

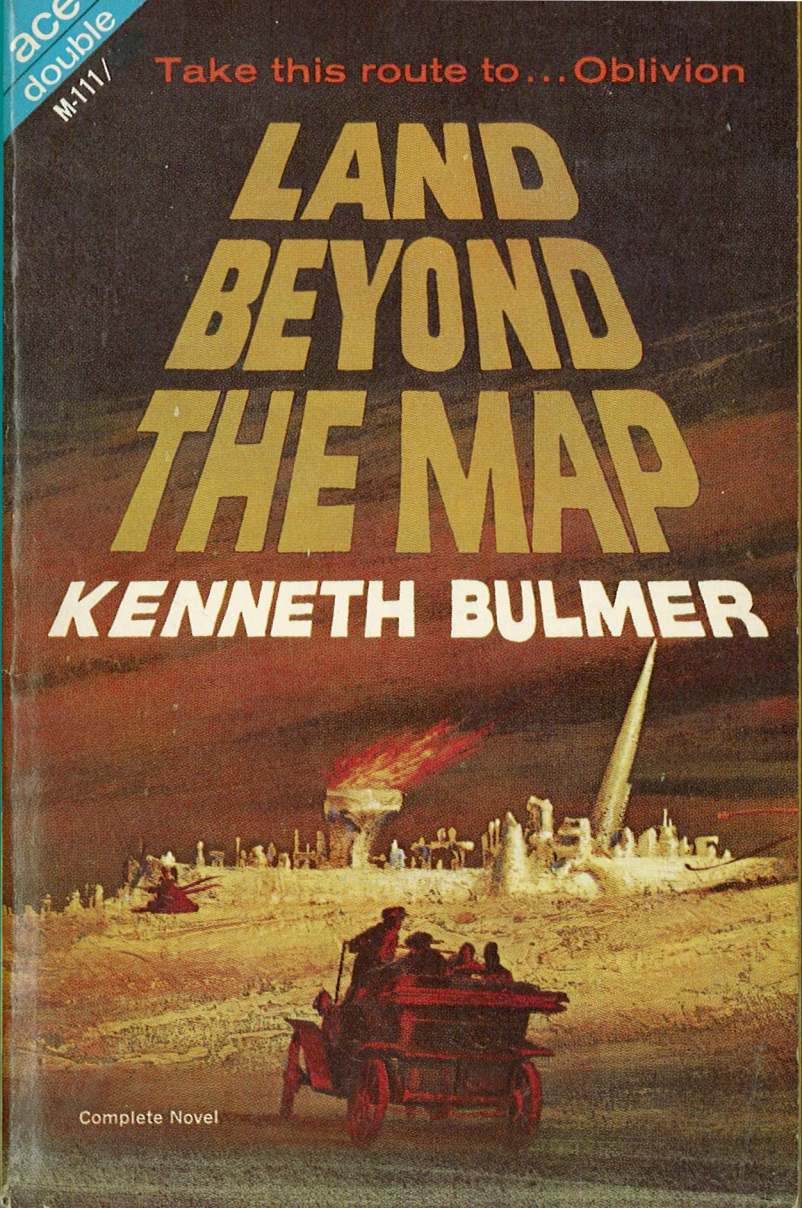
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LAND BEYOND THE MAP

KENNETH BULMER

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"They're about!" the woman whispered, and Crane abruptly saw a strange light shining through the heavy black curtains that shrouded the house. He crossed to the window and before anyone could stop him he drew the curtain back.

At first he did not understand what he saw: a round gleaming, color-running orb stared unwinkingly back into his face. It was . . . an eye. An immense sad eye staring at him through the chink of the curtains, an eye surrounded by a living whorl of flame that he had last seen engulfing poor Barney in the parking lot.

At least three others had disappeared into the strange world from which those aliens had come, and a girl had been driven insane by them. And before Crane's quest to unravel the secret of the Map Country was complete, the fate of two worlds would hang in the balance.

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**LAND
BEYOND
THE MAP
KENNETH BULMER**

ACE BOOKS, INC.
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LAND BEYOND THE MAP

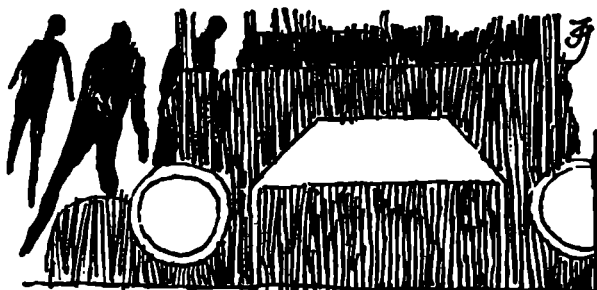
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FUGITIVE OF THE STARS

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I

ROLAND CRANE heard the crash of breaking glass in his study from the hall where he had gone to tap the barometer and curse the windy, overcast, beastly weather. The sound echoed hard on a blast of wind that shook the isolated old house. The carpet rippled the length of the hall like an anaconda. The lamp swung from its chain, chasing shadows like bats across the polished paneling of the walls.

He ran angrily back, almost colliding with the incomplete suit of Florentine armor, in time to see the second maid, young Annie, burst into tears.

Strewn at her feet across the Persian carpet, shards of glass glittered in the table-lamp's illumination like the aftermath of a battle. Crane looked up.

All along the windowless north wall his map frames hung, some faded, some brightly colored, tattered, dimmed with age, charred, stained, inscribed with loving and painstaking care

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and the lavish curlicues of writing from the hands of men long dead. That wall dominated the room. Across from it the curtained windows and ceiling-high bookshelves counterpointed in modern somber book-learning the high brilliance of those maps. They spoke of daring and the great venture across unknown oceans, of beckoning mists of undiscovered lands and the siren call of the sea. The salty tang of romance breathed from them into the close confinement of the somber study. From pigment and parchment beckoned the lure of the unknown.

In the center of the Fifteen Eighty Italian of the Florida Gulf and the westward islands a star-shaped outline revealed the brighter color of gold leaf beyond where no glass lay to dull the luster.

"I'm sorry, sir. I just don't know how it happened."

Annie's nose was red and her cheeks shook and her whole scrawny frame trembled. She peeked at him over her hands pressed tightly to her wet face. Her bright bird-like brown eyes were moist and overflowing.

Crane's anger dissipated. Annie was the daughter of old Annie, who had served him as well as she had his father, and that had been back before the first World War, before Roland Crane was thought of, when Isambard Crane was building up the engineering combine that now kept his son in idle luxury. That idleness was relative, though; because of his dislike of business drearinesses Crane's energies found other outlets. Men of affairs tended to misjudge him on the basis of his inherited affluence.

The map was unharmed. He took four quick strides to the frame and checked. An odd bluish tinge stained the glass. It had shattered into the shape almost of a perfect seven-pointed star.

He turned on Annie.

"That's all right, Annie. No real damage done. And stop crying, for goodness sake!"

"I'm sorry, sir —"

"What were you doing here at all this time of night?"

Annie gestured to the coffee table. A tea pot covered with

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a hand-knitted cosy, a cup and saucer, milk and sugar and a heaping plate of buns, with a dish of butter and a knife and toasting fork reminded Crane he had rung for tea.

"Why didn't Molly bring it?" Molly was the first maid.

"It's her night off, sir—"

"Oh," Crane laughed. "Well, it's not a very pleasant one. The wind must be gusting past seventy. Probably the blast I heard in the hall twisted the fabric of the house in some way, maybe vibration, and the glass must have been weak—never mind now. Just clear the glass away. And be careful—don't spear yourself."

"Yes, sir."

The telephone rang.

"Oh, drat it," said Crane ungraciously and crossed to the wall-table where the phone crouched like a sentient spider, connected to the web of the world.

He did not recognize the voice. The storm must have interfered with the telephone line as well as smashing his map glass; he realized it was a woman, but the squawks and ululations and clicks rendered any further guess impossible.

"Mr. Roland Crane?"

"Speaking."

"The Mr. Roland Crane who is interested in maps?"

Crane's mental defenses alerted. Before he could make his usual cautious reply, the woman's voice went on:

"Interested in buying maps? I have something you might care to see."

"Oh?"

"Perhaps I could come out to Bushmills—?"

"We-ell—"

"I have a car. I'm in the Royal Garage in town. I could be with you in half an hour."

Crane thought of the drive out from Market Nelson, with the road winding steadily upwards onto the inhospitable moorlands, with the scraggy trees lying flat in the wind and the road glistening with unshed water, the ditches and gutters miniature raging torrents. No weather for a woman. He thought of the Coup des Dames, and smiled wryly to himself;

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his notions of womankind stemmed from the pages of old books, where knights in shining armor defended shrinking damsels from fire-breathing dragons. Today, the girls twisted the necks of the fire-breathing dragons pretty efficiently themselves.

"All right, Miss — ?"

"Harbottle."

He shuddered and went on: "Very well, Miss Harbottle. If you care to drive out in this weather tonight then what you have for sale must be very interesting. Come out, by all means."

The phone went dead at once. That might be a fallen telegraph pole just as easily as the replacement of the receiver.

He watched as Annie finished clearing away the glass. Odd that the glass had broken at all, really, just like that; but that had been a treasure bought entire — frame, map, glass and all. The glass was old and weak. He made a mental note to check all the other framed charts and maps. Those housed in the ponderous sliding drawers of the cabinets were preserved better, perhaps; but he would have missed that oriflamme of color along the wall.

Maps perhaps formed too great a part of his life. He had tried various of the other ways rich men spent their days and had found them all uniformly dull, pompous or cruel. His interest in maps stemmed from that early odd experience; he had told the story a few times but, meeting raised eyebrows and smiling incredulity, hadn't bothered lately. He wondered now, not for the first time, if he followed a will o' the wisp. The main fact that the search went on still was good enough.

The buns toasted well before the banked fire roaring in the hearth. Wasteful, perhaps; shedding a benison, yes. And that was what counted with Roland Crane.

He poured milk and added tea and sugar and lay back in his winged armchair with the sliding seat and back fixed in the most comfortable position years of experience had taught him. It was good to be alive. It was good to be rich with financial cares handled by a remote glass-walled office in the City of London. It was good to live a full life in these

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bleak moorlands of the west country, and to go off on a dig during the season, working with men and women who shared his archaeological dedication. The idle wasting away of life in frittering pursuits that was a disease with the rich would have killed him inside three months.

Next season would be — if he was lucky — Turkey. A great deal to be dug up there, to be found, to be added to the store of human knowledge. Many of mankind's origins were to be discovered there and Crane's wealth would once more be willingly thrown into the work of unfolding the veil of the past. Yes, it was good to have a purpose in life.

He drank more tea and ate a toasted bun, liberally smeared with good rich farm butter, and lay back in the great winged armchair, well content.

He wondered, not without a twinge of muted excitement, what this strange woman would be bringing him tonight out of the storm.

Miss Harbottle had wasted no time. She'd probably driven up that winding road with the wipers tick-tocking across the windshield, the tires hissing in the rain, the main beams scything ruthlessly ahead, a cigarette held casually between her lips, clocking a steady sixty.

She looked that sort of girl.

Annie ushered her in, said that she would bring fresh tea, and closed the door silently.

Miss Harbottle advanced with outstretched hand. Crane took it, looking at her, suddenly and disastrously uncomfortable.

Miss Harbottle's fair wavy hair had been cut murderously short. She had a face that could find a match only in those old books of high romance that Crane had read and pored over as a child, a face that made the faces of modern magazine advertisement girls look the vapid blanks they were. She wore slacks and a short leather coat, an attire for which she apologized at once.

"Felt it more suitable for the weather. Filthy ride."

"Yet you came anyway," Crane said, showing her to a

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chair. "It must be very important." He looked vainly for a case.

She laughed, sitting down. "I'm afraid I played a little deception on you, Mr. Crane. I have no maps to sell."

Crane sat up. "Well, what on earth — ?" he began.

Her face, while still retaining all its vitality and vivacious radiation of breeziness that had so befuddled Crane, became at once somber, penetrating and intelligent. The impression she gave Crane was of an elfin sprite full of feminine loveliness and charm barely concealing the practical toughness of a dynasty-toppling Empress. She leaned forward.

"I'm not selling maps, Mr. Crane. But I am interested in acquiring a map —"

"I'm sorry, Miss Harbottle." Crane was brusque and annoyed. "If you knew I collected maps you should also have known I do not sell. I —"

"I know, Mr. Crane. I am interested in one special map. A map which I believe, you, also, do not have."

"Oh?"

Her eyes were hidden now behind down-dropped lids. He wondered for a panic-stricken instant what she was thinking; then he rallied. That was between him and his memories alone.

"Well, Miss Harbottle —"

"And my name isn't Harbottle. That happens to be the name of the proprietor of the Royal Garage. I used it on the spur of the moment."

"But why — ?"

"Mr. Crane. If I told you that I am looking for a certain map and came to you for assistance, what would you say?"

"Well . . . only that if I could help you, I would, of course. But I think it very unlikely."

"So do I."

"What! Well, then?" Crane was exasperated.

"Mr. Crane." The girl whose name was not Harbottle spoke with concentrated seriousness. Her eyelids rose and her eyes — of a deep and disturbing blue — held Crane's hypnotically. "I am interested in a map — a map that has been torn down the center."

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"Ah!" said Crane, and was silent.

