had said:

*"It is no use to yearn for Iwys now. We have seen others taken from among us—we have seen thousands acquire that*

*blind purpose in their eyes. All of them have gone into the mountain, and none of them have returned. True, it is a shame that Iwys was taken when he means so much to you. But it is known that the creature in the mountain cares nothing for our human emotions."*

*"Then," she had said with wild grief, "if it cares nothing for human emotions, it can care little which human being it takes. Let it take me instead of Iwys!"*

*They had tried to hold her back at that, but she had broken free and fled up the mountain, hunting one of the caverns by which the creature dwelling at its heart reached the air outside. Now she had found one, now she had penetrated its depths; now she was surrounded by the noise of the beast's life-processes, that terrible echoing sound which made her flesh crawl on her bones. Now there was nothing between her and the creature itself but a few yards of rocky tunnel and one of its chitinous closures.*

*No, she could not go back. Whether it was her love for Iwys that had driven her so far, or her own pride, she could no longer tell. In this ghastly place the choice between being taken by the creature for its own purposes and going back to face the pity of her friends was no choice.*

*In reality, Sally Ercott fumbled for the handle of the door, turned it, and stepped through blindly.*

*As she reached the chitinous flap closing off the end of the tunnel, she reached out her hand to touch it. Before she actually touched it, however, it fluttered around the edges where it was rubbery to ensure a tight seal to the rock, and then folded and drew back.*

*Beyond was a place glowing very slightly green: like a pouch or bag, laid on its side. In the greenness, things like ferns, tendrils of the creature's substances, waved and gestured. The air was warm and fetid.*

*Horror-struck, she threw out her hands and braced them against the walls of the tunnel.*



Now a voice spoke whisperingly, susurrantly, seeming to come from everywhere at once. Oddly, though it was so quiet, it was distinct enough to penetrate the roaming noise which still echoed up the tunnel. The voice said, "Come forward."

Somewhere she found the resolution to comply. When she stepped past the entrance, her feet sank very slightly into softness, exactly as though she were walking on the skinned flesh of a dead animal. Where her sandals were worn into holes by the rocks she had passed, she could feel the surface underfoot, warm and alive.

She said, "I—I come—" And choked on the words.

The creature's voice came again. "You come," it said affirmatively. "You were not sent for."

"I come to ask you to take me in place of the man you took yesterday. Iwys." She threw back her shoulders and stared defiantly at the waving fronds around her. What a place of nightmare! As though she were standing in the guts of a gigantic man, able to see the villi on the walls of his intestines move, as they went about their business of digestion.

"It is all one which of you I take," said the creature. "As long as you are strong and in good health. But you are too late. I do not know which of the ones I took yesterday was called Iwys. It may be this one I show you now."

She put her hands to her mouth; she wished she could put them over her eyes, but something forced her to watch what happened. A sphincter at the far side of the pouch opened, and the greenish light grew brighter. Beyond the sphincter she could see—

A human form. And yet not altogether human. It could have been man or woman. It had two arms, two legs. But all over its upper torso, and shrouding its head, was alien flesh, clinging, growing. Only in the place where the human eyes should have been were there still two recognizable

features, they were eyes, yes, but not human eyes. Flat, wide, lidless, with enormous pupils like pools of the night sky.

They were dull and unaware.

"Almost ready," said the creature. "When the sun comes tomorrow I shall send them out."

"What—what do you take our people for?" she gasped through a throat dry and constricted with terror.

"To spread my kind," said the creature flatly. "Each year I send out a few like these. Your people give me strong limbs to carry my children far and fast, and to dig them a burrow before they are old enough to grow by themselves."

The sphincter oozed shut with a sucking noise. "I have no use for you," said the creature. "I will kill you if you wish, or let you go. Next year perhaps you would be useful to carry one of my children. But tell me something—why has one of your kind never come willingly to me before?"

Sally screamed; two worlds whirled about her, and she fell. The tolling vanished from her ears, and instead there was the screeching of car brakes, and the high, alarmed shouting of human voices.

Bella Rowall let the gauze curtain drop back into place over the window and turned to her husband with a self-satisfied air.

"Well?" she said challengingly. "Looks as if I was right, doesn't it? The little fool nearly got herself run down by a car that time. Next time it may be a bus, and buses don't stop so easily."

Arthur Rowall scowled at his bleached-blond, sleazy wife. "You're only making excuses for your own softness," he said harshly. "You know as well as I do that so long as this Ercott girl is walking the streets in a body like that, she's liable to meet someone intelligent enough to listen to what she has to say and figure out the truth."

Bella gave a scornful snort of laughter. "Who?" she de-



manded. "More likely they'd stick her in a mental hospital and 'cure' her of her delusions by force. No, I stick by what I said — it's better, and safer for you and me, to let her drink and worry herself into a genuine breakdown. That'll fix things tidily."

"Meatime *we* worry ourselves the same way every time she leaves the house," snapped her husband. "If you'd let me rig the gas meter the way I wanted to the first night she came here—"

"There'd have been hell to pay. Not everybody hides a mind as dumb as yours, Arthur. Suppose she had gone out the way you wanted, in full possession of her faculties and quite aware of the fact that she didn't gas herself—"

"It would have looked like an accident!"

"I don't know about looking like an accident," said Bella; she twitched the curtain aside again to see what was going on in the street now. "It would certainly have been a mistake. There—what did I tell you? Someone picked her up, and she's walked off on her own again. I don't think you appreciate how ashamed that girl is of what she thinks must have happened to her. She's so ashamed, she'll keep it to herself until it breaks her to bits."

"You'd better be right," said Rowall. "You'd *better* be. Maybe I should follow her and make sure."

"Come off it!" Bella roared. "There's no risk of anybody putting two and two together. Have *you* ever met anyone who'd accept such a fantastic idea without trying to explain it away? Of course you haven't. People like that don't live around here."

"It's not the average person I'm worried about," Rowall said. "It's the open-minded idiot who'll swallow anything—the eccentric."

"Can you imagine Sally Ercott putting her trust in a screw-ball? Nuts! She'll be back, more frightened and confused than ever."

She gave her husband a mirthless grin, and finished, "I do have to congratulate you on the beautifully sinister way you imply what you hope to make her do eventually. That by itself would probably be enough to drive her crazy sooner or later."

### CHAPTER III

SOMEONE was helping her to her feet, inquiring in anxious tones whether she was all right. Her vision was blurred; she staggered a little, and when she reached out for support her hand rested on the hood of a shabby old sports car which had come to a halt literally inches from where she had fallen on the hard street. Half a dozen curious people had stopped to see what was going on; now that they could see she was recovering, they were moving away again. Another car honked as it wormed past the stationary sports car, and the driver gave them a casual glance as he went by.

She managed to quiet the raging tumult in her mind, and remembered that she had been asked a question. "Yes—yes, I'm all right, thank you," she said, and forced a smile. "What happened?"

"Apparently you had a dizzy spell. You were standing at the curb, and then you stumbled and fell into the street," said the young man who had helped her up. He was young: brown-haired, longed-faced, with horn-rimmed glasses, wear-



ing a raincoat. "You gave me quite a scare—I damn near smashed into you."

By now she was beginning to see more clearly. At first the startlement of the near disaster would have blinded him to her appearance, Sally thought. Now, though, she could almost read what was in his mind as he tried to reconcile her husky, pleasant voice and educated accent with her shabby, slept-in, much-stained clothing, her chapped lips, her bare legs and broken-heeled shoes.

"You—you ought to see a doctor," the young man ventured.

"Yes, I know. I—I *am* going to see one," Sally improvised. God, this man's questioning eyes! She felt as if he was looking straight through her, seeing her visibly crusted with the scabs of some loathsome disease. "I'll be all right now. I'm sorry I gave you such a fright."

She stepped away from him determinedly, taking the greatest possible care about negotiating the curb, and began to walk quickly. She didn't look back, but she could feel the young man's puzzled gaze on the back of her neck.

*What can be happening to me?*

That vision which had begun in the hallway of Rowall's house had been like a memory of her own. As a chance similarity of environment, a remark, an event, reminds one of like occurrences in the past, so she had been reminded by the dark hallway of that wild, unearthly episode. The action of being reminded was so natural, so automatic, she felt sure it was normal and commonplace. If it had merely been the case that walking down the hallway reminded her of walking down another dark place towards another, not very different door, she would not have given the matter a second thought.

But to be reminded of walking into the heart of a mountain to save her lover from an alien monster! And to *feel*, deep inside, that she *was* remembering, as other people might recall things that happened to them as children!

"Please," said Sally under her breath, making it almost a

prayer, "don't let me be going mad."

Quite unaware of what she was doing, she had come to a halt on the pavement. Now a voice penetrated the fog of misery shrouding her: the voice of the young man who had nearly run her down.

"Hey therel"

She turned and saw that his beat-up car had drawn alongside her. He had reached over to open the passenger's door.

"Look, if you won't let me do anything else for you," he was saying, "at least allow me the ordinary privilege of taking a pretty girl to lunch."

She thought he was being sarcastic. The picture of herself seen in the mirror that morning rose up before her. And all of a sudden *now* (tenement room, cold, dirt) and *then* (boy friends, warmth, pretty clothes) telescoped in her mind. Men had done this for her often; true, the car was more likely to be a new Jaguar or Daimler than a twenty-year-old MG in need of a wash-down like this one . . .

The hopelessness of her situation overwhelmed her. She saw the street swim around her as her eyes filled with tears. Loathing herself, feeling that this was the crown of her degradation, she got into the car.

She sat staring through the windshield as he reached past her and slammed the door before moving back into the stream of traffic.

"My name's Nick Jenkins," he said conversationally. "I don't care whether you tell me yours or not. All that worries me is the fact that you're obviously in a mess, and if I can't help fish you out of it, maybe somebody I know can. You *are* pretty, damn it, and you've got a lovely voice. What the hell has happened to you?"

"I don't know," whispered Sally.

Jenkins shrugged. "All right, so it's none of my business."

With an impressive growl belying its elderly looks, the



car raced through an exiguous gap in the traffic and swung into a broad, tree-lined avenue. Sally gasped. They were even now only five or ten minutes' walk from the place where she had been living; how, in the months since she had found herself stranded in this quarter of London, had she avoided wandering out of those squalid alleys and into this handsome road? Had she perhaps been glorying in her downfall, deliberately magnifying it to herself? The idea horrified her. She felt a sudden urge to convince Jenkins of the truth of what she had just said.

"I *don't* know!" she insisted, surprising herself with her own vehemence. "I can never remember! I can't remember anything about myself before a few weeks ago—"

That wasn't the whole of the truth, of course. But how to explain that she *did* remember, perfectly clearly—only what she recalled was all wrong?

"You do need a doctor, then," Jenkins said flatly. He signaled other traffic to pass him and pulled in at the side of the road. "You mean you have amnesia?"

"It's worse than just that," Sally said, and shivered.

"Well, no one can help you till you give them a chance. You strike me as being the calm type — bottling your troubles up inside you till they burst you wide open." He got out and opened her door for her. "You might get into practice by telling me, but you'd better get some food inside you first. When did you last have a square meal?"

"God knows," she said bitterly. "Last week, maybe."

"Better make this a small one, then."

He took her into the restaurant and ordered soup and dry bread. The smell of good cooking was so pleasant to Sally that she barely noticed the disapproval in the eyes of the waitress who brought her food. While she was eating, Jenkins sipped slowly at a cup of coffee and let a cigarette burn to ash in front of him.

"Good," he said when she had finished the soup. "Like a smoker?"

She took the cigarette and had to steady it with her hand to keep it in the flame of his lighter. Then she sat back and tried to relax. She failed. Jenkins had removed his glasses, and without them he looked so ridiculously youthful that Sally almost laughed at herself for thinking even momentarily, that he might be able to help her. He had called her pretty—rat-tailed hair, filthy coat, shoes without heels and all! Lord, what nonsense!

"You're broke and you've lost your memory," he was saying thoughtfully. "But that can't be the whole story, because you must have taken quite a long time to get to your present state. Do you remember your name?"

"Yes," said Sally wearily. "Sally Ercott. I know I'm aged twenty-five. But that's about all. I can't remember my family, or where I used to live, or any of my friends if I had any, or where my job was."

"Still, if you know your name—how about National Assistance? It's kept me from starving more than once."

"I didn't have my insurance card, and I don't know my number, and I never collected it before so I didn't know what to do, and—"

"And you didn't like to ask anybody," Jenkins finished for her. "I might have guessed. That accounts for the fact that you haven't seen a doctor, nor called the Missing Persons Department at Scotland Yard to find out if they were looking for you. Have you done that?"

Sally shook her head dumbly. "I—I was afraid to. I didn't know how I could face anybody, especially people who knew me before this happened . . ." Her voice trailed away.

"Look," said Jenkins, stubbing his cigarette, "there's one thing you'd better get straight right away. You aren't unique. You've probably been pretending to yourself that you've



suffered such an unparalleled catastrophe you have to hide the fact. Bunk. There are thousands of people who are sick and down-and-out, damn it.

Sally felt the need to drive home to this assured and irritating young man that her downfall *was* unique, her degradation *was* unparalleled. She said bitterly, "All right. I live around the corner in a filthy room in a house owned by a man who sends his wife out on the streets and who's hoping that when I get desperate enough I'll go the same way. I owe him rent, but he's been co-operative about it because he thinks I'll give in eventually. I have to sleep in my clothes on a pile of cushions because I have nothing else to keep me warm. I can't afford gas for the fire. The light bulb has blown and I can't buy another. Last night someone gave me a pound for the pawn ticket on my watch, and I bought half a bottle of gin and drank myself stupid because I couldn't stand it any longer."

Her voice grew shrill as she finished, "How do you think I could explain *that* to people who used to know me?"

Jenkins slammed his palm on the table. "God, what a selfish, *vain* remark! What about the worry you've caused your family? Doesn't it matter to you that somewhere people are driving themselves insane wondering what's happened to you? No, it seems it doesn't. All you're bothered about is saving yourself a well-deserved punch in the ego! Is it your fault you've had a breakdown? Why are you carrying such a load of *guilt*—do you think you've committed a murder or something? You're sick, and you've got to face the fact that you need curing like any other invalid."

Her face went scarlet, and she pushed back her chair as if to get to her feet. That was more than she could bear—to be told she ought to be ashamed of her shame, not of her degradation. Jenkins glared at her. "Wait a minute!"

For no reason that she could think of, she waited.