In the room the feeling of tension was as strong a reality as the wind that clawed at the windows and buffeted the walls outside. A door banged somewhere far off above; probably the beds were being turned down. Annie must have assumed that Miss Harbottle who was not Harbottle would be staying the night. It would be a charitable gesture to offer and everyone knew that Crane was not the man for monkey tricks with females. Crane ignored all these outside unimportant sounds.

A map, torn down the center!

An old map, on thick curling paper with print that was difficult to read. Yet not too old. Young enough to be used by a motorist wanting to find his way along mainroads in the country. Along roads that had run in the same grooves since the time men traversed them searching for fresh flints long before the Romans came. A map that did exist — or had existed — an ordinary map, a cheap mid-nineteenth century map printed all in black.

Yes, Crane knew of a map that had been torn down the center.

But was that map the one this girl was talking about?

The answer to that question could only be: "yes!"

Crane composed himself. He poured more tea. His hand trembled so slightly that the tea fell neatly enough into the cup; its scatter would have covered half a crown.

"You'd better tell me the rest of it, Miss Har — I beg your pardon . . ."

"Polly Gould."

"Miss Gould, then perhaps we can — Polly Gould? You're not Allan Gould's sister?"

"No." Then, at his expression, she said flatly: "I'm his cousin."

"Most odd. I mean, ringing me up and spinning a yarn about having a map to see and being a Miss Harbottle. . . . Why didn't you try to see me in the ordinary way?"

Her expression baffled him; but for a fleeting instant he didn't like what he saw. Then she said: "You're a rich man,

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Mister Crane. From all accounts, very rich. You live alone with a few servants, stuck out in the middle of this bleak moorland. I've had dealings with very rich people a few times before and I can say candidly that I do not like them. They've fallen into the trap of believing that money compensates for the lack of normal human qualities —"

"Please, Miss Gould —"

"Oh, I've heard about your archaeological pursuits and no doubt you feel you are doing a good job — but that's purely relative. I couldn't take the chance that you'd be like all the rest and refuse, offhandedly and offensively, to see me."

"But you're Allan Gould's cousin!" Crane was determined not to become annoyed. "Surely that must have made you understand I'd see you —"

"Allan told me what an odd fish you were — his expression, I'm merely reporting — and how damned glad he was he hadn't been born with all your inherited wealth. No, Mr. Crane. Subterfuge it had to be. You rich and we ordinary people inhabit two different dimensions."

"I remember Allan being a wild one. Always dissatisfied with what he had, always reaching out after fresh experiences. He even bucked army tradition to the extent of volunteering for any crazy scheme that came along. . . ." Crane had been shaken by this girl's verbal bludgeoning. He knew rich people were disliked as a matter of principle; but she seemed so cold-blooded about it all. But he had to know what she knew about a map that had been torn down the center. He shifted in his armchair and said: "Well, then — can you tell me if there is any more news about Allan?"

"None." Polly Gould's manner subtly changed, as though through her tough matter-of-factness she had remembered an old and painful wound. "Since he disappeared no one has heard a word. And that was five years ago. So we're not likely to hear anything now."

"No. I'm sorry. You were fond of him?"

"Pretty much." She was offhanded about it now; it cut deep. "He was in love with me. Wanted to marry me. I wasn't

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and didn't. I sometimes wonder if — but then — what with the map and all I just can't make up my mind. . . ."

Her distress was obvious.

Crane felt unnecessary.

He realized that she'd spoken as she had earlier to show him how she felt, to put her cards on the table, to be honest with him. But this, this about Allan Gould — this meant much more to her.

"Well, anyway," he said brusquely, "perhaps you'd care to tell me why you've come to see me."

"The other day I was speaking to Tom Bowles — you don't know him and, anyway, he isn't important."

Crane felt sorry for poor Tom Bowles. Being so summarily dismissed by this girl was something like the end of the world. Her dismissal of him — well, now, that was a different category of Armageddon.

"He mentioned that he'd heard a funny story from friends and they'd picked it up from overhearing an Admiral talking in his club." She shot him an oblique inquiring look, as though weighing him afresh. "The story was so odd that it was worth repeating."

Crane nodded. "You can spare me the story. I know."

Polly Gould put down her cup and stared directly at Crane. "I don't know it all, not the details. But I want you to tell me. It is very important that you do so, Mr. Crane."

Crane scowled at the fire. "I can't see how this very funny story — to quote your friends — can have any bearing on your visit. It merely explains how you know I am interested in a map that has been torn down the center."

"I guessed you would say that." The fire leaped up, throwing a lurid flickering glow across their faces, picking out the silver glitter of the crossed rapiers on the wall, flinging back a blinding reflection from the broken map case. "I can tell you that Allan had that map —"

"He had it!"

"Yes. He had it. He used it. Just as you did."

"My God!" Crane sat in a cold sweat. That someone he had once known, an old army friend, had actually possessed

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the map — his map! — and he hadn't known — it struck shrewdly. And Allan had actually used it. Incredible.

Polly said: "You'd never told Allan the story. I didn't know until Tom told me. Perhaps, if you had —"

"You think he disappeared — there?"

"I don't know what I think. Perhaps, if you tell me the story and fill in details, I might have something more to go on than a fifth-hand account told with all the boring club-jargon thrown in. Well?"

"I can hardly refuse." Crane sat back in his chair. His voice sank, so that Polly leaned forward, hands under chin and elbows on knees, to hear him. The firelight caught her face, limned it cameo-like against the shadows of the study.

"I must have been five or six at the time. We were touring — father, mother, Adele and myself — but touring where I cannot remember. The experience was so strange that none of us mentioned it afterwards, and now that my parents are dead and Adele is — well" — he swallowed and went on — "that doesn't matter in this context. She cannot tell me. Finding out just what did happen is what matters."

"I know about your sister," Polly said softly. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, they look after her well. She plays with her dolls and her pretty ribbons and lets them wash her face and dress and undress her. She'll be thirty-four next birthday."

Polly remained silent.

After a moment Crane said: "We had a big red car. I remember that because all cars were black in those days. A big tourer and I loved to sit up front with the hood down and let the slipstream whip into my face. I can feel it now." He put one hand to his cheek and rubbed, thoughtfully. "We were going from one town to another — naturally, I don't know where — and I was anxious to get there for an ice cream. I remember bits and pieces, flashes of memory, elusive patterns; not the whole thing in a nicely ordered sequence. To remember anything at all from that age means it must have impressed me very forcibly. This did."

"Yes?"

"Just as we were leaving the outskirts father realized he

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didn't have a map. I believe it was my fault; I'd used his map to make a paper hat. Anyway. There was a junk shop, you know, old stuff people toss out and that lies in windows gathering dust for years on end. Then a rich American happens by and pays enough to keep the owner living for another five years. There was a book tray outside. Twopence each. Nothing much under a shilling these days. Father asked the man if he had a map. He had. He had a map all right."

"The map."

"Yes. The map. It was folded into the back of a guide book. Father just tossed the book onto my lap and we set off. The next flash that comes is of father using words I didn't understand and of mother shushing him. There was only half the map there. Someone had torn half of it off."

"Wasn't a remark passed . . ."

"My mother, I think. She had a whacky sense of humor. It may have been father; it doesn't matter. They said: 'I suppose when we reach the torn part of the map we'll all fall off the edge.' It made me laugh." Crane fiddled with the teacups, thinking back, feeling the sun and air and the way the big old red tourer rolled around corners. He could see the map spread out on the seat between him and his father, his father, upright behind the wheel, leather gauntleted hands so firm on the wheel, so gentle with the old paper of the map.

"We drove on in the sunshine through green fields, not a house or a soul in sight. The telegraph posts were all leaning at crazy angles and the road was very white and dusty. Then father said: 'Well, hold on, folks. This is where we all fall off.' And we all laughed. We were still laughing when the gray mist closed down dankly from nowhere."

He shivered.

"You couldn't see a thing. One minute we were driving in the sunshine, doing fifty along the white road. The next we were groping forward in a dense mist. It was still warm. The car still ran. Father dropped the speed to ten miles an hour, and we groped on. Then I started to cry."

"You were frightened?"

"Yes. Well, scared, wondering what it was all about and

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what it would be like to fall off a map. When Adele said: 'We're not really going to fall off the end of the world, silly!' it only made it worse. I cried all the harder. Eventually father decided to turn back. We retraced our course and came out into the sunshine again. When father checked the map, and mother, too, we found that the mist began at exactly the place where the map was torn."

Polly Gould shivered and moved closer to the fire.

"Father laughed it off. He was a big man. Isambard Crane. Biggest engineer in all the west country. 'Probably a local freak,' he said. I didn't know what he meant; but it sounded comforting. We went on again. We crept through the mist, hearing nothing apart from the rumble of the car. Then, after about ten minutes, the mist began to thin."

Crane put the cup down. He guessed he'd break it if he went on with story holding it in his hand.

"The mist shredded away. We were out in the sunshine again. Father laughed and said that was that. We went on around a bend in the road and then — then —"

"Yes?"

"A confusion. A roaring from the engine as father turned the car around fast, tires spinning. A distant glimpse of turrets and towers, of fire and smoke and the thin keening of trumpets. I cannot bring that scene to mind though I have tried many and many a time. A silver globe from which spurted livid tongues of flame. A tall structure which I think of always as a tree, laminated, many branched, and yet so huge no tree exists on the same scale. A vibration in the air, a gossamer sheening of the atmosphere that set a rippling curtain, many folded, between us and the scene beyond." Crane shook his head. "I have tried to recapture the feelings we all had, the inexplicable sense of dread, the heightened pulse-rate, the dread knowledge that this place was evil — and yet evil designed for one end, that of good — inexplicable as that sounds."

"Inexplicable — and almost crazy."

Crane smiled wryly at Polly. "Yes, Miss Gould. Crazy."

"You ran through an industrial fog-belt into one of those

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god-awful industrial towns, all smoke and soot and flame; and the feeling of evil, of men's lives being warped and crushed, is strong enough there to curl a philosopher's beard."

"So I have thought many times. That must be the answer. You travel through the Welsh valleys, some of the most beautiful scenery God put on this Earth — and then you stumble across the foulness of a mining town huddled under its reeking smoke — like a cess-pit at the bottom of a garden. To a child's eyes a factory belching smoke and steam and flame as the Bessemers tilted would appear as a cacophonous mystery, a place of terror and fascination and repugnance. Oh, yes, Miss Gould, don't think I haven't thought about this."

"I believe you have, Mr. Crane. I merely said that to test your reactions. At least you're not completely dominated by terror-memories; you can still be logical. You forgive me? Good. Now, Allan —"

"Yes. Your cousin. He had this map —"

"What happened afterwards? To the map, I mean."

"Father turned the car around fast. We went out of there and through the mist without slackening speed until we reached the sunshine once more. Then we backtracked and found a fork which took us a longer way around. We didn't speak much of what we had seen."

"All right. Frankly, Mr. Crane, I cannot see what this did to you. And your sister Adele's reaction seems quite out of proportion. You ran into an industrial belt and saw the monstrous growth of factories with a child's eyes. I had been hoping you would help me with my search for my cousin. It seems I was mistaken."

"Just a minute. I've told you the story that is current. I haven't added further details, details I have told no one. It seems also pretty plain why I want the map . . . Adele haunts me and there must be a chance for her . . . Well, I won't elaborate on that. But right now I think it only fair for you to give me your side of the story."

"That's simple enough. Allan planned a long motoring holiday. He was on leave —"

"He stayed on as a regular? Yes, of course. I decided that

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soldiering and Cranes didn't go hand in hand. I think I was right."

"Maybe you were. He'd found a girl friend — Sharon something-or-other — and they were going to do the Grand Tour of Ireland."

"Ireland!"

"Yes. You knew Allan had disappeared in Ireland?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. But I didn't know he had the map. You mean — all this happened to me in Ireland?"

"If it happened, Mr. Crane."

"What d'you mean — if? I may be crazy; but as surely as I sit here, I went through that mist and saw another world."

Ireland. So all his motoring excursions about the bylanes of England had been fruitless. He had no memory of crossing the sea, when, as a child, he had begun that momentous tour with his family. Ireland. Well, if enchantment did enter the picture then Ireland was the right place for that.

Polly stared at him. "Did you say another world, Mr. Crane?"

"Yes. And not only do I mean a different world from the one a child had experienced." Wind caught terrier-like at the windows, souging at the panes, shaking the stout walls of the old house. The fire leaped up in yellow and orange arabesques and shadows wavered eerily on ranked books. "Another world. A different world from anything we could ever know, or anything we could dream of."

"Perhaps you'd better finish your story."

"When you tell me what happened to Allan."

"He wrote that he'd picked up an old guide book and was intrigued by the illustrations. Steel engravings. He also said in his letter that there was an old map in the back that had been torn in half. He said that for the hell of it this girl, Sharon, was going to compare the old routes with the modern. She had a theory that the carriers could find their way about better than modern truck drivers. She was a bit of a crank on things like that. Low heels, hand-woven plaids, wooden utensils from Scandinavia, vegetarian. You know the sort."

"Hardly the type for Allan, wouldn't you say?"

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"You didn't see her."

"Oh."

"They left Belfast one bright morning and were never seen again. That was five years ago."

"I thought he wanted to marry you?"

"This was after I told him no. Finally. In a terrible scene. Sharon was to assuage his pangs. Anyway, she'd have made him a better wife than I would have. But, you see, that's why I feel responsible —"

"No. No, not you, Polly. The map. The damned map. I tell you here and now, Allan did follow that map, he reached the torn-off edge, he groped his way through the mist and one of those blasted clanking monsters got him." He stopped, realizing what he had said.