"I'm going to give you a choice that is no choice. Either

you let me take away this excuse you've given for skulking in a Paddington backstreet—get you a bath and a shampoo and some clean clothes—”

Sally fancied she could see in Jenkin's eyes something like the expression she had so often detected in Rowall's. A small voice in her head said: *You only have to wait till they get desperate . . .*

“Or?” she said coldly.

“Or I'll give your name and description to the first policeman I meet, tell him you're missing from home and have lost your memory, and get the authorities to rescue you by force. It's up to you. I think you'd rather go back to your friends in a presentable condition and on your own feet than in the company of a policeman.”

*You only have to wait till they get desperate . . .*

Suddenly Sally found she didn't care any longer; her pride, her insistence on standing by herself, melted away, and she gave a slow nod. *What the hell? I am desperate, and it's no good lying to myself any longer. If I try to make out on my own after this, there's only one way I can go. Down.*

Jenkins called for the bill and paid it. Sally felt that the coins tinkling in the saucer on the table were like the bell of a cash register ringing up the sale of her soul.

## CHAPTER IV

HE TOOK HER only a short distance, into a small square off the long tree-lined avenue down which they had driven earlier. He parked the car outside a row of handsome old houses which had been converted into apartments, and took her indoors. She barely noticed what was going on until she found herself in a large, high-ceilinged room, aggressively



contemporary in its décor and furnishings, and blessedly, wonderfully warm.

Once more *now* and *then* telescoped in her mind. This was the sort of environment she had known before . . . She didn't let the thought go further than that. But how wonderful to own so many *things*! There were shelves and shelves of books, stacks of records, a record player, a tape recorder, pictures—so many individual items she grew dizzy in a ridiculous attempt to count them one by one.

Jenkins had shut the door behind her. Now he had gone into an adjacent room and was doing something that sounded busy. Sally listened, wondering if she ought to turn around and run out of the house; before she could make up her mind to do so, he was back.

"All right," he said, and there was determination in his voice. He had put his glasses back on when they left the restaurant, and was still wearing them, so he no longer looked too ridiculously youthful. "I think you had better start with a bath and shampoo. If you go into the bedroom you'll find a dressing gown and a couple of towels set out. I'll run your bath while you're undressing. There's a bottle of shampoo in the bathroom—I'll show you where. And I want you to give me your clothes.

"What?" said Sally wonderingly. Jenkins looked uncomfortable, even embarrassed, but he went on firmly.

"I don't want to run the risk of you deciding to walk out while I'm gone. I can't see you running off wearing nothing but a dressing gown. I'm sorry, but—" He spread his hands. Then he turned to a table close at hand, on which stood his telephone; he took up the pad and the pencil which lay there for note-taking, and scribbled something down. "Now," he said, and drew a deep breath, "what sizes do you take in clothes?"

"I—I—do you mean you want to go out and *buy* me new things? You must be crazy! I couldn't let you do that!"

"Look at yourself," said Jenkins pitilessly. "Oh, don't worry—I'll send you the bill for what I buy. I'm not that well off."

"But—"

"Wrap them up in your coat and give me the bundle, if you prefer it that way," said Jenkins, uncannily divining the excuse she was making to herself. She was slightly shocked at the wordly wisdom implicit in the remark. Then she forgot it, and went silently into the bedroom with her head downcast.

She was desperate, she told herself. And desperate does as desperate is.

Slowly, behind the closed door, she took off her clothes and put on the dressing gown. It was thick and masculine and comfortable. The mere touch of a different fabric on her skin was in itself a reward, and she felt suddenly lighter of heart. Maybe Jenkins wasn't so bad . . .

She bundled up her clothes as she had been directed, and when there was a tentative knock at the door she said, "Come in."

Jenkins entered, took up the bundle of clothes with a nod and tossed them into a closet. He locked the closet door and pocketed the key.

"I suppose you might break it open," he said. "But you'd need to want to get away pretty badly. Now, tell me your clothing sizes."

"Everything?"

"Everything," said Jenkins shortly.

She told him; he noted the details carefully, including stockings and shoes. "I'll get you a pair of flat-heeled slippers," he said musingly. "I don't think you'd better have proper shoes without trying them on. How about a dress? What colors do you like?"

"Oh, anything." She made an impatient gesture. "What do *you* like?"



"Red," he said promptly. "Only I never met a blonde who really enjoyed wearing bright colors. I'll get you a pastel—light blue or something like that." He put down the pencil and tore the sheet from the scratch pad. Quite unexpectedly, he gave a short nervous laugh.

"You know, this is really going to embarrass me," he said. "I've never in my life walked into the ladies' underwear department. Oh well, there has to be a first time for everything."

Suddenly, in that moment, Sally found she didn't dislike Jenkins after all. She smiled, and the smile woke light in her eyes that hadn't been there for weeks.

Jenkins pocketed his notes and picked up the towels from the bed. "Okay, I'll show you the bathroom and then get going. I shouldn't have to spend long on this. By the way though—how did you remember your sizes so quickly?"

"I didn't give it a thought," said Sally, staring. "How odd."

Jenkins shrugged. "Well, you remembered your name and other things—I believe it's usually only events which go when you get amnesia."

Later, soaking in the wonderful luxury of a hot bath, Sally thought of that remark. *Only events*. It fitted. The trouble was, though, that she did have memories of events. Fantastic, *unearthly* events, that didn't belong to her own life.

She knew that much. Now, trying to recapture exactly what it was that she had remembered in the hallway of Rowall's house, she found she could not. It was always the same. An event, an outside stimulus, reminded her, and she called to mind a casual reference to something which had happened to her. Only when the memory itself was presented to her consciousness, it was invariably so terrifyingly *wrong* that she fled into the depths of her mind, hunting the recollection of the real world in which she must have grown up.

Somewhere in this brain, she thought, there *must* be memories of childhood, of parents, of school. Instead, when she tried to think back, she found only utter and complete strangeness.

She felt very frightened again for a moment, and then the comforting embrace of the water reassured her. Everything might turn out all right after all. Jenkins had said she needed a doctor; that was perfectly true. Really, she must need a psychiatrist—why had she shrunk from seeking medical help? Maybe she had unconsciously inherited a belief that mental illness was somehow more shameful than physical.

And yet she didn't feel mentally ill at all. Most of the time—aside from the emptiness she was aware of when she sought for memories of her earlier life—she thought clearly and logically enough.

Frowning, she tried to dismiss the whole train of ideas, and dunked her head backward in the bath prior to reaching for the bottle of shampoo. This was the lazy way of washing her hair, but she was enjoying the bath so much that she could not summon the energy to get out and dry herself and wash her hair in the sink.

The sucking feel of the water behind her head was the trigger this time. At first she was only aware of a vague sensation of disquiet; she shampooed her hair and rinsed it and shampooed it again. It was only by degrees that she realized she was again fighting to retain her hold on reality.

*I must get out of the bath and rinse my hair properly at the sink,* she told herself firmly, *or it will be all dull with soap film.*

She splashed lather away from her eyes, and again, almost without conscious intention, bent her head back and submerged her scalp a third time. And—

*Laughing among the other girls in the shallow pools left between the rocks by the retreating tide, she raised her head*



around her. In this sun it would dry soon enough. She climbed out of the pool in which she had been bathing herself and stretched happily. The air and the water were both warm; the sky was a brilliant, wonderful blue, and the red rocks and the reddish-brown sand stretched away to the deep green sea.

Two of the other girls had brought a ball; now, seeing that she had risen from her bath, one of them called to her, inviting her to join them in a game with it. Without bothering to wrap the single length of cloth about her that served as clothing for men and women alike in the pleasant climate of this region, she delightedly agreed, and ran down onto the sand to catch the ball and send it bouncing back.

Soon the rest of the girls had finished bathing in the rock-pools; some of them joined the game with the ball, others chose to stretch out lazily and sleep or talk about their boy friends. Much time had passed when one of their number, who had been staring out to sea gave a frightened cry and threw up her arm, pointing.

On the edge of the ocean were four ominous black shapes; they were ships. Large ships. They had cast anchor where the water was as deep as a man's waist, and now men were pouring from them, splashing over the side and clambering onto the beach. Even at a distance it could be seen that they were big and strangely clad, and that each of them brandished a double-bitted ax or a mace.

She was standing on a rock in the center of a ring of her companions; the ball was in her hands and she was just about to throw it. Now, startled, and as horrified by the intrusion of the strangers as were all the other girls, she dropped the ball in astonishment and took an automatic step backwards.

Losing her footing on the slippery rock, she fell. The sucking sensation of water on the back of her head was the last thing she remembered before her head struck something terribly hard, and there was darkness, and water in her lungs.

Choking, terrified, Sally scrambled back to reality with a spluttering cry. She had let her head fall back so far in the tub that water rose into her mouth and nostrils; she blew it out with a gasp, and spat the foul soapy taste away.

Again. It had happened again.

There were footsteps outside, which barely penetrated her numbed consciousness; then someone tried the handle of the bathroom door and found it would not give.

"Are you all right?" said the familiar voice of Nick Jenkins. "Sally, are you all right?"

It was the first time she had heard him use her name. An overwhelming relief streamed through her body, making her shake and tremble like a leaf.

Coming back from a very long way away, she found her voice and spoke. "Yes, I'm all right. I'll be out in a moment."

She got up noisily and pulled the plug; then she dried herself and wrapped one of the two towels she had been given around her head. She took a deep breath and opened the door. Jenkins was standing there in the foyer. She made certain the dressing gown was pulled closely round her body and went out to him.

"Good God!" he said. He had taken off his glasses again. "Good God! You're as white as a sheet, and you're shaking fit to fall apart! Here, I'd better help you."

She leaned on his arm gratefully, and as he helped her into the living room, she whispered to herself, "Thank heavens somebody helped me after all."

She was ashamed of herself for having refused to recognize that she needed help for so long.



## CHAPTER V

"Bella!" Rowall shouted at the top of his lungs, and his wife came hurrying through from the kitchen without even taking the time to set down the saucepan she was holding. The look in Rowall's eyes warned her before she spoke that something disastrous had occurred.

"What is it?" she asked in a small voice.

"What is it? Only that your brilliant idea of giving the Ercott girl enough rope to drink herself crazy has paid off. And it's likely to ruin everything. It's damned lucky I got to hear about it as soon as I did."

"Calm down a bit, Arthur," Bella suggested. "Maybe it's not as bad as you think it is." She couldn't resist adding, "It usually isn't."

"Shut up and listen. I went around the corner to get a paper, and I heard the old man in the shop talking about the girl who nearly got run over outside here. That's her, isn't it? You're not going to tell me there've been two of them in one day." His tone was bitterly sarcastic.

"Well, what about her?"

"The old fool was making a great joke about how the young man driving the car picked her up a few minutes afterwards and drove off with her."

Bella's face went slowly white. She had to turn and set down the pan she was holding before she could trust herself to speak; Rowall went on at exactly the moment she managed to shape the first word.

"Fortunately it turns out the old man knows who the driver is — he lives just around the corner and buys his papers in the same shop. His name's Jenkins, and he drives a

pre-war MG, a dark green one. Sports model. Get a coat on and come out and help me look for it. The old man thinks he lives in one of the squares behind Sussex Gardens."

"Well, good Lord! What was all the panic about if you know who he is and where he's taken her?" snapped Bella. "If you ask me, she's decided to take up your suggestion and get herself some money."

"Idiot!" snarled Rowall. "Suppose she tells him the truth about herself? Suppose he's not as thick-brained as you *hope* he may be? Where do we find ourselves then?"

"Oh, he won't." Bella spoke with weary disdain. "I wish you wouldn't be so scared of your own shadow —"

"Shadow be damned!" roared Rowall. He was trembling in an ecstasy of fear and rage, and his voice rose to a shout. "You can't recognize danger when it comes up and pokes you in the belly! Get your coat on and come with me! I only hope we can pry this Jenkins off her before it's too late. You and your soft-minded imbecility! We'll wind up having to *make* her look for another body — and I said we ought to do that in the first place, remember?"

"Keep your voice down!" his wife said urgently. "All right, all right. If it'll give you any satisfaction, I'll come and look for her with you. But I'm damned sure you've been panicking over nothing, as usual."

In the room overhead, Clyde West straightened up and brushed off the knees of his trousers. His full-lipped face was set in a puzzled frown.

He had only caught part of what Rowall and his wife were saying, but the fabric of the house was thin enough for him to have heard Rowall's last explosion with perfect clarity. He didn't understand a bit of it, but the violence behind it worried him.

The Ercott girl had worried him since she first came here; he remembered how she had been crying in the hall on that rainy night, how he had seen her thrust money into Rowall's



hand to let her save the empty room on the floor above. He had heard the sound of her hopeless weeping as he went up to the bathroom later on, and imagined her alone in the totally bare room. He had hesitated with his hand stretched out to knock at the wooden panels of the door; he had looked at the hand poised before him, considered it for a moment, and drew it back. Probably she would tell him to mind his own business.

That was not the only time he had listened to her choking sobs, either from his room below or from the landing. He had seen her as she went about the house, cowering, not wishing to be seen, and wondered endlessly who she was, why she was here where she didn't belong.

He had wondered, too, about the attitude of the Rowalls towards their new tenant. He hated the house and its owners both; however, he had little choice as to where he could live, for he was trying to make out as an actor, and there were few parts available, so most of the time he had to get along on his carefully husbanded savings. This place he had was cheap, and he had made it fairly comfortable. He had seen worse back home in Australia.

But this Ercott girl — she had seen better, that was for sure.

Down below he heard the front door open, stay open long enough for two people to pass through, and shut again. He glanced from the window; yes, there were the Rowalls striding along, he with a face like thunder, she half a step behind him with an expression of resigned annoyance.

Resolution hardened in him. He didn't know what it was the Rowalls had in mind for Sally Ercott, but he was sure it was evil. Somehow he must try to get a step ahead of them, warn her, get this Jenkins to keep her away. If she came back to this house, he thought, she was done for.

Jenkins sat her in a comfortable armchair and hurried to

fetch a blanket to put around her shoulders. He dropped to his knees beside her and took her hand comfortingly.

"Can you tell me what happened?" he asked.

She knew. She could remember. That was strange; usually the memories vanished — but then that was hardly surprising, for she usually fled from them, with or without the help of alcohol. If she could remember, she could speak.

"Nick," she said pleadingly, "please listen carefully to what I say, and don't jump to the conclusion that I'm crazy."

He nodded assuringly. "I promise faithfully that I won't jump to any conclusions at all," he said. "I'll tell you what I think, that's all."

It was a candid remark; she accepted it. She sat back in the chair and crossed her legs, staring into vacancy. "Well, to start with, what would you expect me to tell you about my past? My childhood, I mean, and my background."

Jenkins considered. "I would guess that you had a pretty good education, because of your voice. You probably went to an exclusive school. Maybe you were trained as a model or for the stage, because you walk very gracefully."

"I feel that way, too. That's the sort of thing I ought to remember. Only — you know how something you see, or something someone says to you, can remind you of other things that took place years ago? Well, that happens to me.

"Only the things I remember having had happen to me can't *possibly* have happened to *me*."

"Such as?"

She told him about playing naked on the red beach with the other girls from the village, and how the warriors came from the black ships; how she had fallen backwards into the pool and struck her head. Jenkins listened with attention, not betraying the cynical disbelief she had half expected.

"So you would probably have drowned in the pool," he suggested. "The water would have covered your face."

She nodded. "Do you remember any other things like



that?" he went on. "For instance, had you had a — a vision like this when I nearly ran you down?"

She knit her brows. Why, of course. The hallway had become a sort of cave, and —

Jenkins read the mounting horror in her eyes before she gave it utterance, and said quickly, "If it's very dreadful, maybe you shouldn't —"

She shook her head. "It isn't so dreadful in its own context," she said. "I'll tell you about it."

When she had done, Jenkins shuddered. He had got up from the floor and taken a chair facing her while she was talking. Now he said, "I'm sorry, but I disagree. I think the idea of some monster using human beings to spread its young is absolutely disgusting."

"To me, as I'm sitting here," she hastened to agree, "it does seem horrible. But to the person I was at the time, it — it was just something I'd grown up with, gotten used to."

"Do you remember anything else about the creature? For example, how come it spoke Eng—how come it spoke a human language?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. "That's something I hadn't thought of, but you're quite right. Oh, I don't mean how could I understand it — after all, it was intelligent and could compel human beings to serve it, so I never gave that question a thought. But now that you mention it, I don't think the language it used was English, although I understood it."

"Logical. There isn't such a creature anywhere in the world, and hasn't been during the time that English has been spoken. Ergo, English wasn't spoken. How did this thing get its power over human beings, anyway?"

"Why, every year or so a few people in the city felt an uncontrollable urge to walk into the tunnels in the side of the mountain, down to where the thing lived underground. I don't know how the creature actually called them to come."

"You just mentioned a city. When you told me about playing on the beach with other girls, you said they came from a village. What was this city like, do you remember?"

She closed her eyes. The effort of recollection plowed shallow parallel furrows across her forehead. "It was quite big. It had wide roads, but the buildings were only one story high. There were carts and hand-trucks, but no cars. In the middle there was a big temple which nobody ever visited any more. When people first came to the place, they used to offer sacrifices there to try and stop the creature in the mountain from taking away any more of the young men and women. Eventually they realized it wasn't doing any good, so they stopped going there." She opened her eyes. "I'm afraid I'm talking hopeless nonsense, but you asked for it."

Jenkins shook his head. "You seem to me to be talking sense. It all hangs together. How about the village — the one all the girls came from?"

"Very small — only a few hundred people. No roads or anything. People grew vegetables and went fishing. There was a lot of fish. Young girls like me didn't have to work until they were betrothed, when they were taught to cook and weave and keep house. We were supposed to play on one side of the island and the boys on the other — they mostly learned to make nets and harpoons and get fish. Only of course sometimes we managed to creep across the island, especially at night, and meet our boy friends halfway."

It was amazing the richness and fullness of detail that crowded these out-of-place memories now that she was thinking about them without the beclouding terror that had blurred her mind before.

There was a brief pause while Jenkins reflected on what she had said. Then he got up.

"I better not keep you sitting here with that dressing gown on," he said. "I put the things I bought you in the



bedroom — I hope they'll do. While you're dressing, suppose I go through the phone book and see if anybody has lost a beautiful girl called Sally?"

She flushed. But she couldn't think of a sound reason why he shouldn't. He accepted her silence as consent, and went over to the phone. He was shuffling through the directory S to Z as she passed towards the bedroom.

"Not Urquhart, U - r - q," she said. "Ercott — E - r - c - o - double - t."

"Sorry," he said absently, and reached for E to K.

"Nick."

He looked up with a smile. "Yes?"

"Nick, you seem perfectly ready to accept these wild illusions of mine as if they really were memories. Why?"

"You said that's what they seem like to you, didn't you?"

"Yes," agreed Sally, and went on into the bedroom. Somehow, the possibility that the memories *might* be real troubled her more than the possibility that they were pure imagination.

## CHAPTER VI

The trouble melted in the sensuous delight of clean new clothes on her body. Even when she heard the ratching of the telephone dial, she made no attempt to eavesdrop on what Jenkins was saying.

He had remembered everything. Carefully she unwrapped each item; then she hung the dressing gown over a chair and hurried into the underthings. Standing before the long mirror in her slip, she undid the towel round her head and finished drying her hair. Then she borrowed a brush lying on the bedside table and stroked it into a shining glory it had

not known for months. At last she put on the dress — light blue, as he had said it would be — and looked at her reflection.

She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. It was a miracle. It was purely and simply a miracle.

The vague sound of Jenkins talking on the phone outside had stopped. She tore herself away from contemplation of the vision she had become, wishing only that she had some means of disguising her chapped lips and the tired circles of darkness beneath her eyes, and opened the bedroom door.

Jenkins was sitting in a chair chewing his lower lip. He looked up, and his astonishment was obvious. "Damnation!" he exclaimed. "I was right, wasn't I, when I said I was taking a pretty girl to lunch?"

Delighted, Sally danced a few steps forward across the floor, spinning round so that her skirt swung out around her thighs. She felt as if she had made an entrance on stage, in a fabulous period costume which made a whole auditorium hold its collective breath. It was like being a bride . . .

*The splendor of her clothes was dazzling. Around her hips was a skirt of thinly beaten gold leaf appliqued on heavy silk. Over her shoulders and crossing on her bosom were two magnificent panels of brocade, with fertility symbols and good-luck charms embroidered on them in red. Her waist was girdled with a belt of red and yellow hide; on her head was a crown of feathers and shells that towered almost her own height above her, and was so heavy her neck ached. Green paint outlined her eyes; red, her lips; blue, the fine veins on the backs of her hands. There was a ring with a stone set in it weighing down each finger, and every stone differed from its neighbor. Around each of her toes was a tiny leather strap with a bell attached, jingling as she moved. A necklace of solid metal plates an inch*



*square clung to her throat. It was the most gorgeous bridal array that had been seen in a hundred years.*

It passed. A few hours before it would have shaken her mind to its foundations; now Jenkins' contagious matter-of-factness steadied her and caused her to reflect that she could be, was being, helped. She did not have to bear her burden all alone.

He had not noticed her moment of shock. His face had relapsed into a deep-etched frown, and he was letting a cigarette burn towards his fingers with half an inch of ash balanced on it. He said, "Come and sit down. I'm afraid my bright idea wasn't so bright. I can't find anyone named Ercott in the directory at all."

Sally came forward and sat obediently. She didn't know whether to feel disappointed or relieved. "But I thought I heard you phoning," she said. "Were you calling information or something?"

"I did that, too," Jenkins answered. "But — well, I'm afraid I cheated a little. I called a friend of mine, Doctor Tom Gospell. I hope you don't mind."

Sally felt a quiver of apprehension. "A — a *doctor*?" she emphasized. "Not —"

"Not a psychiatrist, no. I'm sure you'll like him, by the way. His office isn't far from here; he's just got a few house calls to make and then he'll be over. I thought it would be wise, just in case — you know, in case you'd hurt your head or something."

Sally nodded.

"Well, all we can do just now is hang on till he comes. How are the clothes, by the way?"

"They're absolutely perfect, Nicky. It's so wonderful to have nice things to put on again."

As Sally spoke, the memory of herself in that fantastic barbarian bridal costume came back, "But it doesn't fit in with any of the other memories I've had! I don't know who

I was marrying, or whether I liked him or was being sold to him — all I know is that I was loving every moment of being a bride and having such gorgeous clothes. Although I really think they were hideous.”

Jenkins said astutely, “How old were you?”

“Why — why, I —” She stopped trying to pretend, and gaped openmouthed at him in undignified awe. “Nick, are you a mindreader or something?”

“No, of course not. I just make a habit of guessing wildly. I take it this particular shot in the dark was on target, and you were a mere child, too young to know what marriage was really about.”

She nodded speechlessly.

“Hmph!” he said, and put his chin in his palm.

The accuracy of his “shot in the dark” had shaken Sally. She felt a sudden need to know something about this imperturbable stranger, and leaned forward. “Nick, what *do* you do? Tell me about yourself.”

He looked slightly uncomfortable. “Well, as a matter of fact — I’m afraid people always find this rather ridiculous, but it’s the absolute truth — I’m an inventor. When I was at Oxford, I thought up two or three gadgets and patented them. A friend of mine sold them to a big commercial company, and they caught on so well that I got quite a lot of money. So, being as lazy a sort of guy as you’re likely to meet, I decided not to bother about working for a living.” He spread his hands vaguely. “When my bank balance runs low, I just think up a new gadget.”

“Sounds fascinating.” Sally stared at him. “And you really get enough out of these things to live on?”

“Well, not exactly. The firm that took my first three ideas was so pleased with them they sort of put me on a regular salary. They pay me five hundred a year on condition that I produce one new gadget a year in their particular line, which is household plastics, and give them first refusal on



anything which doesn't fall into that field. They must make at least five *thousand* out of the things they have of mine, so it doesn't really cost them much."

He dismissed his personal achievements with a wave. "Look, while you were getting dressed I had an idea. Can you draw?"

Sally blinked. "I think I can — a little. I'm not sure, though, because I don't think I've tried since before —"

"Well, here's a pencil and a pad. Suppose you try and draw some of the things you remember. I've got a perfectly sensible reason for asking this. You seem to be able to visualize these memories of yours very clearly, but it's hard for you to put them into words, isn't it? You can't get across the sort of little differences you want to describe. Maybe you can draw them. Let's try, eh? Suppose we start with this outfit you were wearing as a child-bride."

Obediently, Sally took the pencil and poised it over the paper. After a moment she started to sketch awkwardly, putting the tip of her tongue between her lips as she worked, like a small girl having trouble with her homework.

After a while she tore the sheet of paper off the pad and crumpled it up. "It's no good," she said resignedly. "I sort of remember it from the inside, if you follow me. I mean, I was actually wearing this outfit, so I didn't get a chance to see myself in it. Maybe there wasn't a mirror, or it was supposed to be unlucky or something."

"Very possible," agreed Jenkins. "Yes, I see what you mean about remembering it from inside. How about something you saw from a distance? Remember the black ships that came to shore when you were playing ball with the girls? You saw them, and the men that came from them."

"That's right," Sally agreed. She took up the pencil again; this time the sketch went ahead rapidly, and she gave a nod of satisfaction as she filled in each of the details.

"There!" she said when she had finished. "That's one of the men from the ships, battle-ax and all."

Jenkins took the pad from her. The figure was drawn in bold, definite strokes; obviously the picture had been very clear in Sally's mind as she worked. He felt a cold shiver crawl down his spine as he studied it.

"Sally," he said gently, "there's something odd about this drawing. Are you sure it's exactly as you remember it?"

"Why, yes."

"Then I think you — no, I'll let you say it. Sally, the man you've drawn here has *four arms*."

## CHAPTER VII

The sky over London had clouded up; a chilly breeze kicked at the young leaves on the trees. Clyde West wished to God he had stopped to put on an extra sweater as well as his coat when he left the house to follow the Rowalls.

He wasn't good at this detective work; however, he didn't think they had noticed his presence, because he rather self-consciously made use of the chance to alter his bearing, his manner of walking and the other little clues that give away identity at a distance. He reminded himself to walk like a tired man, a lively man, a lazy man, in turn. Now, though, he was getting to the stage at which he could only walk like a cold man. Which he was.

The Rowalls didn't seem to have a very clear idea of where they were going, to begin with. They had gone through all the squares in the neighborhood, looking at cars.



It seemed to be green MG's that interested them; presumably that was the type of car this man Jenkins drove. West had not heard that particular part of the argument between the Rowalls; the couple's actions, however, were filling in the gaps for him.

When they found a green MG parked in one of the squares, they went all along the nearby porches looking at the names on the doorbells. They drew blank fairly consistently. When they had covered a considerable distance from home, they halted and had a somewhat heated discussion. West contrived to look at them and appear to be going nowhere in a hurry at the same time. When he saw that they were starting back the way they had come, he dodged into a bookshop on the corner.

The Rowalls went past on the other side of the street, apparently having given up and decided to head for home. West followed them again, wondering what the hell he could have done anyway if they had found their prey. They were passing the entrance to one of the squares which they had previously searched, when Rowall caught at his wife's arm and pointed excitedly to a shabby, dark green car which had not been there when they came this way the first time.

West felt his heart sink and his throat grow dry. Rowall went back to his old game of checking names on doorbells, and this time he must have struck lucky, for he made a note on a slip of paper and then walked across the road into the middle of the square to look up at the windows of a first-floor apartment.

What were they going to do if this was the place they were looking for?

The couple talked in low tones for a moment, and then Rowall glanced around conspiratorially. He saw no one in sight likely to take any notice; West was in the shadow of a convenient doorway and couldn't be seen.

Going up to the sports car, Rowall reached rapidly inside

and put his hand up beside the steering wheel. He seemed to give a sharp tug. With another glance around, he stepped back, dusting his hands, and returned to his wife with a satisfied air.

He must have pulled loose the wires running to the ignition, West diagnosed. A convenient, if temporary, method of immobilizing the vehicle. The reason for the action escaped him—but then, he was unclear about the reason for anything the Rowalls were doing at the moment.

Once again they seemed to be disputing between themselves, with Rowall getting the better of it. At length he turned and began to walk away, while his wife, with a mutinous expression, took up a leaning position against a tree from which she could survey the entrance to Jenkin's apartment, and his car. When he had gone a short distance, Rowall turned and called something indistinguishable; his wife made an insulting gesture, and he went on his way with even greater energy and irritation.

Obviously there was a purpose in all this. West began to wish he hadn't felt compelled to try and help Sally Ercott; now he could do nothing but stand here watching the watcher.