"Clanking monsters?"

He made a vague gesture. "Through a child's eyes. I don't know what they were. But they came running out of the little trees ahead of us, clanking and shining, with seemingly dozens of legs and spinning treads and long flailing arms reaching out for us. That's why my father turned the car so fast." He shook his head. "I haven't told anyone that, before you."

"And that's why your sister Adele is — is the same mental age now as she was then?"

"Yes."

"That's why you have this personal grudge against the map?"

Crane scowled. "How can you have a personal grudge against a bit of paper? A loathing, a terror, a mortal fear it might reveal things better left undiscovered, yes. That might lead to you burning the accursed thing; but it would scarcely be a personal grudge."

"You never did tell me what happened to it."

"I didn't think about it at the time. Out of the mist of memory I recall that incident itself. When my father died I went through his effects half expecting to find the guide book locked away in a japanned steel box, with its key attached to the ring he always carried on a chain in his pocket. Nothing,

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of course. I suppose you can say that the idea of regaining possession of that map has obsessed me. The guide books I've pawed through astound even me. But what must have happened is obvious. Father disposed of the book fast at the time. It's been kicking about junk shops and second-hand bookstalls waiting for a buyer —"

"Allan."

"Yes." Crane hesitated, and then said: "Unless other people used the map, went through the mist into the — well, what can we call it but the Map Country — and vanished. And then the people — the beings, entities, aliens, what-have-you — who dwell there simply returned the map to our world and waited for fresh victims."

"But that presupposes —"

"Yes. It does rather, doesn't it?"

The tea was cold. The butter melting in the dish looked greasy. All the buns had been toasted and eaten. Crane rang for Annie and when she had cleared away the table he went across to the cabinet and produced bottles. He raised an eyebrow at Polly.

"Same as you. Scotch. Straight."

"Raw it is. Here."

As they drank slowly and reflectively, with the fire glow reddening their faces, Crane studied this girl with a slow and appreciative scrutiny that held nothing of insolence or rudeness. She was a woman many men would do many things to possess. She stared into the fire, oblivious of him, and he wondered if she were thinking of Allan and that last quarrel.

Her cousin had rushed off to Ireland in a rage, with a second-best girl friend, had bought the guide book and the map and, thinking to deaden whatever pain he felt over Polly, had followed the map to — to where? To the Map Country.

And that told him precisely nothing.

In a way he could not define he had begun in the last hour or so, talking to this girl, to believe he might at last solve the riddle that had bedeviled him throughout life. He had vague hopes that he might in some as yet only dimly

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understood way find a cure for Adele; but other reasons had driven him on to seeking the map torn down the center. The piquing of his pride, the knowledge that forces existed outside this normal ordered world, forces that both frightened and fascinated him, the unfounded but tenaciously held belief that his own incomplete personality might be made whole, and the sheer love of digging into the unknown — all these things drove him on in his search to regain the lost key to the Map Country.

He rose and picked from the bookcase the Ordnance Survey of North Ireland. The names rang sweet carillons in his ears. "From Belfast," he said, musing. "No. The names mean nothing to me — apart from a tang of longing."

"When do you leave?" Polly asked, with an upward tilt of her head.

He smiled. They were establishing a rapport already and he found the sensation pleasant, restful — and direfully alarming.

"In the morning. I can catch the early train and the plane —"

"I'm coming too, of course."

"But —"

It took Roland Crane less than thirty seconds to realize that he was seldom going to win arguments with Polly Gould.

II

HE WAS still pointing out when they left the plane at Nutt's Corner and took the bus into Belfast that this didn't seem the

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sort of adventure for a girl. She merely told him to contact his bookselling friends and start the hunt for a mid-nineteenth century guide book of some indeterminate part of Ireland, containing in the back cover the torn half of a map. Neither of them entertained much hope of success with that approach; merely coming to Ireland wouldn't bring the catalogues of the booksellers any closer than back at Crane's home, Bushmills. But it was one avenue of investigation, and they had so few it bulked larger in importance than it really was.

Polly went off tracking down the last people Allan had seen before setting off.

They reported back to each other, sitting at a low table in the lounge of their comfortable hotel. Results — nil.

"The booksellers were pleased to see me, naturally," said Crane, leaning back in the deep leather armchair and yawning. "Whew, I'm tired. I've been a better than average customer. But they shook their heads and expressed a sympathy that was sincere and universal. Not a one." He scratched his nose. "Except for one, that is. An old character who advised me to try Smithfield. I told him I was looking for a book and not a side of beef —"

Polly chuckled. "Yes, I know. It is disconcerting to find a general market and junkshop area called Smithfield. Difficult for an Englishman to disassociate his Smithfield Market from his mind."

"I agree. Especially when Smithfield was the scene of many a tournament with knights in full armor jousting there — or didn't you know that?"

"No. Anyway, what about it? That's a world deader than the do do."

"True. I'm no dreamer of medieval follies; but they did have values that make our material grasping look like the second-rate emptiness it is."

"With your wealth you'd have been all right. Wait" — she held up a hand at his immediate protest. "That's not meant offensively or even personally. I know the middle ages believed in values of service instead of money and we laugh at

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them for it. Our values are money from beginning to end, the lust after material possessions. But even so, if that is the price we have to pay for decent living and freedom from the foulness of those days, then the majority of people today pay it willingly."

At another time Crane would have welcomed an argument about the progress of civilization; but right now a map that had been torn down the center obsessed him. He contented himself with: "One thing's certain. People in those days before the Renaissance cult of the persona would readily believe the Map Country exists."

She smiled obliquely at him, vaguely unsettling his impression that he was getting to know her better. "I think I believe you. I'd still be here even if I didn't, so there's no comfort for you in that. Anyway, did you go?"

"Smithfield? No. Tomorrow." He frowned. "The biggest upset of all is what this same old character told me in passing. Apparently another man has been looking for a guide book, and from his description of what he wants to buy, I'd wager half my collection he's after the same book as us."

"Someone else — after the map!"

"That's what the man said."

"That sheds a totally new light on this —"

"Does it? I don't really think so. If the map is being put back into circulation again, then it must be sought after."

"I really can't go along with your theory there —"

"You're right, of course, Polly. It is only a theory and so wild and woolly a one as to make nonsense of the sanity of the world we live in." He stood up, lean and tall, and smiled down on her. "Me for shut-eye. Tomorrow, Smithfield."

Though he tramped the fascinating alleyways of Smithfield, amid the noise and bustle, penetrating into the quieter, dusty and time-corroded sections, and turned over so many tattered books — all guide books — that he wondered how anyone ever found their way about without them, he did not turn up a guide book with a torn map in the back. Correc-

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tion — he turned up many guide books with ripped and frail maps in the back; but that warning zephyr he knew would creep up his spine when he found the right one did not happen. He returned to the hotel, discouraged. Everyone to whom he had spoken had been helpful, bringing out piles and armloads and old tea chests full of books, had even helped him to turn them over — but one and all they'd shaken their heads.

"Sorry, sir. Feller called McArdle was here, askin' the very same questions, sure he was."

McArdle.

Who the hell was this McArdle to come poking into Crane's life, trying to steal *his* map?"

In the loquacious, easy-talking way of the Irish the book-sellers would have told McArdle about Crane. That was a surety and Crane felt uncomfortable at the thought. He felt exposed in a way he could not explain even though that, too, was all of a piece with the rest of the mystery surrounding the torn map and the existence or otherwise of the place called the Map Country.

Polly, too, that evening looked crestfallen. "I found the hotel where Allan stayed that last night. Run-down sort of place. I spoke to the proprietor. The place has changed hands since then. It was five years ago, after all."

"Hard luck, Polly."

"I've a lead to the man who owned it at the time, though. Thought we could hire a car and run out there tomorrow. Little place called Ballybogy, about four miles northwest of Ballymoney."

"All right. I'm game." The obvious thought occurred to Crane. "I suppose his name isn't McArdle?"

"No. Should it be?"

"If this was straight detection, yes, it should be. But we're mixed up in something a little stronger than mere crime and sudden death. The death's there, well enough, but I don't believe it to be sudden." Crane could not have explained the dark thoughts crowding his brain except by bringing in the

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fey influences of Ireland — influences he had heretofore scoffingly derided.

"His name," Polly said, "is O'Connell. Will you see about the car?"

Crane, thinking back to that filthy night he had first met Polly Gould, said: "On condition you drive."

"Done."

Crane found it easy enough to obtain a car, a late model Austin, and Polly took it through the traffic the next morning and out along the excellently surfaced roads with a sure, gentle touch that amused and impressed Crane. The green countryside sped past. The sun shone and fluffy clouds wallowed in a mild blue sky like a fleet of white-winged galleons. And, like true ships of war, they could congregate in an instant and open up devastating broadsides, deluging everything in their wrath. Crane held the Ordnance Survey on his knee and followed their progress through the enchanted names of Ireland.

Ballybogy turned out to be just a tiny whitewashed village of closed front doors lining the main street. They were directed to O'Connell's cottage, knocked, and, after stating their business, were admitted into the neat, snug, dark little parlor. O'Connell was a brown-faced, wiry, sharp-eyed gnome of a man. He twinkled at them.

As his daughter brewed tea and laid out pan bread and Irish butter, scones and home-made jam from the strawberries of the previous summer, O'Connell racked his brain, thinking back to a single night five years ago when a man and a girl had stayed at his hotel. Amazingly, he remembered.

As he explained why he remembered, Crane's amazement was replaced by mounting excitement. He leaned forward on the black-wood chair.

"And you say, Mr. O'Connell, that the man scared you?"

"Not scared, young man." O'Connell rubbed his chin. "I recall surely he was possessed of the evil eye —"

"Oh, come now, father!" O'Connell's daughter had a fashionable hairdo, and nylons, and a well-cut flowered dress —

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she was no half-wild girl from the distant bogs. "That's all nonsense!"

Despite the sunshine flooding golden through the open door and the cheerful wink of china ornaments and tea things on the table, Crane could not help feeling that perhaps the old man's dark theories were not nonsense. As soon as you set foot in Ireland you realized that anything at all could happen here.

The story as it came out was in itself nothing sensational; but Crane became vividly aware of the undercurrents, the things that were not said, the possibilities this fresh approach opened up.

"The eye o' the divil himself," O'Connell rumbled.

Remembrance of that dark night five years ago had stayed in O'Connell's mind because on that night his hotel had caught fire. He must have gone over the events leading up to the blaze time after time, sitting tucked away in his little cottage, brooding, reliving the scenes of his days in business and of the conflagration that had ended them.

Crane pieced the story together, sitting drinking strong tea and eating pan bread and strawberry jam.

Allan and Sharon had been drinking a lot in the lounge — that made Polly frown — and they'd been creating quite a disturbance. A stranger had walked in out of the night, called for a drink, and had sat down at their table. He'd had the face and the eyes of the devil, according to O'Connell. Crane was willing to give O'Connell the benefit of being an expert in those matters.

"Him and the young feller got talking. He was trying to buy a book off him and the young feller wasn't having any, sure he wasn't." O'Connell shook his gnome's head reflectively. "Before you could say Cuchulain they were pummeling each other like it was the glorious twelfth itself. The young feller was — well — it was like this —" O'Connell stopped and rubbed his nose. "It was like he was hittin' the whole world, hittin' that feller with the divil's face."

"Poor Allan," breathed Polly.

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"And then," O'Connell said with some small satisfaction, "me hotel caught fire, the whole works, entire."

"But I went there yesterday —" Polly protested.

"Terrible fine fire service we have in Belfast, miss. All the best bedrooms running with water and ash. But, d'you know —"

"Now, father," his daughter said in a voice that held an unmistakable warning.

He rounded on her. "Now what d'you take me for, girl! Don't I know what happened? Didn't I see it with my own eyes, then?"

"You know what the insurance people said. You were lucky they didn't press you too hard . . ."

"Faith and all! I'm sitting here and telling you, girl, that that divil-faced feller lost the fight with the wee lad and set my hotel afire with his divil's spit. That's what I'm atelling you of!"

"Oh, father —!"

Crane glanced at Polly. She had her lower lip gripped tightly between her teeth. She looked intense and, caught limpidly unaware in a betraying pose, appealingly lovely. Crane looked away again, fast.

O'Connell's daughter — they never did learn her name — said: "You mustn't mind father too much. He always claimed that the stranger set the hotel alight with his eyes. These old superstitions die hard. I must admit the man did look — well — odd. He registered but of course never stayed the night. I didn't like the look of him then —"

"Registered, you say?" Crane stepped in quickly.

"That's right."

"Do you remember his name?" He waited, aware of the thump of blood through his temples and the dryness of his throat.

"Sure and we all do. 'Twas a McArdle —"

"McArdle!"

Crane nodded at Polly's surprised exclamation.

"McArdle," he said, and the satisfaction purred in his voice.

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"D'you know the feller, then?" asked O'Connell.

"No, we don't." Crane stood up. "But I'm much obliged to you, Mr. O'Connell. We intend to make the acquaintance of this McArdle chap as soon as maybe."

"Sooner, if possible," Polly added; and Crane knew she was back on form.

Crane, speaking with great gravity and emphasis, said: "Tell me, Mr. O'Connell. Can you possibly remember if the young man, Allan Gould, gave any indication where he was going in Ireland? It is most important that we know."

"Divil a word did he say to me on that score. From what they were arguing about I seem to remember a scrap of paper they kept prodding with their wee fingers. But 'twas a lovely fire — only time I remember the best bedroom's fireplace ever drew properly at all —"

"I know it must be difficult for you to recall details of a night five years ago. But the hotel fire fixes it for you. Is there nothing more you can tell us?" Crane was pleading now, openly and unashamed. Something about this whole fire story annoyed him in an obscure way.

"Well, now." O'Connell swiveled around to stare at Crane, his eyes bird-bright. "Don't blame me if it's nothin' but a trick of an old man's memory. After I retired and sold the hotel my mind don't seem as keen as 'twas."

"Yes, Mr. O'Connell?"

"I think they talked about County Tyrone. But mind me — I'm not saying they did. Just that I think they did."

"Thank you, Mr. O'Connell," said Crane simply. He was already standing in the little parlor and when Polly rose to join him they crowded the place with sunshine and shadow from the windows. O'Connell looked up, smiling. He began to pack a pipe kept handy on the mantelpiece. His daughter stood up, a little embarrassed now, at the parting.

Polly smiled at her. "A lovely house you have, Miss O'Connell. You must be very proud of it."

Miss O'Connell beamed and, having been won over, Polly-beguil, could let them depart with dignity and all rites

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fulfilled. As they settled in the car, Polly said wistfully: "An interesting life, with no complications."

Crane chuckled. "Don't you believe it. They have as many complications and figurative knives flashing into backs in a small village as you'll find any day in your London. Come on, start her up. We've no time to waste."

"County Tyrone?"

"When we're ready. I'm thinking of McArdle."

"We know from the booksellers that he's after the map and, conversely, he must know from them that we're searching, too." Polly let in the clutch and the Austin rolled smoothly away. "He was after the map before — trying to wrest it away from Allan violently enough to cause a fight. He's likely to be an ugly customer."

The conception was abruptly novel to Crane. All the way back to Belfast through a countryside that, with its unpredictable shifts of mood, was gray and brooding and misted with rain, Crane thought about McArdle.

When Polly pulled the car up before their hotel he was right back in his thought maze at the place he had started. He roused himself with a little grunt.

"I'll go along," Polly said, "and check the hotel register. If McArdle signed in, his address must be there."

"Yes, you do that, Polly," said Crane humbly. He hadn't thought of it. Not at all. Polly was the practical one.

She came back to late lunch with a triumphant expression. A triumph, Crane noted, that overlaid a grimness.

"He gave his address as some place in County Tyrone."

"Well now," said Crane.

"Only trouble is that the place name has been obliterated by burns. The whole register is badly charred. They keep it in the safe and regard it as a curio. A memento of the Great Fire, if you follow me."

"Yes. Well, it's too late to do much more today. Any ideas?"

"I ought to try to find a story this afternoon."

"Huh?"

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Polly looked at him reflectively, almost calculatingly, pulling her lower lip.

"You're a rich man, Mr. Crane — very rich, I mean?"

"Why, I suppose so. And what's all this Mister Crane stuff, anyway?"

"Rolley?"

"I've grown accustomed to it."

She laughed. "Well, Rolley, hasn't it occurred to you, living in your ivory tower buttressed by a financial empire, that a young unmarried girl has to work for a living?"

It hadn't — not in Polly's case, at any rate.

"Why — huh — " Crane said intelligently.

"I'm a reporter. I kid myself I'm a journalist; not yet, but that'll come. My paper thinks I'm onto a big story here, as I well might be, but — "

But Crane was blazing with anger.

"Is that all you've dragged me here for — to get a story for your confounded paper?"

She blazed right back.

"Your sort are all so high and mighty your feet never touch the ground! I mention that I have to earn my living and I'm trying to find a story — I barely manage to open my mouth telling you what I've told my paper and you jump down it with both hob-nailed boots!" Dots of color in her cheeks and sparkles in her eyes couldn't stop Crane from riposting — and even as he spoke he felt the meanness of his words.

"You know what those few people I've spoken to about the Map Country think of me. Do-lally-tap! And you propose to smear the whole story across the front pages. I can see it now! 'Multi-millionaire map-hunts for phantom world!' You'd soil and degrade the whole object of our search here — and I trusted you!"

Polly stood up to him, chin tip-tilted aggressively.

"With a headline like that thank your lucky stars you don't have to earn your living writing for the papers! And you still haven't given me a chance to tell you what I told my editor! That's just like you — typical. If everything doesn't go your way — blooey! Fire everyone!"

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- "Now look here, Polly — "

She brushed aside whatever he was going to say.

"No! You look here! You know why I'm in Ireland with you. My editor will get nothing from me that in any way can cause you distress — because that would do the same things to me." She was breathing deeply now, angry and annoyed, and yet, Crane somehow knew without doubt, partially angry with herself and understanding what he'd so clumsily been trying to say. "Have you forgotten about Allan?"

At once he saw the enormity of what he had been saying, the attitude he had taken, and contrition swamped him — tinged, thankfully, with a dash of mocking humor. Talk about the grindstone and the steel — the sparks generated here would have done O'Connell's conception of McArdle no injustice.

"Sorry," he said, meaning it. "Sorry, my dear. Just that, well — I've become so bound up in this thing that the thought of millions of gawpers prying into it over their breakfast cereal turns my stomach."

"Don't worry. There's a time for everything. By the time the story is finished with us — or us with it — and I file it you'll be as blasé as the next."

Thinking of the thoughts that had crowded his brain in O'Connell's neat cottage, of the dark enchantment of Ireland, of the potentialities of the Map Country, Crane said slowly: "I wonder."

Polly had regained her composure, her strong ironical sense of balance in the world. She sensed those vague forebodings disturbing Crane. "This isn't any supernatural hocus-pocus we're mixed up in, Rolley. That man McArdle points that up for us. There are some mighty queer goings on going on, but they can all be explained away in the naked light of day, never you fear."

This time Crane didn't say: "I wonder." But the chilling thought still lodged in his brain and refused to be ejected.

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III

ALL CRANE'S hopes were now centered on County Tyrone.

He checked his Ordnance Survey. Inquiries elicited the interesting information that much of the county was wild, sparsely inhabited, remote, forbidding. Tremendous areas of bog and wasteland seemed to him to promise far more than any neatly patterned fields of intensive agriculture. He retained the Austin for the next day and Polly used it for business of her own. At dinner she reported.

"Filed a story — can't remember what, even now — and made some other investigations. Nothing. McArdle isn't known around the newspapers. I checked a couple of book-sellers and the name was on their list of catalogue customers, just as yours is; but that's all. He buys maps and guide books. Only."

"I know I'm becoming very impatient to get to County Tyrone. Tyrone. Brings up some memories from the well of recollection, eh?" He picked up his knife and fork and then laid them down again. "Seems odd that I've been to Ireland before, been to Tyrone, and yet can't remember a thing about it. Nothing was ever said in the family."

"That's easily understandable."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose it is." And he began eating again.

After dinner Polly claimed she must indulge in some of the mysterious tasks women are slaves to before a journey of any description and, at loose ends, Crane wandered into the lounge. Silence, dabbed at by the clock and fibrillated by turning newspaper pages, daunted him. The night was fine, cool but dry, so he decided to saunter about Belfast a little, wondering why be bothered. He was afire to get started.

He had ditched all his theories about the Map Country.

He wanted to keep an open mind, completely open, and let the unraveling facts speak for themselves, form the truth without distortion by a too feverish brain. The facts, at this

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moment, were all at variance. If his childhood experience had really happened in Ireland as he now believed, then how — if in addition it had happened in the boglands of County Tyrone — could it be explained away on the supposition of the fogs and fury of an industrial factory town? And that was only one so-called fact that had to be juggled with. No — Crane hadn't forgotten they were searching for a man and a girl who had disappeared here five years ago.

A light rain had begun to fall; nothing unusual about that — but it was enough to cause Crane to turn back for his hotel. Lights gleamed slickly from the wet pavements and cars hissed by with a swish. The sometimes comforting closeness of rain was all about him.

"Can you direct me to Queen's Bridge, please?"

Crane was momentarily startled. The man had appeared from the curtain of rain unexpectedly. "Why . . . why it's down that way —" He pointed.

"Thank you. Mr. Crane, isn't it?"

"Ye — what?" Crane looked harder, feeling his senses drawing themselves together. "Who are you?"

"That is of no consequence. I just wanted a word with you."

The man's hat shadowed his face. A jut of chin showed beneath a livid slash of mouth. He had picked his spot well — midway between lamps. Rain splashed off the pavements, darkening the man's raincoat, tinkled in the gutter.

"Go home, Mr. Crane. Go back to England, where you belong. We don't want your sort here."

Crane had heard of the times in Ireland when an arm would reach hungrily from the shadows of a doorway, clamping your neck, throttling you, and a voice would rasp in your ear: "What are ye?" You could be one or the other. Everybody in Ireland was; there were no non-combatants. And so you had a fifty-fifty chance — a fifty-fifty chance of the arm releasing and the hoarse voice bidding you be off — and a fifty-fifty chance of walking up in the hospital with broken ribs, broken nose, bloody and battered — if you were lucky.

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But this man was smooth and polite, and he hadn't said: "What are ye?"

He knew.

Crane was over that first jolt of surprise. He let his body lean forward a trifle, not much, just enough to feel the weight come onto the balls of his feet. His hands hung limply at his sides. He said: "McArdle?"

The dark shadow before him, fussy in the rain, might have bowed ironically. It wouldn't have mattered. "At your service, Mr. Crane."

"On what grounds do you suggest I go home?"

"Now that you know of my existence, the grounds have changed. It might have been before that you were an Englishman. It might have been that I didn't like your color — anything." The stranger's voice held the excruciating quality of emery cloth on a wheel. "But now you have found out my name and quick enough to realize that a stranger speaking to you is me — well, I can only warn you for your own good. You'll run into a great deal of trouble if you persist in looking for this map. It is not for you. It never was intended for you — or anyone else. Forget about the map, Mr. Crane, and go home!"

"Why are you searching so desperately for this map, McArdle?"

"If I could take my own advice . . . But it's no concern of yours." The stranger in the darkness was disconcerted by Crane's matter-of-fact manner. His eloquence failed him.

"But it is of concern to me, McArdle. There is only one map. Why shouldn't we pool resources, try to track it down together?"

McArdle's bark of explosive sound, there in the rain-filled darkness, was not a laugh and Crane for a moment wondered if the man was sane. But anyone who would go to the lengths these two men were going for a map couldn't be regarded as sane, could they? Yet — this was no ordinary map. Crane remembered that old car ride, and he thought of Allan Gould. His fists clenched at his sides as he spoke.

"You won't tell me why you want this map, McArdle.

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But it must be obvious to you that I know why. I'm looking for it as well, am I not?"

"A blind man, searching for a corpse in the night. That's all you are, Crane."

"A corpse! Is Allan Gould dead, then?"

"Dead, rotted, cremated — how do I know. He went . . . where he went." McArdle took a step nearer, making Crane stiffen tensely. His tones changed, almost wheedled. "Just drop the whole thing, Crane. That girl with you will never find her cousin. That I promise you. Once you go in — that is, you're running foul of a nasty death, Crane, a most unpleasant demise. You think that with the map you will find Gould. But I tell you that map is not for you — it is not for any man of this world! I'm trying to help you, Crane, to warn you. I know how to deal with the map when I find it —"

"If you find it," Crane said savagely. "I suppose you'll burn it. That's all your sort ever have done, throughout history; burned the things they couldn't understand."

"But I do understand and you do not. And I cannot tell you anything about this map."

"Cannot — or will not?"

"Make of that what you will. You have the crazy notion that if you find it you will also be able to find Gould. I tell you this is not so —"

"No?"

"Well, then — you may find Gould or what is left of him. But you will also be destroyed yourself!"

Crane's impression of McArdle had altered violently during their conversation; the man's emotions changed like a chameleon's skin. Now Crane felt the blast of near hysterical anger barely controlled and a screaming frustration pouring up from a tortured mind. "That map will never be yours, Crane — never! It is mine! I — and I alone — will have that map! All you putrid little fools whining for things you cannot grasp, wonders you cannot understand — and interfering with me, getting in my way! But I will root you all out, every one of you . . . *for the map is mine!*

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The hurricane of tumbled words stilled. McArdle caught himself on a breath, his somber form straightened against the drifting lines of rain.

Crane knew this man would tell him nothing more. Whatever else there was to learn about the map he must find for himself. And the determination to do just that flowed in a strong black tide within him, bolstered by his own anger.

A cruising taxi idled past with a lick of tires; neither man took any notice of it. Wind gusted more strongly, sheeting silver clouds across the ranked spears of rain beneath the lights, wrapping Crane's raincoat around his legs, flinging stinging drops into his face. He felt the growing chill of the night. McArdle stood, tall and spare, rain glinting from the brim of his hat. Each droplet caught and split the distant lamplight so that, for an odd timeless instant, Crane glimpsed something more than a mere man standing there on the prosaic rain-slicked Belfast pavement.

Then he shook his shoulders, feeling the wetness seeping through, and brought himself back to the present. McArdle was just a man. That he could imagine anything else showed how off balance he was about all this. This damned map — this whole damned affair — was throwing him for a spineless, addle-pated ninny. He opened his clenched fists and moved his fingers slowly, feeling the blood pumping back.

"If you have nothing else to say, McArdle, then goodnight!"