Twenty minutes had passed, and he was tempted to leave and go somewhere to get warm, when Bella Rowall began to shift from foot to foot. She appeared to be suffering some kind of discomfort. West realized after a second's puzzlement what the trouble must be, and had to put his hand to his mouth to stifle a laugh. Praise be for the human metabolism.

Bella Rowall stuck it out for another fifteen minutes; then, as there was still no sign of her husband returning, she flounced off from her post with a hurt expression and disappeared down a side street. West seized his chance; he ran across the road and up the steps to the door which she had been watching. He pressed the bell marked Nicholas Jenkins and waited anxiously for a reply.



There was no mistake. Sally stared at the drawing she had executed, hoping that some miracle would transform the two brawny left arms clutching the raised ax into one left arm and one right. But he had two right arms already.

Sally's face paled. "Nick, I *must* be crazy. There never was a man with four arms like that!"

"You told me earlier not to jump to conclusions," Jenkins remarked mildly. "You seem to be jumping to conclusions yourself now. Your mind seems to be relaxing a bit already—you've told me about three of these memories so far. Any more?"

"There've been dozens," said Sally. "Oh, all right—I'll see if I can tell you about some of them. Last night, for example . . ."

At first the recollection of the horror that the memory had brought was more vivid than the memory itself. It was like trying to call back a dream dreamt last year, and the alcoholic fog in which she had tried to lose herself muddled her.

Bit by bit an icy wind seemed to drive the fog away, and she spoke of the way the people grew hungry in a bad season, when game was scarce and ice lay thick on the rivers and the winter seemed as though it would never end. That time she had been old and toothless, and she had huddled shivering in the corner with nothing to keep her warm but one stiff old piece of hide. The young people crowded her away when she tried to get near the little fire, and piece by piece they had also stolen her clothes for themselves, no matter how much she raved and threatened to haunt them when she died. There had been no meat in the pot for days now, not even the carcass of a small animal frozen to death in the snow. The children had cried ceaselessly at first, but now most of them were too weak even to cry.

Yesterday her grandson, now the head of the family, had started to cast meaningful glances at her. Now he uttered

what was in his mind, saying that the old woman was useless, she had borne her children, now she was only a gaping mouth depriving the youngsters of precious food. His wife, the fat one from over the hill who had always hated the old woman, chimed in with the suggestion that there was even so a little meat on her scrawny frame . . .

The picture of the man advancing menacingly towards her with his hunting knife in his hand was again so vivid that it brought sweat to Sally's forehead, and she had to grip the sides of the chair to control herself.

"I suppose that one was triggered off by the fact that I was lying on the floor trying to keep warm with only my coat to cover me," she said.

"Could be. Could you draw the man who was going to kill you?"

Sally felt half afraid to say yes, although the man was so clear in her mind she knew she could depict him easily. She studied him mentally; no, there was nothing incongruous or inhuman about this one. She decided to risk it, drew with swift, certain strokes, and waited while Jenkins looked at the result.

When he said nothing, she asked shrilly, "Is there anything wrong this time?"

Jenkins put the drawing aside. "You haven't given him any hair or ears," he said reluctantly. "His head is as round as a cannon ball."

*Well, of course it was . . .* Sally stifled the tart reply and put her hand to her shoulder-length blonde hair. In the memory, she knew beyond doubt, none of the participants had hair or external ears.

She said faintly, "He has ears like a snake's—just a slit in the skull and a hole leading to an eardrum inside."

"He would have," Jenkins agreed.

"Is that all you can find to say?"

"Do you want to be congratulated on the vividness of



your imagination or the precision of your memory?" Jenkins asked acidly. "I mean just what I say—"

The doorbell interrupted his sentence, and he glanced at his watch. "Funny—that can't be Tom Gospell already, I'm certain. Wonder who—Oh well, I'd better go see."

While he hurried downstairs, Sally took back her two drawings and studied them uncomprehendingly. She was still seeking an answer to the riddle when Jenkins came back, looking completely mystified.

"Sally, do you know any Australians?" he demanded.

"I—I don't think so, unless maybe from before."

"That doesn't fit at all. That was an Australian who rang the bell. He asked if I was Nicholas Jenkins, and I said I was, and then asked if I had a Miss Ercott here. Of course I said I hadn't, but I suppose I was so surprised I gave myself away, because he didn't believe me. He said, 'Well, tell her for God's sake to keep away from the Rowalls. They know she's here. I don't know what they're fixing to do to her, but it's something horrible.' What did he mean by that?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Rowall are the landlords of the place where I've been living," said Sally in a faint voice. "How did he know? How did this man know I was here? It—maybe it was the man who lived on the floor below me in the house."

"Yes, I decided it wasn't much good pretending you weren't here if he was out to help you. I asked how he'd found me, and he said he'd followed Rowall and his wife when they came to look for you. He said he had to go, because Mrs. Rowall was watching the house and would come back any moment, and she would recognize him. That fits, doesn't it? And then he said something which really shook me."

Sally looked at him dumbly, like a frightened doe.

"He said, 'It doesn't mean anything to me, but maybe it will to Miss Ercott. They said they were going to have to

make her look for another body.' And then he ran off."

"It sounds horrible!" Sally exclaimed. "But it doesn't mean anything to me. What shook you about it—the way he said it?"

"No, not the way he said it," Jenkins replied absently, going over to the window. It was not dark yet by a long way, and he hesitated in the act of drawing the curtains.

"No, we don't need to be that obvious," he said. "Sally, come over here in the corner, without letting yourself be seen in the window. Look out behind the curtain—don't move it more than you can help. There's a woman down below. Do you recognize her?"

Sally complied quickly, and nodded. "That's Mrs. Rowall all right," she said in a low voice. "Nick, what on earth am I to do?"

"I don't think you have a lot to be afraid of," Jenkins said.

"But I have! A nervous breakdown, and now this foul man Rowall and his wife after me. I'm damned sure it's not just his back rent he's after me for—" She broke off. "Damn it, why don't you tell me? Do you know what's wrong with me, can you even guess? If I'm not already crazy, worrying's going to make me that way!"

"I can guess," said Jenkins levelly. "It's a wild guess, like the one about the child-bride, and though I was right on that point I won't necessarily be right this time. But it was this guess that made me sit up and take notice of what that Australian said just now about making you look for another body"

"I don't think you're insane. I think when you get these memories you really are remembering, or visualizing at any rate. And what you're seeing is life on other worlds."

"What?" said Sally faintly in a very small voice. All her worries about what Rowall and his wife might do faded from her mind.

Taking a final look at Bella Rowall, as though to fix her



appearance in his mind, Jenkins said, "Come away from here and sit down. You don't have to worry about this Rowall couple while you're in this apartment. I did a little tinkering a while ago, and I imagine it's about as thoroughly burglar-proofed as any place could be. Sold a couple of the ideas I worked out for the job—

"Yes, I meant what I said. It seems perfectly logical to me. Obviously there has never been on Earth a race of bald men with snakes' ears, or marauding barbarians with four arms, or mountain creatures which steal away human beings to plant their young. If not here, then elsewhere. After all, there are millions upon millions of stars in the sky, and we know that some of them have planets. The laws of chance insist that there must be thousands of planets on which people like us could exist."

"But how could memories of these others planets be here—inside my head?"

"Well . . . I say again that this is all guesswork of the wildest sort, but something strikes me as significant about the various episodes you've described to me. Each of them dealt with a moment in which you were on the point of death—in the tunnel with the mountain creature, on the beach where you probably drowned in a pool, among these starving tribesmen who proposed to eat you. Even the memory of yourself as a child-bride might well qualify as the most vivid recollection of a whole life, especially if you weren't really going to be married to a man, but to a deity of some kind, and accordingly sacrificed—but damn it, there I go guessing again.

"Nonetheless, my thesis stands. Each of these memories could well be the one which was uppermost when the consciousness, whatever that may be, carried it over into death."

"Oh, no, Nick! There must be a more rational explanation."

Jenkins shrugged. "Okay, let's try and figure one out. But before we go on, do you think in any of these visions you

saw the night sky clearly enough to be able to draw the patterns of the stars?"

She shook her head.

"Well, how about this world on which you were starving and freezing to death? Were the winters always long?"

Sally screwed up her forehead. "I—I think they were."

"What was it like when the spring came?"

"Why, like the end of any other winter. I can picture it now, actually—the ice flaking off the eaves of the huts, the jams breaking in the rivers, the suns going up the sky—"

"What did you say?"

"The suns—no, the sun, I mean. No, that's not right." Sally gave him a hurt look. "Nick, that's idiotic. But I did mean suns. Two of them. Small ones."

"That fits. The people with snakes' ears live on a planet turning around a double star. No wonder the winters are always long—the orbit must be incredibly far out for the planet to be stable."

A great light seemed to be dawning on Sally. She said, "I think I knew. Nick, where's my coat? I'll show you!"

Jenkins hurried with her to open the closet in which he had locked Sally's old clothes; she fumbled in the pocket of the coat and produced the magazine she had sat reading (was it only last night?) as she sobbed in terror in her empty room. "That's right," she said. "I did know. I think I'd instinctively decided the things I was remembering could never have happened on Earth."

"So you turned to the imagination of science-fiction writers to see if you could find a clue to them. It's not exactly conscious logic, but it's logic."

He had a solemn, chastened expression which would have suited him better if he had been wearing his glasses. He said, "It's like walking into the middle of that magazine you have there, isn't it?"

Sally fought hard to keep her teeth from chattering; her



stomach felt as if it was being stirred with an egg-beater. She said, "You take it all so calmly that I can't really think you believe it."

The doorbell rang, and Jenkins looked out the window again as he spoke. "I need some time to get used to the idea. So do you, I imagine. That's Tom Gospell now—I can see his car outside. I'll go let him in."

Troubledly, Sally awaited his return with the doctor, who proved to be a huge man with an untidy red beard. He seemed unable to speak in a tone quieter than a bellow, so that from a distance his most friendly remarks sounded as if he was insulting a life-long enemy. He wore unpressed gray flannels and a tweed jacket, the pockets bulging with reams of scribbled notes. Sally took to him, not exactly on sight, but when he spoke to her.

"Nick tells me you're one up on the astronomers, young woman," he boomed. "Good for you. Nick, get in the bedroom and close the door. You, young lady, take off your dress and your slip, if you've got one on, and lie down on that couch. This is not an invitation, it's an order, and all I want to do is look. Nick!"

Jenkins disappeared, chuckling, and Gospell fished out his stethoscope. Briskly he checked Sally's heart, her lungs, her reflexes, the dilation of her pupils; made her stand on one leg with her eyes closed and noted how long she lasted without falling. When the examination was over, and she was getting dressed again, he gave her some simple problems in mental arithmetic.

"Young woman," he growled when she had solved them, "aside from the fact that you don't seem to have been eating or sleeping properly lately, you're in damned good health. Let's have a look at your scalp."

With surprising gentleness the blunt fingers probed among the roots of her hair. "No—no sign of a blow or injury of any

sort," Gospell told her. He returned his instruments to their leather case and called for Nick to come back.

"Let's sit down and talk this over. I'd like to hear what you've got to say," he suggested, pulling a large, much-used pipe from one of his overloaded pockets and tamping tobacco into it as he spoke. "Sorry to have gone for you so promptly, young woman—what is your name, anyway?"

"Sally."

"Suits you. What was I saying? Oh, yes. I wanted to take you by surprise, so to speak. Sometimes psychological odd-balls show up better that way. What Nick had been telling me struck me as so improbable I wanted to make sure you weren't off your rocker. Sorry to have doubted you, Nick."

Jenkins was conscious of Sally's puzzled eyes on him. He explained quickly, "Tom—uh—thinks I'm wasting myself on gadgets."

"You are, damn it! If you weren't so congenitally lazy you'd be where you belong, in a mental hospital. On the *staff*, damn it," he added to Sally as he saw a mischievous glint in Jenkins's eye.

"However—" He broke a match trying to strike it for his pipe, cursed, and lit a second one. "All right, Nick. Go over it again, slowly, from the beginning, and forgive me in advance if I tell you the whole idea's bunkum." He sat back in his chair with a resigned expression.

Jenkins went over the whole story in detail, showing Sally's drawings when he came to them, and finishing with the mysterious message from the Australian who had come to warn Sally of what the Rowalls were up to.

"Make her look for another body?" said Gospell incredulously. "Who do they think she is? Burke and Hare?"

"But it fits, doesn't it? If I make any sense out of what's happened, it only adds up to the certainty that you, Sally"—he turned and looked directly at her—"remember existence on some other planet or planets; that the Rowalls know; and



that somehow the fact that you remember is dangerous to them. They want to make you look for another body—not kill you. Think it over.”

“I have,” Sally said tremulously. “And it terrifies me.”

Gospell was combing his beard with his fingers. “And you say that’s the Rowall woman out there watching this place. All right, granted it has a kind of lunatic consistency, this theory of yours. Who are these Rowalls supposed to be?”

“I don’t know,” said Jenkins. “But it looks as if somehow it can’t just have been chance that when Sally first had these visions of hers, and discovered she couldn’t remember her home and so on, she found herself in Rowall’s place and couldn’t get away.”

“Are they doing anything except keep an eye on the house?”

“Not a thing.”

Jenkins looked around and judged that it was now dark enough to draw the curtains. He got up and did so, and stiffened on looking down into the square.

“Well, that must be Rowall himself out there now. His wife seems to have gone. I hope he didn’t notice me looking at him.”

“Well, whoever or whatever the Rowalls may be, the boobytraps you’ve rigged up around this flat ought to keep them out,” Gospell grunted. “Uh—couldn’t you immobilize him by calling Scotland Yard and telling them about his living on immoral earnings, or something?”

“I suppose we could,” said Jenkins doubtfully, but Sally shook her head.

“Please . . . I don’t want to have to try and explain what’s happened to me to the police or anyone else.”

“You might have trouble, at that,” Gospell agreed. “I don’t know exactly what I can do for you, young woman. I could recommend you to a psychiatrist I know, but he’d probably try and beat these memories of yours into Freudian

analogies with real life. I think the best I can possibly do is to write you a prescription for some tranquilizers, just in case it gets too much for you to bear again.

"In all probability, whatever the true nature of your peculiar memories, they've been precipitated by a shock. It would be my guess that when you've had a chance to get used to an ordinary life again, you'll find your own memories coming back bit by bit. I don't know of anyone I could better commend you to the care of than Nick here, who's one of the most level-headed people I know. You're taking on a load of trouble, Nick, but if you think it's better that way than a hospital . . ."