He turned away, tensed again at this moment of arbitrary parting, still ready for anything that might happen.

McArdle was no fool. The man simply said, a mocking voice ghosting from the rain-lashed darkness: "And good-night to you, too, Crane. Just forget all about this foolishness and go home. I'm doing you a favor."

Crane did not answer; he walked off, head bent against the rain, hands now thrust deeply into his raincoat pockets.

Damn McArdle! And damn the map! In fact, taking everything that had happened — damn the whole business!

And then he remembered Polly and immediately reconsidered his decision. No map, no Polly.

The map had at least done something positively good for

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him. He was aware of the selfishness of the idea when set beside the tragedy of Adele, but that could not stop him from recognizing it. He luxuriated in the warm glow spreading in him as he thought of Polly. He walked back to the hotel in a remarkably good humor.

She was waiting for him in the lounge, a woman's magazine folded on her knee, a cup of coffee — stone cold — on the table and a cigarette burning into an inch long ash drooping from her mouth. She smiled weakly as he walked in.

When he told her of his meeting with McArdle in the rain he began to think there was something odd in her reaction when she lost that little smile and blue arc-lights began to snap — as Crane thought, aghast — from her eyes.

"You idiot!" she blazed out as he lapsed into silence. "You nitwit! You utter jackass — you — you . . ."

Crane sat down. "I thought you'd —" he began. Then: "What's the matter? I'm not allowing McArdle to frighten me off. I told you so."

"That's not it!"

"I was ready in case he started anything funny. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd tried to lay me out. He might just have thought I had the map on me." Crane studied her. She glared at him with such wrath that he wondered the wall at his back did not burst into flame.

"That's it, Rolley! That's the whole trouble — the whole trouble with you! You were ready for him — my God!" Her sarcasm scorched. "You were ready, tensed up with clenched fists in case he tried to shake the truth out of you. Well, you benighted nitwit, why didn't you grab him instead? You were there with the man who know the answers and you let him get away! Rolley — what's up with you? You should have grabbed him, run his arm up his back and frogmarched him back here so we could have had a little chat with him. Well?"

Crane had nothing to say.

He could, of course, have said that it hadn't occurred to him. He could have said that, anyway, even if it had, he wasn't accustomed to snatching strangers in the street and

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handling them forcibly. He might have pointed out that McArdle might have resented being manhandled and have called out. A policeman might have agreed with McArdle. That, at least, was a reasonable assumption.

He could have said all this. Instead he lowered his head and looked away. Hell! This girl made him feel like a criminal.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, lamely.

Quite deliberately, Polly stood up. She let her cigarette ash fall into the cup of coffee, creating a disgusting sight. "Are we still going to County Tyrone in the morning? Now that McArdle's here in Belfast? Is there any point?"

"I think so." Crane was tired and his head had begun to ache. "I think so. Allan went that way, and, if what we believe to be true is true, then so did I. I might recall something on the way. . . ."

"A faint hope," she said, still with that cold and distant voice, standing, looking down on the ruined coffee. "But at least, something. Good night, Rolley. If you run into McArdle again, just let me know. We might get somewhere then." And she walked off as though she'd just missed a six-inch putt on the eighteenth at Portrush.

Staring after her, Crane returned to his old philosophy.

"Damn the map," he said under his breath. "And damn all cocky, super-efficient women, too."

And went to bed.

The Austin strode sweetly out along the gray roads next morning, skirting south of Lough Neagh, dappled with cloud shadow and the glint of sunshine, pushing towards the west. The morning had begun with constraint between the two seekers after the map, and silence filled the car deafeningly. The wastelands and rolling hill-clumps, boggy and sparsely clothed with stunted bushes, enveloped them in a friendly desolation. Every now and then the road ran along a causeway raised above the low-flying marsh. This was turf country. The air smelled sweet. Despite his own impotent inward-directed anger, Crane began to feel good. The horizons extended, the sky expanded — his lungs expanded, too, in keep-

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ing with the mood of this vast, desolate and open space — and he realized once more that the world was indeed a great and wonderful place.

They passed very few people. Isolated farmhouses, each ringed with its protective screen of trees, looked somehow forlorn and tattered, as though they stood outposts of humanity, forgotten, and awaiting the final dissolution of the world. Sheep formed white dots on the hillsides, clearly seen, yet so far off they might have been white blood corpuscles in the veins of giants, sleeping through the ages.

The road meant nothing to Crane. The brooding land, the sense of isolation and the broad sweep of the wind, all conveyed no spark of remembrance. He stared through the windshield at the unwinding road, half-conscious of Polly lounging competently behind the wheel, trying to recapture the feelings and impressions of a five year old.

"Nothing, Rolley?" It was the first time she had spoken in miles.

"Not a thing. Sorry."

"For God's sake! Don't keep on being sorry."

"Sor — all right. Maybe we took another road."

"Might have. North of the Lough from Belfast. Longer. Have to try it tomorrow."

"Lunch in Omagh?"

"Check."

A sort of preparatory friendship had been restored, then.

Later on, Polly said out of the blue: "Just who is McArdle, anyway? I'm after the map because I believe it will lead me to Allan. You want it because of an experience of your childhood. We're both following this will o' the wisp on the shakiest of foundations; our whole deductive process can collapse at any minute. But we want the map for a positive reason. Two positive reasons. Why does McArdle want it?"

"Search me," said Crane. "He seemed to be trying to create the impression he was warning me off for my own good, more in sorrow than in anger. I suggested that if he found it he'd burn it. He didn't contradict or agree." Crane could remember in vivid detail the events of that rain-filled

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night on the wet streets of Belfast, talking to a dark shadow in the darkness. "But his last violent outburst, when he said the map was his, told me quite plainly he meant what he said. He reminded me of a soul in perpetual torment in hell, tantalized by the unattainable and yet knowing that it existed, could be attained, if only people like us did not stand in his way."

"Frightening."

"Yes. Yes, Polly, frightening. 'That map is not for you or for any man of this world.' He couldn't be much clearer than that."

The car rounded a curve and sped down a long shallow hill.

"If your idea — which you later rejected — did happen to be sound and the map is put into circulation again after people have gone through into the Map Country as victims, then maybe McArdle went through at some time and is searching for the way back."

"I wish I'd had a look at the fellow. In the rain and darkness he was just a tall spare shadow. The raindrops made a halo around his hat brim."

"Very pretty — but it doesn't help."

"No."

"Huh — civilization ahead."

"Omagh. Yes," Crane said thoughtfully. "Maybe McArdle did go through into the Map Country and maybe he is desperately seeking a way back. If this is true, then I'd be a little sorry for the fellow."

Polly glanced sideways at him, sharply, her face shrewd and calculating.

"Why sorry for him? What makes you say that?"

Crane could guess easily enough what she was thinking. In that acute brain of hers the idea was growing that perhaps he hadn't told her the whole story, that he had held out on some vital detail. She half expected that he, too, might be seeking to return to the Map Country for — for what?

"What do you expect us to find there?" he asked with sarcasm too evident in his tone. "Houris, fountains of wine, the

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secret of immortality, Aladdin's lamp or the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow?"

She had the grace to flush slightly. The car increased speed and rounded a curve faster than Crane liked. He said: "We're in this together, Polly. Maybe we have different reasons and maybe we don't see the way ahead in absolutely identical terms. Oh, yes, and I have money and you're a working girl. But as of now we work as a team. Check?"

She smiled, relaxing. "Check!"

Omagh turned out to be a neat little market town, hilly and subject to flooding. They found a parking place and had a meal. Then the specter that had been gnawing at Crane arose. What, exactly, had he hoped to accomplish by coming here? He had recognized nothing on the road. McArdle was in Belfast. Polly was fretting. They found a bookshop and asked the question and received the expected answer. No map torn down the center, not at all, not at any price. Then again, the bookseller did not mention McArdle. Crane didn't know whether that was a good sign or a bad.

Walking back to the car, Crane said with an attempt at confidence: "In a place like this word gets around. If anyone knows of a map torn down the center they'll come arunning when they scent the money."

Polly only sniffed.

It looked, and being as kind as possible, as though he had bungled it all again.

Inside the parking lot they halted for a moment beside the Austin. Polly was looking at him, not saying anything, just standing, looking.

Crane put a hand on the door handle. He tried to make the action sharp and decisive, as though he'd made up his mind.

The man crossing towards them must have interpreted it that way, because he began running, and shouted: "Hi! Just a minute, please."

Crane turned at once. The divertisement was welcome. Perhaps, just perhaps, the map was at last on its way to them now.

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The man was young, strongly built, with a square browned face and the square and amusingly blunted features of a clown. Crane had time to glimpse the stubbornness in the line of mouth and jaw, a strange erratic movement in the man's gait. Then a pale oval of silver light grew like an unfolding lily in the air above the man. Crane stood open-mouthed, quite still and silent, watching.

The running man held something in his hand, a scrap of bright blue, holding it out to Crane.

He must only have then realized he was running forward in a bath of silver light for he looked upwards, startled. He began to shout. This time the shouting was a scream; high and harsh and terrified. The oval of lambent light hovered and descended. It dropped like a ghostly parachute, like a monstrous shimmering jellyfish, enveloping the man, starting at his head and running down over his shoulders, engulfing his body, enfolding his legs and entwining itself about his feet.

There was only a tall and narrow oval of liquid light there in the parking lot, with the sun shining and the clouds high in the sky and the old market town all about.

Then there was only the sun and clouds and the parking lot in the town.

IV

POLLY SAID: "Oh, my God!" but faintly. Crane turned to her at once, freed from the mesmeric spell, and put an arm about her waist. She stared at him. Her face was drained of blood.

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He moved around the car, opened the door, put Polly onto the seat. He sat himself behind the wheel, started the Austin, put her in gear and went slowly out of the car park. He drove mechanically. It began to rain and he switched on the wipers. His eyes followed the metronomic tic-toc across the windshield and saw the ripples and balloons of water rilling down. He did not say anything at all. He just sat there, driving the car, watching the rain and the silver-gleaming pavement.

There was nothing to say that would help.

Polly shivered and straightened in the seat. She began to tidy herself up — fresh make-up, a moistened finger along her eyebrows. She did not look at Crane. He kept his face stonily ahead, watching the road as they left the town, not knowing which way he was going, lost in more than the slanting rain.

The downpour had broken suddenly in heavy driving lines of rain; as suddenly it passed with the lightening of the sky and the rolling away of gray cloud masses. A watery sun shyly peeked down on the soaked land.

"Where are you going, Rolley?"

"Huh?" He glanced at her, bemused. "Oh — going. Hell, I don't know. Anywhere. Anywhere away from that damned parking lot and that — that —"

"We're in this thing right up to our necks now; you know that, don't you?" Her voice was steady and grave.

"Yes. We've been mixed up in it for some time without knowing just how far committed we were. Who was that poor devil, anyway? What did he want? What —"

"You ask the questions, Rolley. I don't know the answers."

"Who does?"

Crane swung the wheel, turning the car, and brought her around and back again onto the road leading into Omagh. His mouth hurt from the pressure of his teeth and he had consciously to relax his tension. The decision to go back helped.

Polly tapped him lightly on the elbow.

"You're going back? Is that wise?"

"Wise or not — it's the only decent thing we can do.

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Some poor devil back there may be lying on the ground, badly hurt, dying. We can't just skip out on a responsibility; we witnessed the accident."

"You're talking as though this was just a road accident."

"Of course! Maybe he was struck by lightning."

"Have you ever seen lightning like that, Rolley? Act your age, man!"

"Have you ever seen anyone struck by lightning?"

"Well." She fidgeted. "No. No, I haven't. But that's just a quibble."

They were bowling down the main street again, heading back through rapidly drying puddles to the parking lot.

"Well, then, Polly. You tell me what you think happened."

"You saw the same as I did."

"All right. This is a civilized country, Polly, although occasionally you'd never believe that. You can't just go around ducking your responsibilities just because you think there was something — something odd about it all."

"That wasn't a civilized act, Rolley." She was angry now. "And you damn well know it. That man was killed — kidnapped, made to vanish — *taken*. He's not lying on the ground with a broken skull from a lightning stroke. Turn the car, Rolley. Let's get out of here!"

The vehemence of her words, the tremble of her lips, scared Crane. Polly Gould was a tough girl; yet she was plainly very frightened, with a fear she tried to cover by anger. As for himself, he felt a detached desire to investigate, to find out more. And now Polly, to whom he had looked for the iron core of determination in their expedition, was begging him to take her away.

He said slowly: "I'm like the character who kept calm because he didn't know the full details. Is that it, Polly?"

"Some. You can turn at this next corner."

"I fear nothing very much about this . . . this flicker of light. It could easily have been lightning. You get very odd effects with the ball variety. But, Polly —" He turned to look at her and then swung back as the car's tires hit a pothole.

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"I'm scared when I think you may crack up. If you really think so, we'll head straight back to Belfast and take the next plane home."

After a time, during which Crane halted the car by the curb, she said slowly: "No, Rolley. We can't run out now. You know as well as I do that that man wasn't struck down by lightning. The rain hadn't started then, anyway — and did you hear thunder? Whoever — whatever — wants the map tried to stop what he — or it — thought was an attempt to pass it on to us or to contact us in some way."

Crane remembered he had thought that the man had shambled across to them. Now he said: "Supposition."

"But a pretty conclusive supposition, don't you think?" She blazed the query at him, her eyes wide, her bottom lip trapped between her white teeth as soon as she had finished. Crane had to make a decision, then, a decision he knew he was making incorrectly.