Sally realized this must refer to something they had discussed before Gospell came up to the flat. She said, "Oh, no! I couldn't impose on you, Nick. You've spent pounds on me already today, and I can't let you—"

"You want to go back to Rowall's?" put in Nick glacially. "Of course not. You're broke. I'd cheerfully make you a sizable loan if I thought you just wanted to get the hell out of here, but what would you do? I'm not proposing to imprison you, damn it! Even if Rowall knows you're here, you're perfectly safe for the time being, and as soon as I can track down anyone who used to know you, or your family or whoever, I'll be rather relieved to unload the worry on to them.

"Meantime—and it should only be a few days—that bedroom's yours; I often turn it over to visitors and sleep in here on the couch. Ask Tom's opinion, why don't you? The only real alternative, I'm afraid, is a hospital—and maybe you wouldn't find such sympathetic listeners there."

Sally hesitated, but she knew his argument made sense.

"Settled," said Jenkins, and got to his feet. "Come on, Tom—I'll go downstairs with you. I have to go out and do



some shopping for supper. And I forgot to get Sally a toothbrush."

## CHAPTER VII

Sally was alarmed at the idea of being left alone; Jenkins patiently showed her all the devices he had installed to burglar-proof the apartment. "And if worse comes to worse call the police," he finished. "We don't even know for sure if Rowall means to do anything, remember."

His voice sounded hollow and unconvincing even to himself, but Sally nodded a reluctant acquiescence, and he gave her a bright smile as he turned to go downstairs with Gospell.

They separated on the doorstep, Gospell promising to call later in the evening to find out whether Sally had had any more attacks of inhuman memory. Then, looking in his bulky overcoat like a vast and amiable bear, the doctor went back to his own car and roared into the gathering dark.

Jenkins climbed into his MG and thrust the key in the ignition. When he pressed the starter, nothing happened.

This was not an unknown phenomenon with a twenty-year-old car, even one which had been doctored by an owner with a knack for fiddling with motors. Jenkins swore, and glanced round at the vague shape of Rowall standing across the road watching his apartment—probably, now, watching him.

Trying to assume a nonchalant air, he got out, lifted the

hood and checked half a dozen obvious possible faults. It was not until he had been through the list that it occurred to him the damage might be deliberate.

He got back in the driver's seat and felt behind the dash; dangling ends of wire met his probing fingers. If that was all, he could fix it in no time. Getting out his penknife and a roll of insulating tape from the glove compartment, he squirmed under the dash so that he could see what he was doing.

Still contorted into an uncomfortable position, he put his hand around to the starter, pressed it, and discovered that he had successfully settled the problem. Dusting his hands and muttering curses, he wriggled back into driving position.

"All right, Mr. Jenkins," said a quiet voice. "Don't move till I tell you to."

Jenkins felt his heart stand still. The man must have opened the passenger's door very quietly while he was working under the dash. He stood there with his face shadowed by the brim of a soft hat, and in his right hand there was something which looked very much like a gun.

"Who the devil are you?" Jenkins said harshly, trying to decide whether it was dark enough inside the car for him to engage first gear and accelerate out of the way before the other could react.

"You probably wouldn't know me, Mr. Jenkins," said the man. "However, you doubtless recognize this weapon in my hand. I think I'm rather good with it."

"You're out of your mind," said Jenkins, and let his hand fall to the brake lever, releasing it.

A noise no louder than a paper bag bursting, and he felt and saw the spurt of hot smoke as Rowall casually fired the gun in front of his face. "You take a lot of convincing for a person afraid of death," he said. "Leave the brake alone till I tell you you can use it."



He got into the passenger's seat, contriving to keep the gun aimed at Jenkins, and slammed the door. "All right. I want you to take me to number five Mamble Row."

"Where on earth is that?" Jenkins snapped. "And what the hell do you think you're doing, ordering me about as if I was a taxi driver?"

"If you don't do as I tell you, I shall shoot you."

"Murder happens to be a crime." Jenkins felt the sweat crawling down his face now.

"Not fatally. Enough to cause you considerable pain. Now start moving! You know very well where Mamble Row is—you nearly ran over a girl there this morning. The one you picked up so neatly afterwards."

"So? Has something happened to her since?"

"No, but it will." Rowall—it *must* be Rowall—grinned unpleasantly. "You tripped over something very important, Mr. Jenkins, and it's for your own good that I'm trying to keep you out of the way for a while, just long enough to get the girl out of your flat."

"So you're a burglar too?" Somehow Jenkins managed to match and even surpass Rowall's grin. "Well, I wish you luck if you try and break into my place. I spent two weeks working on the alarms and booby traps."

Rowall shrugged. "That doesn't matter. Sooner or later, if we can't get in, the girl will have to come out, or she will walk in front of a window and we can shoot her. I'd prefer it a different way myself. But now start driving!"

The sudden menace in his tone, combined with the menace of his previous remarks, made Jenkins shiver. Obediently he engaged the gears and moved away.

Drive the wrong way? Look for a policeman and pull up with Rowall on the policeman's side? Try and crash the car into a lamppost? Possibilities flitted through his mind; he dismissed them one by one. It would probably suit Rowall's

purpose just as well to have him, Jenkins, laid up in the hospital after a crash, or with a serious but not fatal bullet-wound, as to have him captive in his own house. Better to stay in possession of his faculties and hunt desperately for an opportunity of escape.

They had not yet turned into Mamble Row when Rowall said abruptly, "Stop the car here."

Jenkins obeyed. Obviously, he wouldn't want Jenkins's car parked conspicuously within a short distance of his own house if anyone did discover what had happened. He hoped for an opportunity to accelerate away if Rowall got out first; Rowall had thought of that one, too, and told him to switch the engine off immediately.

With Rowall at his elbow, he was forced to walk briskly towards the house. Anyone passing them would have failed to see the gun, for it was shrugged into Rowall's coat sleeve.

Not for a moment did his captor's vigilance relax. Even when they reached the doorstep of the house, the man did not distract himself by trying to use a key; he merely reached for the bell and rang sharply twice. After a moment his wife came to the door and opened it. Her plump face was pale; her eyes widened in wonder.

"So you managed it!" she said. "Didn't think you were capable of it."

"Shut up and let us in," Rowall growled.

They took him into a shabby living room, typical of its kind, with a tattered three-piece suite, a dispirited fire burning, many knickknacks and ornaments. The dust was thick on everything except the chairs. The carpet looked as if it hadn't been cleaned in twenty years. One yellow bulb illumined the stained ceiling and the dingy brown wallpaper.

They made Jenkins sit down in one of the armchairs; that was ingenious, for the spring sagged so much he sank deep into it, eliminating the possibility of his jumping suddenly to his feet. He composed himself and tried to look as if he



didn't understand, as if he thought he was in the hands of maniacs.

Maybe he was.

Rowall locked the door carefully and dropped the key in his pocket. Now he turned and looked at Jenkins.

"Afraid enough to keep your mouth shut now, aren't you?" he said with a sneer. "Well, now I'll tell you the answer to your questions. I brought you here to give you a choice: turn the girl loose and let her come back here where she belongs—or know that you've been the cause of her meeting an unpleasant death."

Bella Rowall leaned forward. "That bothers you, doesn't it? Well, it doesn't bother us! You'd have a lovely time answering questions about what you've been doing with her, wouldn't you? Picking up a crazy girl and taking advantage of her—"

Jenkins was suddenly boiling with uncontrollable rage. "You bitch!" he said. "I'd like to spit in your eye! Standing back and watching the poor girl drink herself crazy—I suppose you get some kind of satisfaction out of that, knowing you can't kill her—"

"What?" said Rowall. The silence was like a fog in the room. Jenkins sat very still, wondering if Rowall had believed his own ears.

He had. And now he turned on his wife, his face scarlet with rage. "Now look what this filthy softness of yours has brought us to!" he yelled. "I told you, I *told* you if we let her loose she'd run into someone with enough intelligence to listen to her!"

He swung back to Jenkins, while his wife babbled, "We had to do it that way! We had to drive her crazy before she died, in case she remembered—you said so yourself, you agreed when we started—"

It was suddenly very clear to Jenkins what had happened.

Rowall was bending over him, his eyes screwed up in

insane fury. "What did the girl tell you?" he demanded. "Why did you listen to her? How do you know what has happened to her?"

Jenkins shook his head. Somehow he managed to smile contemptuously.

"You swine! You bastard." Rowall's voice was climaxing towards incoherence. He swung back to face his wife. "Don't just stand there, you blubbing fool! We've got to fix the Ercott girl! If she found one person who believed her, she'll go looking for others. There's no knowing how many she may manage to convince before she's done."

Jenkins tried to heave himself out of the chair; Rowall saw the motion and punched him back in his seat. Head reeling, Jenkins barely saw him leave the room.

As the time ticked away, Sally wondered anxiously what had happened to Jenkins. She tried to relax and tell herself not to worry; she tried to read a book, tried to think about the strange memories she had. No good, she could not concentrate.

An hour had passed. She dropped into a chair and looked around the empty apartment. It was lonely by herself—almost as lonely as that unfurnished room in Rowall's house. It reminded her of . . .

*It was not altogether lonely, to be by herself on this isolated planetoid, to look into the frozen vastness of the sky. She could look at the blue sun yonder and think of the Chidnim who lived by its warmth, at the orange-yellow one and picture the Tansules under it, at the pure white one overhead and remind herself that that one shone on the lark.*

*But in spite of her best efforts, she had sometimes to remember that those suns were all distant, and that the nearer orbs were prey to the hordes of the Yem. That between her and her own people stretched light-year on empty light-year of interstellar space, as implacably hostile*



as the hostile Yem themselves. That there was nothing sheltering her from the hostility of either but the shell of the observation station.

Whenever the situation began to threaten her mental defenses, she lost herself in her job; she did so now, moving to her instrument panels as gracefully as ever, cocking her head to survey the dials in a way that had attracted the attention of many a masculine eye.

Now, as she looked over the readings, she felt a sudden intense cold, as if her mind had frozen. Surely not me, she pleaded with the fates. Surely not me, not here!

For life seemed suddenly very sweet for its own sake, and too precious to be wasted on the deserts of space.

And yet that was what the instruments told her. They spoke mutely of a swarm of the mindless spawn of the Yem passing onwards and outwards in another gigantic seeding; they spoke of the many which had passed close enough to this lonely planetoid to tell that she was here. The Yem spawn did not have conscious logic to tell them that there was only one of her, and that their second generation would die on the sterile rocks.

Her slender, agile arms reached for controls; her long, green-scaled hand glinted iridescently in the light. There was only one service she could perform for her people in the few moments left to her: to tell them that the swarm was on its way, and that they had lost one of their most valuable forward observation posts.

She spoke swiftly, and received the answering condolence of a speaker who knew as well as she that her position was hopeless. Then she went to the transparent door of the airlock and looked up achinglly one last time at the stars.

The Tansules' sun blurred and wavered. There were the spawn. Clawing their way along the distortions of space in a manner too subtle for the minds of her people to define,

*they knew only that somewhere nearby was an instrument for their future reproduction.*

*She waited till the swarm had grounded, knowing that once it had grounded it was helpless to return to the space-ways, and then blew the air from the lock.*

*Her last thought was of the baffled less-than-consciousness of the Yem spawn stopping—not dying, for they were not yet fully alive. Stopping. The thought stopped too.*

Sally was crying when she returned to reality. That creature had been so beautiful, so graceful, even if she had not been human as she herself defined the term. To think of such loveliness being wasted on the lonely dark filled her with a boundless misery.

And yet that loveliness was not altogether gone, she realized suddenly. For she, Sally Ercott, remembered it.

She got to her feet and paced around the room. Somehow that point seemed immensely important.

Fumbling, Sally groped towards the knowledge of a tremendous truth, while the enemy fumed and fought and struggled to prevent her.

## CHAPTER IX

The door slammed, but did not lock. Bella Rowall yelled after her husband, "What the hell do you want me to do?"

"Shut that Jenkins up and come back to his place!" Rowall



snapped in answer; then the outside door crashed shut.

Jenkins's head was still ringing from the cruel blow he had received, and before he could recover himself sufficiently to rise from the slack-sprung chair, Bella had fumbled in her handbag and brought out a gun, a twin of the one Rowall had been carrying. She looked at him as she raised it.

"Too bad you know as much as you do," she said steadily. "You'd make a fine subject for me."

Jenkins licked his lips, his head clearing at last. He said with false bravado, "Going to make me look for another body?"

Bella's eyes widened, and the gun shifted for a moment from its aim. "How the hell could you know about that?"

"I keep my ears open," said Jenkins bluntly.

"So . . . that settles it, my friend. I might have given you a comparatively quick and merciful death if you hadn't said that. As it is, I shall have to treat you slowly. I wonder what would be the best way of driving you insane."

Jenkins shuddered at the calm, considering tone she used. He said, "That's what you were trying to do to Sally Ercott, wasn't it? You didn't succeed. Why? What's the object?"

"I should have thought it was simple enough. Unless you die insane, you might remember what happened to you and who did it. I think I shall shoot you in the legs and arms and then knock you unconscious. That'll mean you stay alive till we get back. I hope that fool of a husband of mine doesn't kill the Ercott girl without giving me another chance to try and fuddle her brain—she's too dangerous to be allowed to take her memories with her."

The gun came up, and Jenkins braced himself for his last chance, wondering with odd detachment how he managed to feel so calm.

The door creaked.

Bella glanced towards it, and Jenkins leaped to his feet. In

that same moment the door swung wide, and there in the opening stood Clyde West. Startled, Bella Rowall began to turn the gun towards the newcomer—and Jenkins kicked with all his strength at the arm carrying the weapon.

The woman cried out with the pain, and her grip relaxed convulsively; then she struck open-handed at Jenkins's face, and three sharp nails clawed flesh from his left cheek, barely missing his eye. He had to step back to recover his balance.

In the doorway, Clyde West followed the fall of the gun with his eye, made a decision, and took three steps forward with his fists bunched. Before Bella Rowall could poise her bulky body to attack him, he had driven a punch—aimed for the point of her chin, but slightly off course—into her soggy jowls.

She shook her head and appeared to ignore the impact, going for West and pummeling him, head down. Jenkins put one bloody hand on her shoulder, set his right leg behind her legs, and heaved with all his strength; she tried to step backwards, tripped over his outstretched foot, and fell with a cry of despair.

Jenkins had not let go of her shoulder when she lost her balance; with her fall, the material of her dress ripped to bare her greasy-skinned nape and back. And there was something—

She heaved herself to her knees, panting, and glared at the two men. She opened her mouth as if to say something, and then launched herself unexpectedly at Jenkins's legs, wrapping her arms round his knees and hurling him to the floor.

Clyde West swung one leg over her back and bent so that his right arm went around her throat. He braced himself and straightened; she tried to roll on one side, to kick at him, to get her chin down and bite him. She failed, and he lifted



inexorably. The woman's face purpled as she was raised bodily by the arm around her throat.

Jenkins wriggled his legs free and staggered to his feet. He whipped off his tie. "Can you hold her?" he demanded of the Australian, who nodded, panting.

"For a while, I guess," he bit out.

Jenkins stepped around behind him, knocked off Bella's shoes, and looped his tie around her ankles. She realized what he was doing and gave a spasmodic kick; Jenkins put his foot down cruelly on hers to make her hold still, and knotted quickly.

What for her hands? He plunged in his pocket and found the roll of insulating tape with which he had fixed the ignition of his car—tough enough to hold anything, he judged. Her hands were harder to tie than her feet, but in a short while it was done, and between them the two men managed to get Bella Rowall into the deep-sagging chair where Jenkins had previously sat.

Panting, they watched her recover from her near strangulation.

"What happened?" West demanded. "I heard all that shrieking of Rowall's from upstairs, and when I heard your name, I knew they must have got at you. I thought they'd both gone out and left you here—I never reckoned on finding her with a gun!"

"I'm damn glad you turned up, believe me," said Jenkins. "What can we use to immobilize her altogether? Got any rope? Electric light cord? Something like that?"

"Get you some," nodded West, and hurried from the room.

Jenkins watched Bella carefully, to make sure she was not pretending to be exhausted. She lolled sideways in the chair mouth open, eyes closed, her torn dress exposing her gross bosom packed into her brassiere. West's return, bringing a hank of coarse rope, made her open her eyes, and try

to heave herself up on her hobbled legs. Jenkins moved to stop her; in dodging him, she fell forward, and her dress ripped still further.

"My God!" said West. "What's that on her back?"

For the flesh that had been exposed now was not exactly flesh.

Furiously the woman kicked and struggled to release herself from her bonds, while Jenkins bent to inspect the patch on her back. It began at the level of her shoulder blades, the normal skin uniting with something smooth and apparently a little wet, for it shone like slippery leather. It was greenish under the light from the ceiling, and it pulsed a little.

Bella Rowall abruptly stopped trying to work loose and began to curse them in a stream of obscenity. They paid no attention. Unable to bring themselves to touch it directly, they prodded it with a pencil Jenkins took from his pocket, and found it was soft and yielding like a bladder filled with half-melted grease.

"Some men like that sort of thing, I guess," was West's bitter comment. "Myself, I couldn't touch a woman with a growth like that."

Jenkins took his penknife and slit Bella's dress all the way down to the hem, cutting away her slip and then sawing through the strap of her brassiere. He said softly, "Maybe this isn't just a growth—it's not a cancer, or a rodent ulcer, or anything of that kind. God, it's *enormous!*"

Bella's shrill-voiced obscenities pounded at their ears as they pulled away the fabric to reveal the green patch's full extent. It ran to her waist, spreading in a rough triangle fifteen inches from apex to base, livid-green in the middle, paler at the edges. It followed roughly the same surface contour as normal skin would have adopted, not bulging enough to be visible through clothing.

Jenkins hesitated, then brought up his penknife and



poised it to cut across the surface of the green area. "Man, what are you doing?" West burst out.

"I don't know. I think I'm solving a lot of problems," said Jenkins softly, and brought the razor-sharp blade down to the shiny wet-leather-like skin.

The skin *writhed* away from the metal, hollowing itself adopting different contours to try and escape.

"Jesus, it's like it was alive by itself!" West muttered, and Jenkins nodded.

"I think it is." He stabbed down sharply with the point of the knife, and this time the growth did not have a chance to surge out of the way. Tautly the skin ripped back, and foul, putrescent-smelling ichor oozed from the gash.

"That's no natural growth," said Jenkins. He looked as if he wanted to be sick. "That's a parasite of some kind—and I don't think you'll find it in any medical books."

"Look at her!" West exclaimed. "She's passed out completely."

"I don't think it's been correct to call Bella Rowall 'she' for a long time," said Jenkins. "That thing on her back probably has outgrowths along the spinal canal—I believe that's what's been driving her."

"You mean that thing has taken over her mind? Jenkins, you're crazy! That's impossible!"

"Impossible? I've believed more impossible things than that already today." Jenkins took the knife again and made another deep slashing cut across the green area at right angles to the previous one. The flow of ichor stank so much it nauseated them.

"Help me make this poor bitch comfortable in the chair," he invited, wiping the knife and folding it shut. "I guess we've given that parasite too much to think about for the time being. I'll get a doctor around to remove it later on—if it hasn't permanently ruined her ability to think for herself."

West, on the point of making an objection, thought better of it and helped Jenkins to pack cushions around Bella's unconscious body before roping her securely in the chair.

"How about Miss Ercott?" he asked as he tugged at the knots. "Did Rowall go after her?"

"Yes, but I burglar-proofed the flat myself, and one man on his own would sound so many alarms—Holy Moses!" Jenkins's expression suddenly changed to one of dismayed horror. "God, am I an idiot! The flat's burglar-proofed, but the house isn't! All Rowall has to do is get into the hallway, knock on the apartment door, and tell Sally he has a message from me. If he disguises his voice a little . . . Quick! We've got to get over to my place right away!"

"How about the gun?" West called as Jenkins made for the door.

"Never used one!" the other flung back.

"I have. I'll bring it." West bent to pick it up, put the safety catch on and dropped it in his pocket as he followed Jenkins. Behind him, Bella Rowall forced one eyelid up a short distance; the effort of holding it there proved too much, and she lolled again in the chair, her mouth half open, her breath coming in ugly snorts from her bruised throat.

The car was still where Jenkins had been forced to leave it; West barely managed to catch up and fall into the passenger's seat before Jenkins roared away. Almost at once a red light halted them again, and Jenkins cursed.

"Have you a cigarette?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure." West produced one, lit it, and passed it over as the light changed.

"Thanks. I haven't thanked you for getting me out of that room alive, by the way. It's damned good of you to get yourself involved in this mess."

West lighted his own cigarette. "I didn't like what the



Rowalls were doing to Sally. Matter of fact, I'm sort of ashamed I didn't get mixed up in it earlier."

The car squealed around a sharp corner. As soon as he had recovered from nearly being thrown out, West finished, "And you got yourself involved, didn't you? As I read it, you only ran into Sally today."

"Ran into is right," Jenkins answered. He pulled up opposite his flat and scrambled from the car. "Light's still on," he commented. "Hope she's all right . . ."

Followed by West, he dashed into the house and up the stairs. On the landing he fumbled the key into the lock of his door. He could hear the phone ringing insistently; the fact disturbed him, but he told himself that Sally might have been afraid to answer in case it was Rowall calling.

As he turned the key, he called out, "Sally! It's Nick! Are you okay?"

There was no reply. The phone continued to ring.

And when the door swung wide, the room it revealed was empty.

"Oh, *God*," said Jenkins hopelessly. "How did the bastard do it? How did he *do* it?"

"Maybe she ran off by herself," West suggested. "She was pretty shaken up, wasn't she?"

The phone stopped ringing, unnoticed.

"I suppose she might have, but I would think she'd at least leave a note. Maybe if she was looking down and saw Rowall pull the gun on me and make me drive him away—or if she didn't see the gun, maybe she thought I was on Rowall's side after all . . . There hasn't been a fight or anything," he added. "Everything looks to be the way I left it."

The phone started to complain again; almost absently he picked up the receiver, and his face lightened momentarily as he heard Tom Gospell's booming voice.

"I've been calling for hours! Where the hell have you been?"

"Tom, she's gone, and I think Rowall got at her. That's her landlord—the one who seems to have been trying to drive her insane, remember? Listen carefully and I'll tell you everything that's happened."

He launched into a rapid survey of his capture, his rescue by Clyde West, and the mysterious green parasite they had discovered on Bella Rowall's back. Gospell punctuated the story with incredulous grunts, but otherwise made no comment.

"So I suppose he must have been taking her away almost as we came to find her," Jenkins finished. "I don't know where else he might have taken her except to his own place. So I want you to go right over to number five Mamble Row—that's his house. As fast as you can, for heaven's sake. Even if Rowall hasn't taken Sally there, we might be able to find out from his wife where he could have gone with her—and I want you to see this crazy parasite for yourself."

"Number five Mamble Row—that near you?"

"Yes, a few minutes from here."

"Right, I'll find it. See you then. God, cloak-and-dagger stuff! Kidnaping and all—" The phone went dead on a final snort of disgust.

Jenkins turned to West. "Let's just look around and make absolutely sure she didn't leave a note," he said. "Then we must get back to Rowall's and see if she's there. You have a key for his door?"

"Of course." West was shifting cushions, lifting books and magazines and shaking them. "I don't see anything, do you?"

Jenkins hunted briefly, running into the bedroom and the kitchen. "Not a sign," he said at length. "Okay—back to Rowall's. And this time we may need that gun you brought."

"It's in my pocket. Let's go."

As they swung into Mamble Row, West touched his



companion lightly on the arm. Look!" he said in a low voice. "What's going on there at Rowall's? That's old Mrs. Ramsey on the step, and a policeman—"

"And Mrs. Rowall!" snapped Jenkins. "What the devil's happened?"

As he halted the car, Bella Rowall raised a dramatic arm. She was wearing a dressing gown to hide the ruin of her clothes, and her face was ugly. "There they are, officer!" she shouted.

Together, West and Jenkins got out of the car and approached the steps on which the reception committee stood. Mrs. Ramsey, a large woman whose legs were swollen with edema and who appeared to walk with difficulty, cried out that it was a shame and a scandal. "You should've *seen* the way I found poor Mrs. Rowall!" she added to the police officer. "Half-naked, all tied up in the chair—and if it was those two there that did it to her, they oughta be in prison!"

The officer surveyed Jenkins and West searchingly. He glanced at Mrs. Rowall. "Are these the men you say tied you up, ma'am?" he asked. Bella nodded triumphantly.

Jenkins gave the policeman a hard glare. "Officer, what is this all about?" he said. "Do I gather that this woman is accusing me of an assault of some sort? Or is it my friend here she means? Or both of us?"

The policeman, impressed by Jenkins's obvious self-assurance, hesitated. At length he said reluctantly, "Well, sir, this lady here"—indicating Mrs. Ramsey—"tells me she heard shouts for help from her landlady's sitting room, and when she managed to come downstairs she says she found her tied up in a chair with her clothes half off her. And *she* says"—he gestured to Mrs. Rowall—"that it was you and your friend that did it."

"Yes!" put in Bella. "Him with his fancy ways, an' that stupid Aussie he's got with him—"

West's face froze into a scowl, and he almost raised a fist. Jenkins trod hard on his toe, hoping the policeman would not notice, and smiled sunnily at the latter. "What an extraordinary story!" he said. "The woman must be deranged, don't you agree?"

He wished he could see past Bella into the hallway of the house, but from the level of the road it was impossible. The policeman made an entry in his open notebook, and then clapped it shut. "I'm afraid I must ask you all to come along with me," he said. "Best thing for you, ma'am," he said to Bella, "is to make a statement to the sergeant."

"I don't think I could go all that way after the shock I've had," said Bella with a convincing stagger, and Mrs. Ramsey chimed in in her defense. The wrangle was still going on when there was the sound of a car drawing up, and Jenkins glanced round.

"Praise be," he murmured to West. "It's Tom—the doctor I was talking to on the phone just now."

Gospell had a remarkably quick mind buried beneath his mat of red hair; he declared his acquaintance with Jenkins, and heard the policeman briefly describe the situation.

"Well, I'm a doctor," Gospell declared, hefting his black bag in support of his statement. "Of course this woman's not fit enough to walk all the way to the police station after a shock like that. And it's stupid to keep her here on the doorstep in a dressing gown on an evening as chilly as this." He went up the steps and took Bella's arm. "Come along, my dear," he said. "Let's get you in where it's warm and have a look at you."

Bella, sudden fright appearing in her eyes, tried to shake herself free, but this time Mrs. Ramsey chimed in on the other side. "Don't be silly, dearie!" she said. "If the kind gentleman's a doctor, you ought to be grateful to him!"

Jenkins breathed a sigh of quiet relief. After a moment's hesitation, the policeman nodded for him and West to go



inside after Gospell. "If the doctor says she can't go to the station, I'll take her statement here," he said. "And get you to come along after."

Mrs. Ramsey, waddling indoors first, went to open the door of the sitting room where Jenkins had been imprisoned. "Not there, please!" said Bella in sudden alarm, and a bell rang in Jenkins's mind. "It'd remind me of my horrible experience," Bella was explaining, and Mrs. Ramsey, beaming understandingly, led the way to the kitchen at the back of the house instead.

Sally was probably in the sitting room, Jenkins reasoned; he tried to hang back so that he could open the door, but the officer nodded him firmly into the kitchen.

And then, as he entered the room with Bella's arm still tightly gripped, Gospell made his play. With one quick motion, he ripped open the belt of Bella's dressing gown and flung the skirt of it up to expose her back.

There—crossed by two black-edged scars where Jenkins had slashed it with his pocket-knife—was the foul green growth.

Mrs. Ramsey collapsed backwards against the kitchen table, her mouth working as if she was going to vomit. Bella snatched the hem of the dressing gown out of Gospell's hands and tried to hit him across the mouth, but the doctor swayed his head back and she only brushed his beard. He was visibly shaken, but his presence of mind was unimpaired.

Turning to the policeman, he said, "Sorry, officer—but did you see that green thing on this lady's back? I had to take her by surprise to show it. It's what I suspected might be the case. She has a very serious carcinomatous affliction of the nervous system, a rare condition but one that I happen to be familiar with. I'm afraid she's probably subject to serious delusion."

"You mean she *imagined* she'd been tied up?" said the policeman in amazement. "You mean—"

"That she didn't!" exclaimed Mrs. Ramsey, sitting up

abruptly. "I saw her! I let her loose!"

"Ah!" said Gospell. "But in this condition the lesions often lead to the most elaborate fantasy-building. Mrs. Rowall may well be completely convinced that she was tied up by the gentlemen here. In actual fact she tied herself up, I don't doubt, and tore her own dress."