As usual, he found an excuse to avoid an immediate decision. A small white-painted teashop with a narrow red door stood on the opposite side of the road. The tiny windows beckoned with loaded cake-stands and brightly colored tins. The reassuring smell of hot fresh buns wafted across the rain-wet road. The teashop looked pert and charming, smiling amid the frowning rows of stark gardenless houses.

Crane locked the car and ushered Polly across, not meeting her eye, knowing she had guessed the reason for his actions. But, at that, they both needed a cup of tea. The experience in the parking lot, for all their acceptance of it and their matter-of-fact attempts to rationalize it away, had been nerve-shattering to an alarming degree. Over a cup of tea and a thickly-buttered slice of barn brack, Crane faced the problem again.

They had reached the crossroads in this enterprise.

They could go back home, thankful still to be alive, and forget about the Map Country. Correction: try to forget. But they'd be out of it and no worse off. Or — they could go on, probe deeper, face the meaning behind that sinister

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oval of silver light and McArdle's passionate desire to gain possession of the map, enter, if they were fortunate, the Map Country.

He knew he ought to say: "Okay. If that's how you feel we'll go back home right away." But some unsuspected devil of obstinacy deep within him resented such a tame ending. With distaste he remembered how during training he had wished, with a frightful lapse from his normal personality, that his men's ammunition had not been blank but sharp. The moment had come on him suddenly and overwhelmingly, when a red regiment had enfiladed his company in a gulley and the umpires were knocking him out left and right. A sergeant had got a bren going in reply for his own blue company; but the umpires had not been impressed. Crane recalled with cold horror how he had had to crush down the hot words, the violent wish that the bren had been firing live ammunition — the umpires would have been proved wrong then.

Something like that was happening now. He very much wanted to find the Map Country. For Polly's sake he wanted to find out what happened to her cousin and for himself he wanted to do what he could to help Adele. For both Polly and himself finding the Map Country was a therapy and a healing of wounds. He didn't feel right about giving it all up now.

The most scary thing of all was his own lack of fear.

He sipped tea moodily, staring past heaped cake-stands out of the window. A small tousle-haired boy pushed that same tousled head into the shop, stared about and began to withdraw. His eyes focussed on Crane and Polly. He stopped back-pedaling, froze, jerked forward and then backed out as though he'd stuck his head into a furnace. The door slammed.

"What's up with him?" Polly asked in a voice that showed she hadn't the slightest interest.

Crane didn't bother to answer.

They'd finished their second cup of tea when the door opened again, and an old, bent, white-haired man entered. His

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hair was a clear white, brushed up stiffly and standing out at the sides. His thin face, deeply furrowed, was burned brown and formed an oaken frame around startlingly blue eyes, so blue they appeared white. He walked towards Crane with the near-stepping and deliberate walk of the aged.

Without invitation he seated himself at their table.

"And would you be the man lookin' for the map, now?"

Crane thought very deliberately: "So I've been saved a decision — again."

"I must be," he said. "Otherwise you wouldn't ask."

"Fair," the old man said. "Very fair." He squinted down his nose at them, then took out a red handkerchief and bugled. "Ye saw what happened to poor Barney?"

"Barney?"

"The wee idiot lad. Him as looks after the motor cars. Terrible, it was."

"Oh," Crane understood now. "We never did pay the car parking fee."

The oldster crackled. "I wouldn't let that weigh on me conscience, son. Barney'll be the third — the third in twenty five years. I've known 'em all, so I have."

"For God's sake get to the point!" Polly's face was blotched, the lipstick lividly patchy on bloodless lips.

Crane touched her hand gently.

"What did you see, Mister — ?"

"What you did. And you can call me Liam." He cocked an eye at them. "And none of your 'old Liam,' either. I'm not finished yet." And the cheeky old devil leered lecherously at Polly.

Crane smiled and Polly perked up. The rigidness left the hand Crane was touching.

"Why, Liam?" Crane asked softly. "Why did it happen?"

"You don't waste time, son, sure you don't. It won't be necessary for me to spend hours explaining. They took Barney and the other two so they could feel safe. And safe they are, the murdering devils."

Crane glanced at Polly. He guessed her thoughts paralleled his — another O'Connell?

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Crane realized that this oldster sitting across from him was not as ancient and decrepit as he looked. There was a sparkle in him like the flash of fire from the surface of running water — and like running water he would be slippery and hard to hold. The white stiff hair seemed genuine enough; but the bent posture, the crackling-bone movements, the jerkiness, appeared to Crane to be put on deliberately. Disguise. That must be it. Liam also appeared to think that Crane knew more than he did, which might be awkward or useful. Crane chanced a gentle nudge.

"They thought they had the map, eh, Liam?"

Liam chuckled. His leathery face creased. "Sure and all that's what they thought. Three times in twenty-five years — and each time wrong." And he chuckled quietly to himself, the rheumy water standing in his eyes. Crane waited.

Presently Liam said: "And what's the map worth, then?"

"At the moment," Crane said, putting artificial hardness into his voice, "precisely nothing."

"Is it nothing you say!" Liam rocked back.

"Nothing."

"Faith — then maybe I'm wasting my time!"

"Maybe. And maybe not. Tell me, is it true that Barney was taken because they thought he had the map?"

Liam stared back as though Crane had suddenly sprouted horns. He couldn't know the profound shock — a shock beneficially turned into shock of relief — shaking Crane at meeting a man who talked about a map logically, with rational speech, familiarly and with no covert leers about Crane's state of mental health. Liam was a tonic.

"Well, of course. And why else should they take the poor wee creature?"

"And they thought those other two, the others in the twenty-five years, also had the map?"

"Of course."

"Do you know where they went, Liam?"

"Yes."

Crane leaned forward. He trembled very slightly, and he could feel his heart beating as though he were an insomniac,

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unable to sleep. He swallowed. "Have you been there, Liam?"

The reply should not have surprised him. What was unsettling, even now, was the matter-of-fact, offhand way Liam said: "Sure. Coupla times. In the long ago."

"In the long ago," Polly repeated in a whisper.

"And since then they've been after you for the map, Liam. That's it, isn't it?"

"It could be." Liam's face and voice became abruptly foxy. "I had a good look at you and your lady before I sat down here. I summed you up as people I could deal with, people who would deal squarely with an old man. There's been another — a divil-faced heathen with sparks in his eyes who'd roast and eat newborn babes on the Sabbath day."

"McArdle?"

"Faith, man, I didn't stop to ask his name. And there's always the chance I might find a true comrade, a person I could trust. . . . But I think that dream is over." The foxy look died and in its place a long sad look of regret clouded Liam's lined face. "There's only the map left now."

"If you've been — there — then you must have the map."

Caution deepened the wrinkles around Liam's nose and eyes. "That doesn't follow at all, young man. Not at all. Maybe I had the map in the long ago. . . . I don't want you to run away with the wrong ideas, though."

"I won't. Just that this isn't an everyday happening, is it now?"

Liam lost his watchful look. "You won't be contradicted in that, son. Most unnatural, sure it is. But you're seriously trying to tell me the map is worth nothing? You don't expect me to believe that — knowing what I do?"

"At the moment." Crane took a deep breath. "How much were you thinking of asking for it?"

"Ah, now." And Liam curled up and went into his shell like a tortoise tickled by a lettuce leaf.

Polly said: "If they snatch people they think have the map and you have it, why don't they snatch you, Liam?"

He showed no apprehension; rather, a deep and joyful cunning irradiated his wizened face. "They can't seek through

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brick walls and what they can't see they can't eavesdrop on. I found that out quickly enough. That's why I waited until you were safely under a roof first. Just don't talk about this out of doors, that's all."

Crane sat quietly. Opposite from him sat a man who had, by implication, possession of the map. Yet the fever of impatience in him was quiescent, calm, content to sit and wait.

Why?

Crane didn't know. They were dealing here with forces that were alien and unnatural and he trusted his own instincts. The time for heady action had not yet come. When it did he felt he would be better and stronger to face the conflict for the benison of this hiatus, this calm before the storm.

He had journeyed a long way since that stormy night when his fifteen eighty Italian of the Florida Gulf and the westward islands had gleamed more brightly through a seven pointed star shattered in its glass. Perhaps there was some tenuous connection between that shattering and his present position. He doubted it; but you never knew, you never knew.

That was the night Polly Gould had erupted into his life.

Liam was talking again, here in this tiny tearoom in a neat market town in the boglands of Ireland. Outside the clouds had massed again; as Crane watched the rain started. Inside the shop colors faded and he shivered a little.

"If a man knows how to use the map, why, then, you cannot put a price on it. It's more wonderful than any pot of gold at the foot of a rainbow."

"A treasure map," said Polly, contempt slurring her voice. She tossed her head. "Is that all you can offer?"

Liam smiled wisely at Crane. "It's an offer few get and fewer make. Mind you, I'm not making it to you — yet."

Crane said: "When did you last go into the Map Country, Liam?"

"Is that what you call it? Well, 'tis a good enough name. The Map Country. Faith, yes."

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He would have gone on speaking but the door of the tea-room swung open again and a tall, dignified, roughly-dressed man entered. The man's eyes held the long gaze of one used to looking far distances under a misty sky. His hands gripped square and strong on the heavy, shiny stick; hands that knew the cunning of cutting turf. He marched straight up to Liam.

"And what is it, Sean, that you should be worrying me when I'm talking to foreigners?" demanded Liam wrathfully.

The man was humble; his dignity remained, but he showed very clearly that he was lower in the pecking order here than Liam. He twisted his cloth cap nervously.

"'Tis only that I'd like another week, Liam. Everything's gone awry. The cow —"

"All right, Sean. It seems to me I've heard all this before."

Crane watched, fascinated. Here were country politics, country finance of the old school, being enacted before his eyes. He could guess at the outlines of the farm running down, and the loan, and the pressure for repayment. Another week. Well — how many weeks would that make?

Liam surprised him. The blue eyes gentled and the bristling white hair lost its aggressiveness as he said: "Yes, Sean. Another week. I know you mean well — but never mind that now. Away with ye, and stop your thanks, man."

Sean's dignity cloaked his gratitude; but he shook hands as a drowning man shakes hands with a lifebelt.

"You're a good man, Liam, for all that you've never done a stroke of work in your life. The money's never meant anything to you —"

"Away, man!" roared Liam.

Sean turned and made for the door. "Goodbye, now," he said, bobbing his head.

"Goodbye, now," Liam answered automatically.

Ulstermen, both.

"What did he mean," Polly asked with feminine rudeness that merely charmed, "by the money's never meant anything to you?"

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Liam chuckled again, a wet, wheezing rustle of good humor. He drank the tea that Crane, for one, had not seen provided for him.

"I'll tell you, young lady. It's all part of the same story, and I'm not ashamed to admit that I'll be pleased to be rid of it — both parts."

The same tousled-haired boy they had seen before put his tousled head into the tearoom. "They're about, Granfer. On the prowl. Ma's having her twitches again."

"Drat," said Liam, rising and throwing coins onto the table in payment for the tea. "Come on. Ma's never wrong." Going out the door with Crane and Polly in instant but perplexed pursuit, he added: "Ma's my daughter and his mother; but she's looked after the family so long now we all call her Ma."

Liam halted by the Austin, one hand on the front near-side mudguard. He peered about, like a hound-dog scenting.

"This is our car," Crane said. "Any use?"

"Aye, that it is. Inside with ye both. Quick, now!"

Polly slipped behind the wheel, Liam at her side. Crane found himself in the back with the tousled-haired youngster bouncing up and down on the upholstery.

"Which way?" asked Polly crisply.

"Och, any way. You're pointed in the right direction. Just move away from here."

The car started, carrying them quickly out of town.

Crane looked at the hedges and stone walls fleeing past. The boy at his side remained absorbed in the experience of riding in the car. Polly gave her attention to the driving, adjusting her metal outlook into the bargain, too, surmised Crane. Liam lay back, breathing shallowly with a wheezing cough every now and then. Presently he said: "Take the left fork and stop at the crossroad."

Polly did so. At the crossroads a stone-built house of two stories leaned against the wind. Rain glinted from blue tiles and tall narrow windows. It was growing dark and the rain and wind in the huddle of trees about the houses sounded disturbingly eerie. The old house might have been a witches'

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castle gauntly shadowed in an enchanted forest. Crane waited for Liam's next oracular pronouncement.

"Let's go inside," he said casually. "It's going to be a soft night."

Crane walked up the pathway to the frowning façade of the house by Polly's side. He felt no wonder that he should be doing this. He knew only that he must not let Liam get away until the man had parted with the map. For Crane now felt obviously sure that the strange white-haired oldster did possess the map. And the map was a central part of his life.

V

INSIDE THE gaunt rock of a house Crane stood for a moment disoriented, off-balance, bamboozled by that bleak, oak-lashed, iron-bound exterior. Inside he might have been standing in some super-luxurious hotel, with every modern convenience the hand of ingenious sybaritic man could devise for the well-being of indolent millionaires. Modern decor, subdued lighting, central heating, futuristic armchairs that swiveled at a touch and adjusted to the most comfortable positions. Wall-screen television. A bar backed by such a liquor display as might have stocked a whisky-distiller's convention. Rugs ankle-deep in floating pile. Furniture that had been built by craftsmen to serve a purpose, in impeccable taste and scorning the rigid limitations of style and period.

Polly exclaimed rapturously.

Crane — who was a millionaire anyway even though he forgot it himself on occasion — smiled as he recognized

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with sympathy the drive of personality that had amassed this remarkable display of luxury. Around the walls large oblongs of emptiness frowned out, the picture lights still in position above them, and in alcoves desolate pedestals stood, their tops bare and shining.

Liam dropped into a chair and reached out a hand. On the table attached to the chair's arm a bottle and glasses appeared through a trap door with a promising click and he poured one each. "Sit yeselves down, then." They drank, relishing the thick fiery potency of the stuff.

"Now I see what Sean meant about the money," Polly said.

Liam lowered his glass gratefully. "Aye. And it's all gone. Every last penny."

"But this house —" Polly checked. Her voice trailed. She'd only just then appreciated her own rudeness and Crane smiled again to himself as he saw the color mount in her cheeks.

The tousle-haired boy broke in again to save the situation.

"Ma says they're not around here, anyway. In a fair flutter, sure she says they were." The boy's voice went from subject to subject as though each was as familiar as the other. "She's after making the dinner now."

Liam nodded affectionately. "You go and help. Mind now. Attend to your business."

"Yes, Granfer." And the youngster vanished through the far door from which appetizing if mysterious scents emerged.

"He's a scamp . . . I feel a dire responsibility for him." Liam sighed and drank again. "When his father — when his father died, it fairly broke Ma's heart. That map," he finished savagely.

Crane leaned forward. "Tell us about the Map Country."

A relationship had been set up between these three people, the sharing of common experiences, within the space of an hour or two; Crane recognized that the fact went far beyond this past hour and extended to a knowledge of the map's existence and a desire to possess it — or the knowledge it could bring. For Crane's whole purpose was undergoing a change. All his original reasons for the search remained in-

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tact but the balance of importance had subtly shifted; no longer was he seeking the map for the map's sake, or for Adele's; no longer was he merely interested in rescuing Allan Gould. He sensed something else, something greater and more frightening even than he had imagined — in the finding of the map.

What Liam told him, at first, merely awoke old memories.

Forty years ago, when Liam had been a reckless youth full of Irish bounce and living in a land torn by rebellion and war, when Irishman ruthlessly sought out and murdered Irishman, in the time of the Troubles, he'd needed a map for some dark and devious purpose of his own and had turned up the map — The Map — in some odd little corner shop where it had mouldered for decades. Using it, he had stumbled into the Map Country.

As he said, with a lopsided smile: "It was a lucky thing I was carrying a Lee-Enfield .303 and a bag of grenades."

Thinking back, trying to pierce the blank of childhood memory, Crane wondered what good rifle bullets and grenades would have been against the clanking monsters.

"That trip I cleared enough to set me up in life, find me a wife and a fine house, and give me, as I thought, no more worries."

Polly and Crane exchanged looks. Here was the old treasure story being trotted out again. Liam didn't know it; but neither of them was interested in the treasure — if it existed. Liam was making a pitch without need.

Crane said: "So you found some treasure. Bully for you. But what about the Map Country? You went back. What is it like?"

This time Liam was taken aback. He set his whisky down and stared at them. "You're after buying the map, are ye not? And if that is so, why else but for the treasure?"

Crane said: "Your daughter married and you and your son-in-law went back into the Map Country for more money — or whatever the treasure may be. He was trapped there. Now you've come to the end of the money and need more. Am I right?"

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Liam's white head bowed. "Yes, son. That's about the way of it."

Polly clucked sympathetically.

Crane went on prodding. "You've come to the end of the cash and your grandson is too young to go in and you're — you're not too old, Liam," he said, altering his attack as understanding came. "You're scared!"

Liam did not answer. He sat hunched, the hand holding the whiskey glass tightening and relaxing, tightening and relaxing.

At last he said: "For forty years I've lived in the shadow of them. They seem to sense the map is somewhere hereabouts. I've never really understood them and sure isn't that natural, weird unearthly beasties they be . . . ? But I've beaten them so far and I'll beat them still." The conviction in his voice was dulled and chill. "I have to have money, enough to tide me over 'til — enough for Ma and the boy. I can't last out much longer."

"How about Sean?"

"A flea bite." The fingers tightened and relaxed, tightened and relaxed. "Faith, haven't I been the big man of these parts? You might understand, you with your factories and offices in England. Open-handed I was, joying in largesse, respected, envied, admired — the big feller himself. And then came the thin gruel days, and the selling of pictures and statues and the pinching and scraping. And my pride turning in my guts like a sword"

"And the Map Country —"

"Ah, the treasure trove, the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow . . ." Liam lifted his head and looked up at them and the passion and sorrow in his ravaged face was a terrible thing to see. "You don't know what it's like, living with the knowledge that a paladin's fortune lies over the hill and you too scared to run across and fetch it."

"I can imagine," said Polly, softly.

"Colla and me went in just before the boy was born. I had some of the old wealth left; but Colla was mad to go, to bring back a fortune that would set his son among the high-

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est in the land—or to buy a husband from the nobility for his daughter. Even then I didn't really—So I took the sub-machine guns from the war and Colla the grenades. We loaded the truck well enough and started to run out; but they caught us. Colla . . . Colla . . .”

Polly said firmly: “Clanking monsters with arms?”

“Aye,” Liam said dispiritedly, recall draining him even of remembered fear. “Aye, I might have guessed you'd know. I don't know how you know what you do; but you don't know the whole truth and that's a fact.” He wheezed spitefully. “But you don't have the map. Don't forget that.”

“So you want more money, Liam. And if you haven't the courage to go into the Map Country yourself after it, you're willing to sell the map in lieu. All right. How much?”

The tousle-haired boy, Colla Junior, put his head in the door. He had a gift for doing that with dramatic effect. “Dinner's ready. Ma says she'll flay you if you let it go cold.”

Liam rose slowly, rolling the whiskey glass between his hands and then swallowing the contents in one gulp. His blue eyes did not leave Crane's face. “How much?” he repeated, and then turned abruptly, and made for the door.

Perforce, Crane and Polly followed.

Over dinner, a simple meal eaten in luxurious surroundings, nothing was said about the Map Country. Ma turned out to be a wispy, neat-figured woman with the penetrating blue eyes of her father. Her distant but polite manner did nothing to invite warmth of human contact; her aloofness from the world seemed to Crane to come from a personality blockage rather than a defect, as though she was perfectly happy to remain forever embedded within a certain circumscribed series of events—and he thought of his sister Adele . . .

To the watchful Crane Ma wore a perpetual air of listening, as though ready to start up at a sound.

He ate his meal in silence. Polly did the same. Ma and her son chatted desultorily about local tittle-tattle in which, surprisingly, Liam joined. He spoke with a grave and habitual authority about the things of the soil that are important to a man. There was no embarrassment here.

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Crane felt a touch of sympathy with this family, given a head start in life by Liam and the treasure from the Map Country and then fallen on evil times, unable to continue with their standard of living and no man in the house to shoulder the responsibility and venture once again into that eerie other world beyond the mist. Clear evidence showed that in every room valuable items had been sold from the house. Despite Liam's assertion that the loan had been a flea bite, how did these wholesale pawnings or sales tie in with the loan of money to Sean? Why didn't Liam ask Sean to go into the Map Country?

The answer to that came as Liam laid down his knife and fork, looked across unwaveringly with those startling eyes, and said quietly: "One hundred thousand. Yes or no, Mister Crane?"

Crane's first thought was that Liam, knowing who Roland Crane was, knowing he was the son of Isambard Crane, the inheritor of the biggest engineering concern in all the west country, must have debated long and painfully with himself to arrive at that round figure of one hundred thousand. Oh, sure, he could find a hundred thousand in liquid form without too much trouble — annoying, but nothing his office couldn't handle. As to the worth of the map — how, after all that had happened, could mere money be measured against the uncanny power vested in that scrap of paper?

He thought: "To live with an emperor's ransom on the other side of the hill — and too scared to go across and fetch it!"

Slowly, speaking with care, he said: "Would you trust us with the map, Liam, to go into the Map Country and bring you out the treasure?"

"You want the map, you pay me — now!"

"Trust is a beautiful thing," Polly said, amused.

"Aye," Liam nodded sourly. "You were maybe wondering why I didn't ask Sean to go for me? Well, you know now. When I heard you were poking about the booksellers, Mister Crane, asking for a rather peculiar map — I felt it. I felt my chance had come at last . . ."

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"You mean you hadn't dared offer the map for sale before," Polly said, an odd and to Crane an inexplicable edge to her voice, "because you knew no one would believe you and you couldn't prove the Map Country existed because you were too frightened. But when we turned up — we must have seemed like manna from heaven to you!"

"Maybe. You bring out the treasure and you can have your hundred thousand back. But, of course, you wouldn't want to then. A pocketful of gems is worth more than a mere hundred thousand."

"And a truckload."

The thrust went home. Liam said: "The truck's still there."

Polly favored Crane with one of her enigmatic looks.

Whenever she did that he wanted to turn her over and tan her stern, and that, to him was a surprising admission that their relationship was undergoing change. He contained himself manfully, realizing that the question of the money had been settled as soon as Liam spoke.

"All right," he said. "Where's the map?"

Polly put a hand to her lips, surprised despite herself. One thinks of a man as being rich; but when he gives evidence of it, it still astonishes. Crane smiled sourly at her. He didn't blame her.

"Hey, Ma — what is it?"

They all swung first to look at Colla Junior and then at his mother. Her face shone pallidly, her eyes rolled back, the eyelids fluttering about the white of eyeballs like fronds undulating erratically undersea. She trembled all over and every now and then her body twitched. She stood upright, head back; she did not fall over.

"Petit Mal . . ." breathed Polly.

Liam jumped up, his face livid.

"They're about; The damned dratted things, they're about!"

He ran out of the room like an old bearded crab scuttling irritably between rocks on a sandy shore.

Watching him go, Crane caught a strange upright streak of light from the corner of his eye, whirled to the curtains. The drapes hung in long stiff folds, the velvet material's soft-

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ness dragged from it by its own weight. They completely blacked off all light, did those curtains against the windows; but through a narrow crack a wan light waxed and waned, pulsing like a distant beacon through fog.

Crane moved to the windows, drawn by a compulsion to see outside.

"No!" Colla Junior scrambled across, leaving his mother, his face wild. "No! Granfer wouldn't like you to —"

But Crane had put a finger between the curtains, looked out.

At first he did not understand what he saw: a round gleaming, color-running orb stared unwinkingly back into his face. His eyes shifted to adapt to the increased light input and he saw . . . He saw . . . An eye. An immense sad eye staring at him through the chink of the curtains, an eye surrounded by a living whorl of flame that he had last seen engulfing poor Barney in the parking lot.

For a timeless second he stared out into the eye and the living pillar of flame, his fingers hard and constricted on the velvet of the curtains; then he jerked the curtains to and shut out the light.

He was shaking all over and sweat stung the corner of his eyes.

"They're about . . ." Ma's gargling warning swung him around from the curtains, brought his appalled vision back from that unwinking eye of light back into the room, back to sanity and to the people here bargaining over a torn map, a torn piece of paper that was the gateway to another world, being bartered for a hundred thousand pounds — brought him back, indeed, to sanity!

"The living light —" he said, stumbling over the words, incoherent. Strange shapes and colors burned against the screen of his mind, memory bringing back details of that light and of that eye — that eye that had been prying into this room to tear from them the secret of the map!

Polly began to speak, checked on a breath, went stiff-legged, her leather coat swinging, across to the window. She reached out a hand for the curtains.

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"No!" said Crane. And could say no more. Polly swung the curtain aside and Crane saw the darkness beyond with the glinting reflection of the light in the room reflecting on the glass of the window. Instinctively, he thought of his smashed map glass, the fifteen eighty of the Florida Gulf and the westward islands.

"Put that curtain back, girl! What are ye thinking of with the map so near!" Liam's harsh voice snapped Polly's hand across; the curtains rippled sluggishly and fell once more into their stiff vertical velvet folds.

Liam carried a submachine gun cradled under his old arm. The blue steel caught the light, carrying on the sequence of reflections from the now hidden window. But Crane knew as well as he knew anything of this weird business that what he had seen had been no mere light reflection; he had seen the living light, and in the light had been an eye

"Granfer!" Colla Junior spoke accusingly. "There was one outside! I saw the light."

"It's all right," Crane said placatingly. "It could have seen nothing. Except my face."

Gray tiredness dragged at Liam's face, drawing the skin tight, pinching the eyes. His mouth trembled and the submachine gun's muzzle moved in jerky little circles. "Write me a check and a note to cover it," he said harshly. But the harshness brazened with a hollow mockery of the strong man he once had been.

Crane did as he was bidden, adding a separate note to his office. "They'll pay, without question," he said, tapping the note.

"They'd better — " Liam began, taking the slips of paper.

Polly cut him off. "What have you to lose? You're too scared to use the map yourself. The — thing — outside has stripped your mind. If we don't come back, you're no worse off. Give us the map, Liam, and let us be off."

He glared at her, resentfully, shifting the tommygun.

Crane now felt he had no time to waste on sympathy for the old man. That recent experience with the eye had shaken him, given him a hallucinatory vision of his own soul, re-

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flected and distorted. Liam was a poseur, a husk, a worn-out shell that once had housed an intrepid youth. Living in indolence had sapped not only his morale and self-respect; it had sapped his will-power. He watched as Liam edged to a window, using a little finger to open a slit in the curtains, peered through, the cords in his neck taut and shadow-filled as his head thrust forward.