The officer turned to Bella. "Well, ma'am?" he said. "You heard what the doctor said—is what you told me true?"

"No, of course it's not true," Jenkins put in.

"How about your tie, then?" Bella challenged, and put her hand to her mouth as if to thrust the words back.

"That's right" said Mrs. Ramsey. "The gentleman hasn't got a tie, and a tie was used to fasten Mrs. Rowall's legs! It'll be in the front room," she added, and started to get heavily to her feet as if to fetch it. But Bella, remembering what was in the front room, lost control for a moment and pushed her sharply to prevent her from rising.

"Hold her!" snapped Gospell with extreme presence of mind. "She's liable to get violent. I'll give her a shot to calm her."

He dug in his bag, while the policeman, Jenkins and West between them managed to hold Bella still. Gospell came over with a filled syringe in his hand.

"Novocain," he said briefly, and lifted the dressing gown aside to sink the needle directly into the green parasite.

After a moment, Bella's eyes grew glassy and vacant, and she went limp. They lowered her into a chair, and wiped the sweat from their faces.



## CHAPTER X

"Well, I must apologize to you two gentlemen," said the police officer reluctantly. "Though I find it pretty hard to swallow that a woman could tie herself up and then claim it was two innocent men who did it."

"It's not uncommon," said Gospell with an air of magisterial authority. "I've come across it more than once in my practice as a doctor."

"Crazy, isn't it?" the policeman said. "It's just as well for these two gentlemen that you came along when you did, I reckon. Well, is it safe to leave the lady?"

"I'll get Mrs. Ramsey here to help me put her to bed," Gospell said. "She'll probably have forgotten the whole thing when she wakes up. That shot I gave her will make her sleep like a log."

Jenkins meanwhile was questioning his own conclusions. If Mrs. Ramsey had released Bella from her bonds, and stood on the doorstep while calling for the policeman and then while talking to him, how could Rowall have put

Sally in the sitting room without her noticing and commenting? And if it wasn't Sally in the sitting room, *what was it?*

He turned abruptly and went along the passage; the policeman made a move to stop him and changed his mind. "Tom!" he called. "Come here, will you?"

Gospell had bent to examine the green growth; now he hurried to join Jenkins. In a tone too low to be overheard, he said, "Nick, you're quite right about that thing on her back. It's nothing like any cancer or parasite I ever saw! Where does it come from?"

"I suspect Sally could tell us," said Jenkins. "And I think that's why Rowall was so scared of her telling people what she knew—even though she didn't yet know how much she knew." He rattled the door. "Locked," he said. "We'll have to break it down."

"Let me," said Gospell, stepping back. To the accompaniment of a cry from the officer, demanding to know what they were up to, he charged the door with his broad shoulder and sent the flimsy wood crashing aside.

For an instant the horror of the scene brought them to a dead stop, as though time itself had frozen.

On the couch across the room was Sally. Her dress and slip had been taken from her, so that her back was bare. She lay as if unconscious, her knees folded, facing the back of the couch. And squatting on the floor, with his back turned to Sally's, was Rowall, stripped to the waist. The apex of a green triangular parasite could be seen between his shoulder-blades. And from the parasite a pseudopod was extending tentacle-wise, gnawing and eroding Sally's smooth, fair skin.

Gospell was still thunderstruck by the sight when Jenkins recovered and dashed forward. He struck Rowall on the back of the head, so that he slumped forward, and the extended pseudopod was torn free, leaving a reddish, inflamed patch where it had rested, but nothing more.



Then, ignoring the feebly moaning man, Jenkins picked Sally up bodily and called her by name, terrified at what might already have happened to her. After a moment he saw her eyelids flicker.

"Nick! Oh, thank heaven you came!"

The policeman, watching from the doorway, demanded to know what the hell was happening, and Gospell turned on him. "Call the station house and tell them to send over every man they can spare," he ordered crisply. "You can start by saying we're preferring charges of kidnaping against Mr. and Mrs. Rowall, if you like—but take it from me, there's bigger things involved."

The officer's eyes bugged out, and Gospell saw he was very young. On an inspiration, he added, "White slave trading!" And the officer, awestruck, ran promptly from the house.

Seeing that Sally was in capable hand, Gospell bent to examine the thing on Rowall's back. The pseudopod was still waving vaguely in the air, hunting the flesh with which it had been in contact.

Setting Sally down in a chair, Jenkins found her dress and put it over her cold body. She seemed fully awakened, but staring into space rather than focusing on anything, and he spoke to her urgently.

"Sally! Sally, dear, are you all right? Please! Do you know why all this was done to you?"

She nodded, and licked her lips. Her eyes fell on the green foulness on Rowall's back, and strangely, instead of revulsion for the parasite, her face revealed compassion for its victim. "Poor man," she said. "Poor weak man."

"Sally, what was he going to do? How did he get you away from my place? How did he get you in here without Mrs. Ramsey seeing you?"

"He got me away quite easily. I was worried to death because you'd been gone so long; then he knocked and said

he had a message from Mr. Jenkins, and I was so relieved that I didn't even stop to think—I just opened the door. Rowall was standing there in the hall with a gun in his hand. I could have let him kill me then; it might not have mattered—”

“*Not have mattered?*” The incredulous outburst was from Gospell. Sally gave him a wry smile.

“I'll make it clear in a moment. It would have wasted a chance, though, and I didn't want to risk it. Anyway, he put his hand on my arm, and I felt a sort of little prick, and after that I felt quite helpless. But there wasn't anything in his hand—no syringe or anything.

“I *had* to come here. I just had to. That was all there was to it. I had to come into this room—Bella was on the doorstep, and she didn't say anything to me. Mrs. Ramsey was hobbling off to the corner calling for a policeman, and I don't think she noticed me come in. Then I came in here and Bella locked the door. Later, after you'd arrived, Rowall came in and took my dress off and laid me down on the couch. That's all I remember till you woke me up just now.”

She got to her feet, a little unsteadily, and shook out her dress so that she could pull it over her head. As she wriggled it down over her hips un-self-consciously, Gospell demanded, “Look, do you know what these green things are?”

Sally nodded. “That's why Rowall was so scared of what I might say. Or not Rowall, really—it was the green thing that was scared. Do you remember my telling you about the time I went into the mountain to offer myself in exchange for Iwys?”

“Why—” A fantastic possibility clicked together in Jenkins' mind. “Why, that was why you came here, wasn't it? Where is the creature? Is there a basement under the house?”



"There must be. Rowall was down there, I think, getting his parasite fertilized so that he could infect me." She spoke with the most amazing self-control and composure, and Jenkins exclaimed at it.

"Damn it, woman! How can you take all this so—so frozenly"

"I was terrified at first, wasn't I?" Sally smiled at him. "That was because I didn't know what I know now. I can remember a very great deal. Before this happened to me, I know one of my greatest ambitions was to go round the world; I used to sit turning the leaves of an atlas and dreaming of the places I wanted to visit—Hawaii, Fujiyama, Katmandu, Crete . . . But now I've got something infinitely better, something marvelous and wonderful, which maybe no one else has ever had."

"*What* are you, then—do you know?" Jenkins had involuntarily taken a step back.

"Not for certain. But I can guess. What I do know for certain is that I'm human."

Gospell listened to this interchange with astonishment. "Nick, blast you and your crossword-puzzle mind! Tell me what this is all about!"

"I think we'd better go look in the cellar first," Jenkins countered. "There's a flashlight in my car—I'll go get it."

He was half out of the room when he glanced back. "What happened to our Australian friend?" he said.

"In the kitchen stifling Mrs. Ramsey's embryo hysterics and keeping an eye on Mrs. Rowall," said Gospell. "Why?"

"*You* go and look after them—you're the doctor. I want him to be on hand at the finish. He deserves to be."

Gospell scowled, sighed, and gave in. When Jenkins came back from fetching his flashlight and other pieces of equipment he thought might be valuable, West and Sally were on the porch looking down into the narrow pit in front of the house.

"There's a basement all right," West was saying. "But it was boarded up good and solid before I moved in here. I never noticed it much."

Jenkin's flashlight swept the boarded-up windows. "Let's go down anyway," he said. "Damn gates chained and pad-locked—we'll have to scramble over." He suited the action to the word, and West hoisted Sally over after him, her legs swinging high in the air. She dropped lightly on the slippery downward steps. The the Australian's lanky stature followed.

"Hold the light, Sally, will you?" Jenkins said, setting down the tools he had brought. He selected a claw-hammer and went for the nails holding the boards in place.

Three or four nails torn out sufficed to release the first board. Sally started to bring the flashlight closer and shine it into the basement, but an exclamation from West startled her into hesitation.

"Jesus! What's that—that green shining in there?"

"That's an invader from another planet," said Jenkins in as matter-of-fact a tone as he could manage. "It's the adult of the thing on Rowall's back. I *hope* it's the only one on Earth so far."

It was too much for West; all he could do was shake his head and make comprehending noises. Jenkins went for the nails again, and soon had the entire window clear. The green luminescence was unmistakable now; it was like the light of a green-burning fire.

He took the flashlight from Sally and played it into the basement. As if startled, things that waver like a forest of crazy ferns folded back from the light. A putrid smell, like the smell of the ichor oozing from Bella Rowall's back, assailed their noses.

Jenkins selected a screw-driver now, shoved it under the window-frame and heaved with all his strength; the rusted latch creaked and yielded, and he thrust the window up.



A pane of glass, previously cracked, shattered and fell in shards.

"My God, the thing goes all the way through!" he said. "Look, it's grown over the walls, and through into the rooms beyond. Sally, is this big, or is it still small?"

"A full-grown one is as big as a house and weighs hundreds of tons," she answered, not explaining how she knew.

Inside the basement, the green-glowing alien flesh coated the floor, swelled up around the walls, branched into the frond-like excrescences, bulged into sac-like bladders and knotted, writhing hyphae. Jenkins felt his skin crawl as he stared at it.

"What's going on down there?" snapped an official voice from street level. A flashlight much more powerful than the one Jenkins held jutted its beam down towards them and transfixed them with its light like pinned butterflies.

"Is that the police?" Jenkins called up.

"Yes! Inspector Dougherty. What's going on?"

"I think you'd better come down and see for yourself—it takes quite a lot of believing. Mind the steps, they're rather slippery."

Grunting and puffing, a large man descended to them. "I never heard of such a thing," he complained. "White slaving, a woman tying herself up and accusing innocent men of assaulting her—" He caught sight of the thing in the basement.

"What the hell is that?" he exploded.

"Did you ever see anything like it before?" Jenkins demanded.

"No! Good God, no! It's—it's revolting. Like a giant fungus, or something!"

"Not quite," said Jenkins levelly. "But now that you've seen it, come upstairs and we'll show its offspring, and then I want a chance to tell you the whole story without interrup-

tion. Tell your men to surround the house and not to let anyone come too close to this thing. It's dangerous. It can infect people, like a disease. All right, let's go back up."

The inspector studied the thing on Rowall's back carefully. He also saw the one on Bella's back. They had carried her into the sitting room and laid her on the couch beside her husband, not allowing them to be too close in case the parasites might be able to communicate without their hosts speaking.

Inspector Dougherty turned to Gospell. "And you're prepared to swear they aren't natural?" he said.

"That's not what I said," Gospell contradicted. "Of course they're natural. But I've seen the stuff they use for blood and I've cut some cells from them and looked at them under the pocket microscope I carry around, and I am prepared to swear that neither the cells nor the 'blood' ever evolved on Earth. They just aren't like ordinary protoplasm."

Dougherty gave a helpless shrug. "It's beyond me," he grunted. "But I'll have to take your word for it—that foul thing in the basement doesn't look natural to me. So you maintain that this thing came to Earth from some other world, planted itself, grew in the cellar, planted bits of itself on these people's backs—"

"And on the backs of the customers Mrs. Rowall picked up on the street," put in Jenkins. "Lord knows how many of them are spread through London now!"

"But why didn't the Rowalls infect Sally right away?" demanded Gospell. "It would have been so much simpler than trying to drive her insane with worry and drink!"

"I suspect because the thing in the cellar only reproduces at certain times of the year." Jenkins nodded at Sally. "I think that's another of the things on which Sally can enlighten us. Still, we'll leave her story for a moment—it's at least twice as fantastic as all of the rest put together."

"But how about the men who didn't get infected—the ones



Mrs. Rowall brought here for other purposes? How could they face a woman with a thing like that on her back?" Dougherty asked.

Gospell coughed. "Inspector, it's a regrettable fact, but there are quite a lot of men who are actually attracted to deformity and disease. Stekel records a case of a person who could only obtain pleasure from a kiss which tasted of puss and blood."

The inspector shuddered. "Thank God I'm reasonably normal," he said. "All right, I suppose I have to take a doctor's word on a point like that. I wish these two with the things on their backs could speak for themselves, though. You think you can wake them?"

"I shot Mrs. Rowall's parasite full on novocain," said Gospell. "I guessed that if it could survive on a human body it would probably also be subject to an anesthetic which affects human nerve tissue. Seems I was right. That suggests a method of dealing with the one in the cellar, too; stab a sharpened length of one-inch piping into it and pump it full of formalin or something of that sort. Or maybe we'd have to burn it out with sulphuric acid. I don't know—"

He remembered that he had started out to answer a request from the inspector, and interrupted himself. "Maybe we can learn something from Rowall, though. Let's try and wake him."

But slapping Rowall's face produced no result, and Gospell tipped his body forward with a frown. "Good God!" he said. "Look—the thing's dying!"

Shriveling, twisting away from the host flesh around the edges, the green parasite seemed to be decaying before it was dead.

"Amazing!" Gospell muttered. "Must be because it was fertilized and couldn't reproduce itself after all. The surface is going all granular, as if the cells were multiplying too fast for the available nourishment."

He swung round. "Help me lay him face down on the floor and we'll see if we can save his life," he snapped at West and Jenkins.

But when they had laid him down, it became clear that nothing could save Arthur Rowall. As the parasite shrank away from his body, it could be seen that it had eroded its way into his spinal column, laying bare tiny holes through which its pseudopods had directly affected his nervous tissue. The pit left by the parasite's withdrawal was fully an inch deep, and raw, as if it had been flayed.

The thing was rounding into a ball, and Sally suddenly gave a warning cry. "Put it in something—something very strong!" she ordered. "It's going to sporulate, and when it does it'll explode and throw its spawn all over the place!"

"What the devil *can* we put it in?" Jenkins snapped, looking helplessly around the room.

"How long before it explodes?" Dougherty demanded of Sally.

"Ten minutes, maybe—perhaps less."

Dougherty turned to one of his men who was standing with a bemused expression at the side of the room. "Is there a foam fire-extinguisher on the van you came in?"

"No, sir—only a CTC one, the sort you pump."

"Would an ash can be strong enough, if the lid was weighted down?" Dougherty asked Sally.

She gave a hesitant nod. "This is a very small one—it might be."

"Right." Dougherty peeled off his coat and flung it over the parasite, which had now detached itself from the dying Rowall completely, and was assuming a spherical shape. "Out of the way!" he snapped, and charged from the room with the thing wrapped in his coat.

"There's a brave man," said West appreciatively.

There was clanging among the ashcans outside the house, and then a tense silence, lasting a minute or two. More



clanging; something was being tied around the ash can to keep the lid down. And a sudden thudding report, followed by a smashing noise.

They rushed to see what had happened, and met Dougherty, coatless, his face slightly dirty, coming back up the steps.

"Damned thing went off before I had the lid fastened," he grunted. "But the ash can acted like a gun-barrel, and whatever it was that came out went slap through the window into the basement, along with the lid, which knocked the window out. As far as I can see, the basement is already crawling with the stuff, so no harm's done, is it?" He looked at Sally.

"No," she said with obvious relief. "Thank goodness for that, Inspector. It was very brave of you."

"Nothing of the kind," snapped Dougherty. "To tell the truth, I didn't believe anything was going to happen at all. I want to know now, this moment, how you knew that thing was going to go bang like that. I want to know how you know so much, in fact."

Sally hesitated. She looked very youthful and attractive, her hair a little untidy but honey-colored and shining around her head, her eyes ringed with tiredness but blue and clear, her dress rumpled but emphasizing the young, shapely body. She looked all wrong to be the person who held a secret on which the fate of more than one race might depend.

"All right," she said. "Come back in the sitting room and I'll tell you the whole story."

They found Gospell laying Sally's discarded slip, for want of any other covering, over Rowall's prostrate body. In answer to an inquiring glance from Dougherty, the doctor nodded.

"Pretty well the moment you took that thing off him," he said. "Air got into his spinal column, the fluid drained off, and his brain stopped working. That's what it amounts to.

If the thing on his wife's back survives the novocain, though, I expect we can remove it under hospital conditions and at least give her a short lease on life."

Dougherty gave a comprehending nod, and turned to Sally. "Right," he said crisply. "Let's have it."

"Well, it begins a long time ago, and a very long way from Earth," said Sally, and as she spoke she seemed to be looking through space, through time, and seeing the events she was describing . . .

They grew, first of all, on a world where the people were very much like human beings. Very much indeed. They were vast, plant-like organisms, and because they were so huge and there was only one planet, they competed fiercely with each other for living space. Perhaps by chance, perhaps as a weapon in the struggle for survival, they became intelligent.

They reproduced in two ways, essentially similar but not identical. First there was the normal way; when the need to propagate the species moved them, they put forth tendrils and snared small animals at random, by planting a tiny thorn-like spike in their flesh. As soon as the spike entered their bodies, the animals felt an irresistible urge to go to the place where the creature grew—usually in the heart of a mountain, or in a network of burrows and tunnels under a forest or plain. There the creature placed on them a bud from itself; the bud, not truly intelligent but parasitic on the brain of the victim, was taken by the limbs of the host to a new home, where it made its adopted body dig it a fresh tunnel. When the tunnel was dug, the creature used the animal's body as its first food.

When they became intelligent, they saw that the best hosts for their young were human beings; therefore they sent their creeping tendrils often many miles to a human village or town and selected healthy, strong young people as carriers for the new-budded organisms.

There was also the second, emergency method of reproduc-



tion. When one of the creatures could not find suitable host animals for the fertilized buds, reflex caused the buds to develop differently from the normal pattern; the cells multiplied wildly, generating gases and building up vast pressures which at last burst forth, destroying the parent but hurling millions on millions of spawn-cells into the sky.

Possessed of a rudimentary instinct towards finding a host, armed with an evolution-born miracle which allowed them to sense a suitable animal over huge distances, the spawn drifted with the winds, hunting, seeking.

Over millennia, watching the human beings which now formed their sole source of host animals, the creatures learned much which they would not have discovered for themselves. On the planet where the creatures first grew, it was crowded; no matter how carefully they chose hosts for their offspring, it was hard to find a place where a previously-established growth was not already bleeding the earth of the essential minerals and organic residues on which the newly-planted buds would otherwise have fed. So most of the new plants starved to death, and the depredation of the human beings fell to a level at which it could be tolerated, and civilization grew.

Being essentially unlike the things which preyed on them, the human race inquired about the nature of the universe. Watching them, always watching them, listening to them, the predators learned of other worlds in space, learned of the possibility of other planets suitable to them.

Being, as has been said, essentially unlike human beings, the predators could pass at least some of their acquired knowledge to their descendants. They had earlier deliberately developed their offspring so as to make them ideally suited to use human hosts; now they likewise developed their offspring to adapt to any species similar to the one on their home-world.

Then, calculatingly, deliberately, they deprived certain of their number of the opportunity to find hosts. Reflex took over and controlled the deprived organisms, held them back for as long as possible. Until—explosion, an explosion which rocked the planet, gave rise to blasting, boiling winds that laid waste whole forests and many human cities.

“And,” said Sally very softly, “that was how the Yem set off to conquer the universe. For they had not merely taught their offsprings to use races of other worlds as hosts. Subtly, no one quite understands how, they had used their human-gained knowledge of the nature of the universe to teach their spawn how to drift from star to star on radiation-pressure. The journeys took millennia, at first, until evolution fined down unsuitable characteristics. When it had done its work, the spawn of the Yem was perfectly adapted to spread throughout the cosmos.”



## CHAPTER XI

"But I still want to know how you know all this!" blazed Dougherty. "All right, you fit all the facts together very neatly. I presume that when these Yem, as you call them, got to Earth, they found human beings like us suitable, and one of them planted itself in the cellar here and used the Rowalls to provide it with hosts for its—its buds. But how do you know?" His voice was almost pleading. "Or is it all wild guessing?"

Sally shook her head. "Not at all. You see, the Yem had another reason for wishing to conquer the universe, besides simply the need to propagate their kind. They were afraid of revenge.

"They must have made the discovery when they began to use human beings as hosts for their buds—after all, the parasites directly contact their hosts' nervous systems. Probably it was then that they discovered something the human beings themselves didn't know. Sealed off from consciousness by the terrifying, mind-shaking experience of *being born* after

having died, there were memories. The wrong memories." Again Sally seemed to be looking through time, through space, and seeing the events she was describing . . .

Without the knowledge that these memories existed in human minds, the Yem would not have undertaken their incredible task of spreading across the light-years. They knew that the people they used as hosts recalled lives on other planets than their own; what the Yem feared was that on some other world, a human might remember how his own kind had been preyed upon, and determine to set his alien cousins free.

If the Yem had not spread, leaving their own world, it would never have happened. Yet the certain knowledge that there were other races like their victims drove them to their fate.

They had already been hurling their spawn between the stars for thousands on thousands of years when they were, for the first time, discovered by a race that came to meet them—a race very far advanced in all the sciences, including those of the mind. Visiting a Yem-infected world when they started to explore space, this race—green-scaled, graceful, too far different from their cousins to become a prey to the Yem themselves, but like enough to them to sympathize and wish to set them free—determined that somehow it must halt the onward surge of the parasitical monsters.

Their study of possible tactics led them first to the discovery of the hidden memories locked in their subconscious—for they shared in this fantastic pool of inter-racial memory too—and then to the ironical fact that the danger the Yem feared, the possibility of one of their victims recalling what had been done to him on an alien planet, was negligible. The experience brought madness before death, and madness so distorted the hidden memories that even if they were made available to consciousness, consciousness could not comprehend them.



But then they investigated the nature of the thing which conveyed the memories from mind to mind, and found that it was not an entity but a sort of resonance. They could not define or isolate it; all they could say was that it was a frame or reference set up by certain brain-reactions—and those reactions included the things that set aside humanity in all its multiplicity of bodily forms: the capacity for love, the appreciation of beauty, the need to inquire into the nature of the universe.

And, though they could not isolate this thing that passed from personality to personality, they could direct it. So they did. They taught each of their own kind by skilled psychological instruction how to bring his or her own memories to light; then, how to bring them to light in the mind of the inheritor of them, if the planet on which the inheritor lived was a victim to the hordes of the Yem. In this way, the green-scaled and graceful race could multiply its own efforts a millionfold; it was not numerous enough to undo the millennia-long work of the Yem alone, but it could give its cousins the knowledge needed to save them.

So the lovely girl who had died on a lonely outpost in space had not truly died; she lived in Sally's memory, and through Sally she would save Earthborn humanity from the Yem.

"I've remembered everything," Sally said quietly. "I was walking to Paddington Station to go and spend the night with a friend in the country—that was why I had an overnight bag with me, and quite a lot of money. I was passing near this house and somehow I sensed the presence of the Yem in the basement. That triggered the memories. And I must have been half out of my mind with revulsion and fear. All I knew was that I had to get close to it, find out what it was.

"Rowall must have known—or rather, the thing controlling him—that the danger the Yem had so long feared threatened

their tenuous beachhead on Earth. I think Rowall was probably a much less intelligent person than his wife, who saw that the only way to put a stop to me was to drive me, or rather simply let me drive myself, insane. Rowall's choice was to kill me immediately; as he said, make me look for another body. His wife, though, wanted to make sure I couldn't repeat the feat of remembering on some other planet. And driving me mad was the only way to insure that."

She looked at Dougherty. "Well?" she said. "I have to admit that I never thought anyone would believe me—till I met Nick here, who not only believed me but I think saw the whole truth before I told him. Didn't you, Nick?"

Jenkins took off his glasses and rubbed them with his handkerchief. "I wouldn't say that," he answered cautiously. "But I have an odd sort of mind—Tom says it's a crossword-puzzle mind. I sort of have the knack of putting two and one-and-a-half together . . . Yes, nothing you've said contradicts what I'd guessed."

"But good Lord!" said Dougherty, staring. "If this *is* true, even if we poison the thing in the cellar, how the hell do we track down all of Mrs. Rowall's customers who've been infected?"

West, who had been listening in silence from near the door, spoke up. "I think I can tell you Inspector," he ventured. "I've been living here for quite a while, and I've often been worried about whether I ought to tell the police that Rowall—poor bastard!—was living off what his wife brought in. Anyway, one time I did some prowling when they were out, and if you go into the bedroom next door to here, you'll find a tin box with some names and addresses on bits of paper. I thought they might maybe regular 'customers' names; now I'm pretty sure they're the people the Rowalls managed to plant their parasites on."

"Go and look and bring 'em in herel!" snapped Dougherty,



and the policeman who stood beside West obeyed smartly. In a moment he came back, with the tin box.

"Found it in plain sight," he said.

Dougherty riffled through the contents. "All right, we'll investigate some of these people. If I get this straight we can assume that they've probably died a filthy death in some burrow dug for the benefit of the thing on their back—right?" Sally nodded. "I'll tell Missing Persons at the Yard to see if the names here match their files; if they do, and if the scientists that I'm sending over agree with Dr. Gospell that this thing in the cellar isn't from Earth, then we'll start digging for the others and burn or poison them."

He turned to go out, head bent over the list of names in the box. As he was on the point of departure, he glanced back. "I *still* don't really believe it," he said in an aggrieved tone, and vanished.

Clyde West shook his head. "It's weird," he said with a deep sigh. "But it hangs together for me. I don't know about you, but my belly's getting acquainted with my backbone, and if they bring in scientists and so forth we're going to have a damned busy time answering questions. I got some food in my room—eggs, bread and butter, and coffee. Can I interest anyone?"

"Not me, thanks," Gospell answered. "I'm going to get the body out of here, and then get Mrs. Rowall to the hospital and see if the surgeons can cut that thing off her back."

"Nick? Sally?" West looked inquiringly at them.

"Why," said Jenkins, almost surprised, "yes, please! I'd clean forgotten that I originally went out to buy something for supper. I'm starved."

"Right," said West cheerfully, and they heard him clatter up the stairs. Halfway to the top he halted and looked back at them.

"Man, was I ever a lucky s-o-b-l Suppose they'd been short of customers to put these things on—they might have stuck one on me!" But he seemed more relieved at the escape than upset by the possibility, and even began to hum as he went on upstairs.

The ambulance men came and removed first Bella Rowall, then Rowall's dead body, covering the corpse with one of their blankets. They closed the front door behind them, leaving Jenkins and Sally alone in the sitting room.

"Nick," she said, as soon as the men were gone, "I'd just like to tell you something. I don't know if it's your peculiar crossword-puzzle sort of mind, or what, but you've been wonderful to me. If you hadn't believed me when I told you a crazy-sounding story, I think I really would have gone out of my mind. It still seems pretty fantastic to me, even though I got the whole thing straight in my head before Rowall came and caught me at your place."

Jenkins felt slightly embarrassed and tried a modest laugh which didn't come off.

"So—well, I'd like to remind you of what I said before. I said there was one thing I was absolutely sure of—do you remember what it was?"

"That you were completely human," Jenkins quoted correctly.

"That's right. Would you like me to prove it? Don't say no, because I'm going to."

And she walked up to him and kissed him firmly and very pleasantly on the mouth. After a moment, he put his arms around her, and proceeded to establish that she was not only entirely human, but entirely feminine as well.

"If you did that purely out of gratitude," Jenkins said in a slightly breathless tone, "you ought to do it to Tom as well, for being open-minded enough to accept this fantastic story, and to Clyde West for saving my life when Mrs.



Rowall had a gun pointed at me, and Inspector Dougherty for risking being blown up by that thing in the ashcan, and—”

“Food’s ready!” said West cheerfully from the top of the stairs. “I’m going to put it on a tray and bring it down.” He paused, and finished with a chuckle, “I guess you’d rather be alone for a while.”

“Aren’t people nice?” said Sally with a contented sigh, and turned towards the middle of the room.

“Jenkins! You there?” Dougherty’s voice called from the front door. “Could you come down to the basement right away? And bring Miss Ercott with you. We’ve got a biologist here who wants to—”

“*And* considerate,” said Jenkins in mock disgust. “What do we do—tell him to bring the food outside?”

Sally pulled a face, the *moue* turned into a smile, and arm-in-arm they went out to explain how to save mankind.