"They're about," Liam said uneasily, fidgeting with the gun.

"The map," Crane said harshly.

Reluctance stiffened Liam's fingers. He put a hand into his pocket, withdrew it, fingered the gun.

"They can see things." Again his fingers hovered over his pocket. "But they can't see through a brick wall or through a thick curtain — and they can't hear too well. But how did they know to follow us? We've never been followed like this before."

Surprising them all, Ma said: "When my man was taken and me near my time I felt them. I knew! I know them and their ways! I can feel them. And these foreigners have been followed here — not by them. Oh, no, not by them! But they've followed that other, that dark one — beware him, for he means evil. . . ."

And then Polly deliberately broke the spell conjured by the bizarre happenings within this room. "Oh," she said brightly, "we know all about him. He's after the map, too; but then, he doesn't have a hundred thousand pounds! Why don't you hand it over, have a good drink of whiskey and pop off to bed? Do you the world of good!"

Furiously, Liam thrust his hand into his pocket as though plunging into the ice-hole on Christmas Day, pulled out a leather wallet, and tossed it on the table.

Crane's and Polly's hands met over the wallet.

She withdrew, laughing a little shakily. "Sorry, Rolley. You paid for it. Yours, of course."

Crane had no time for gallantry. He mumbled something, opening the wallet, unfolding waxed paper, prying down into a secret he had waited the best part of his life to unravel.

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Difficult to comprehend, unsettling — this was the moment he had been looking for all these years.

The packet was strangely thin for a guide book. Understanding brought with it a flash of annoyance at his own sluggishness of perception. Wax paper sibilated. Light reflected from smooth white paper, faintly browned with the mark of age, showed up a tracery of black lines, clung pooling from a map, from the map, and picked out jaggedly the roughly torn edge that ran clear from top to bottom.

The map.

Here in his hands, at last, in the strange luxurious penurious house of a family who had lived on the proceeds of the map, in the heart of the boglands of Ireland. His hands trembled now, unashamedly. He thought of his father, and of Adele, who played with her dolls.

"Where's the guide book?" demanded Polly, suspiciously.

Liam said: "Faith, what more do ye want?"

Crane said: "It's all right. Don't you realize, Polly, this isn't the map that my father and Allan had. Haven't you understood? This is the part of the map that was torn off. This is the other half."

In that moment of consummation Crane's brain was like nothing so much as a detached and floating iceberg, drifting frozen in arctic seas. Everything he and Polly had learned about the map and the Map Country shrieked danger! with flashing red signals and the banshee wail of sirens. He had already decided he was going in alone; Polly must be left behind. But now, now the ice sheath began to melt and slither from his mind. He thought of the evil lozenge of light engulfing the parking lot attendant, the sad and baleful eye staring intensely into his face, the story of Colla left to rot with an abandoned truck and the gnawing fear that had destroyed the happy life of this family, of Allan, of Adele, and of his own time-distorted memories of fearsome monsters from elsewhere clanking with power and dominance and courage-consuming fire.

Ma sobbed, a thick bubble of sound that followed shockingly on the silence in the room. Liam held the check again,

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stroking it. Polly stared at the half-map — the *other* map — and speculation and wonder moved her breast shudderingly, made her breathe faster, awed. Young Colla crossed quickly to his mother.

"Yes," Liam said quickly. "They know! They know!"

Polly took the map from Crane with fingers cold and steady with purpose, refolded it, slipped it into the leather wallet. Her hands manipulated the old paper firmly, but beads of perspiration dewed in roseate drops across her brow. "Come on, Rolley. Let's get out of here."

He went at once, as though switched on, thankful, half-audible goodbyes guillotined by the closing door, the house drawing up behind him in a close secretiveness showing not a single chink of light. They stood outside on the porch in the windy wet darkness, the house brooding and somber at their backs. It seemed a long and naked way to the car.

"They don't know we have what we have," Polly whispered.

They stared about them, heads chafing collars of coats, daunted, expecting to see an evil lozenge of light and yet believing that that could not be.

"They can't see through material objects," said Crane, barely moving his lips, "and they can't hear too well, or so we were told. The car . . ."

"Yes, the car . . ."

The car offered a haven, a warm, snug primeval place of privacy and comfort, isolated and adrift in a cold and hostile world. When the courtesy light went on as they bundled in Crane felt like an illuminated target in a shooting gallery. Then the two doors slammed and the dome light went out.

"No lights," Crane said shortly.

Polly started up and they drove sloshily through puddles, groping slowly in third through the darkness, away from that house with its pitiful secrets and festering fears. They headed east.

"How well can they see us?" Polly said once, fretfully. "We ought to run with sidelights on, at least."

Crane didn't bother to answer, reached across and switched

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on the sidelights. He didn't know how well they could see with that huge cold sad eye staring unwinkingly from the lozenge of living light. But he could feel the fear coiling in him, urging him on, wanting Polly to send the car slamming headlong through the rain-filled darkness. Above them the sky moved massively, in a black blur of swollen cloud. She drove fast, with all her natural skill so that the big car rolled around the bends with full traction, the tires scarcely murmuring.

His fingers felt the shape of the wallet in his pocket and he marveled. Even if it was the other half, it was still the map. And he had found it at last.

VI

EIGHTEEN PEOPLE die every day on the roads of Britain, and although Ulster is part of the United Kingdom and not a part of Great Britain, Crane began to wonder with a savage self-motification whether it might perhaps turn out that he and Polly would raise that number to twenty. At that, it would be one way out of the mess. He knew as each minute passed he grew more and more frightened and reluctant to enter the Map Country. Big words tended to melt in face of the threat he knew lay over the hills.

Out of nowhere, Polly said: "Do you think that tommy-gun of Liam's would be any use against that oval of light?"

The answer was self-evident; but Crane had to say: "No."

"Well, so far we haven't seen it. Maybe they didn't spot us."

"We hope."

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"Ma said they were following the dark evil one. That could only have been McArdle. She'd probably seen him when he was around here before searching for the map. I don't blame Liam for having nothing to do with him. The old man was wise to wait for us —"

"Like Allan. But Liam didn't know anyone else would come after the map, and he could sell only to someone who knew about the Map Country."

"Poor Liam. He may have turned into a spineless blob; but he was saddled with a horrible predicament."

"True. And I'm not all that sure I'd be happy to go back into the Map Country, despite all its wealth, if those clanking monsters had taken my son-in-law."

The darkness lowered about them outside, streaks and lines flowing past the car windows with not a dot of light to show perspective. Polly said: "I'll have to switch the main beam on soon. Can't see a damn thing."

"If they'd been following us I think we'd have seen their lights by now. All right." Crane drew a deep breath. "All right. We don't want to up the rate to twenty."

Polly glanced at him, puzzled, but offered no comment as the light went on.

"You realize McArdle must have followed us to Omagh? He must have had pretty strong suspicions that the map was hidden hereabouts somewhere."

"Yes. Now Liam has confirmed that there is treasure in the Map Country I suppose we can assign that motive to McArdle?"

By her tones no less than the form of her words, Crane knew Polly didn't believe that theory any more than he did. That was a sensible, comprehensible motive for McArdle's appearance in the search for the map — but Crane no longer believed in sensible reasons for anyone's further interest in entering the Map Country. Proof of that lay in the lack of courage to enter of the single man avowedly solely after treasure.

Only a moment thereafter, or so it seemed to Crane aroused from his somber brooding, he saw the big saloon

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parked at the roadside. Polly swung smoothly out to pass; but the man with upraised arms, pinned in the beam like an enemy bomber, halted her. She brought the car to a stop.

A face peered in at Crane's window. A man's voice said: "I'm so sorry to stop you on a night like this, but we've run into a spot of trouble —"

Polly turned towards the man and said something sympathetically and Crane wondered with a part of his mind that wasn't scurrying frantically for shelter if she welcomed the interruption. The situation was one where her practical knowledge of cars could show to best advantage. Crane crouched low in his seat, thankful the dome light was off.

Oh, sure, he recognized the man looking in. Probably he was stopping all the cars out of Omagh, just to make sure.

Crane felt completely useless, dewed with the sweat of fear, slouching back in the darkness of the car.

Polly put her hand on the door handle and Crane moved. If she opened the door the courtesy light would go on and McArdle would know he had found his quarry.

"What — ?" began Polly.

A torch beam cut through the gloom, fastened like a fly in a spider's web on Crane's face. He winced back, throwing up an arm, blinded.

"It's him!" He could hear McArdle breathing, hoarse and rasping, and then a hand grasped his collar. His own hand snapped down to that hand, wrenched and tore, slipping along to a thick hairy wrist. His fingers caught in a smooth cold metal chain and he tugged desperately, feeling McArdle's hand dragging him up, and seeing only a blood-red haze beating through his closed eyelids. Polly cursed. Crane felt her body press against him and heard a soggy thump. McArdle's clawing hand slackened and through a haze of dancing blood-red specks, Crane glimpsed vaguely the torch disappear, McArdle vanish, and the sudden, bent-forward apparition of Polly's face in profile with a ferocious look of fierce hatred plastered all across it. Then the car lurched forward in a gasping tearing of gears and spinning tires.

"Duck!" shouted Crane automatically.

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Polly bent above the wheel and the windshield followed the rear window into shattered confusion. Cold, wet night air whipped in. More shots must have been fired lost in the roaring of the engine and the throaty shouting of the exhaust and the whickering crack of wind blustering through the car.

"Cripes!" Polly said. Then she threw back her head and laughed. Crane, slowly straightening, stared at her in amazement.

"You all right, Polly?"

"Of course."

"Oh — I see." Then: "What hit McArdle?"

"He wasn't the only one with a torch. He didn't know me, of course. Your warning was only just in time. I hit him with my torch — a rubber-covered beauty — but it laid him out on the ground."

"But he'll follow."

"Yep. So — what now?"

"It's damned cold in here. I suggest you get moving as fast as you can away from here. We'll have to sit and shiver."

"Right. One thing remains the same. We still have the map."

Crane smiled at the girl. "Thanks, Polly."

A cold sliding touch in his fingers brought his attention to the chain he must have wrenched from McArdle's wrist as Polly slugged the man.

"What have you got there, Rolley?"

He held it up so that the dashboard lights glowed on its intricate golden entwining of chain and link, its strange symbols deeply etched on golden medallions like a girl's charm bracelet. Intaglio work of a supreme artistry showed the chain to be no cheap manufactured item.

"Odd sort of ornament for a man."

"McArdle's a weird enough customer for me to believe anything about him."

Crane laughed softly, reaction from that brief, fierce encounter leaving him calm and pleasantly relaxed. "I'll put it with the map, snugged down in my pocket. That makes two things McArdle wants from us. If he does catch up —"

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"Not if the old bus holds out."

The car responded magnificently, streaking along the dark roads beneath the occasional twinkle of stars as they cleared one patch of drifting cloud and its attendant rain before plunging once again into the fine downpour. Stray patches of mist floated past in the headlights like spider-silk, whirling upwards, sparkling, as the car spun through. The threnody of wind and rain began to work insidiously on Crane; his face and hair and clothes were becoming wetter every moment and he wondered anxiously how long Polly could keep it up. He began to fret about their route; they seemed to be fixed on this single strand of road so that McArdle would have no difficulty at all in following. He was thinking that he ought to consult the map about alternative routes and then take over the driving when the streaky mist blotched and coalesced and real fog clamped down.

"Blast!" Polly said in her best ladylike way. "We could have done without this. Still, it'll slow McArdle, too."

"Two speeding cars, chasing through fog — what a laugh," Crane said. He felt like beating the air with his fists. If McArdle got hold of Polly there was no knowing what might happen.

"I'll have to slow down, Rolley." The car slackened speed as she spoke. "Can't see a damn thing."

They groped forward in the dank gloom, tendrils of mist writhing in through the smashed screen, chilling them with a miasmic breath. Crane coughed a couple of times.

Polly nodded forward. "Looks like a fire. What — ?"

Crane peered ahead, through the curling banks of fog. Up there the world expanded into a roseate halo, a round, chromatic whorl of incandescence that neared as the car crept forward. Glints of silver and gold light reflected in the swirling fog. The color deepened, brightened, took on a ghostly all-pervading golden glow that reminded Crane of something that he knew, that he should know with familiarity, some commonplace fact of everyday life that for the moment escaped his memory. It was like —

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"Like coming out of fog into sunshine!" said Polly suddenly, sitting up and gripping the wheel hard.

"Sunshine!" Crane echoed. "But it's night-time!"

Now the golden radiance was all about them, creating a nimbus of glory that irradiated the whole world. Then they had broken through, and the mist dissipated behind them, and the green countryside lay all before them, bathed in the warm and glorious rays of the sun.

Polly stopped the car with a jerk and they both sat there, conscious of the warmth about them, yet numbed, frozen, chilled to the core of their beings.

Crane took a deep breath. At last, licking his lips and moving his tongue as though it belonged to someone else, he said: "Welcome to the Map Country."

"The Map Country!" echoed Polly. They both looked ahead, bemused, trying to take in their new surroundings, lost to the danger following them along the road.

For the road still ran between green hedges and low stone walls, still curved gently over rounded hills, with the distant purple and gray mountains dotted with scraps of naked rock. The road ran slantwise before them, empty, waiting, sinister.

"This is no road in Ireland," whispered Polly.

"We'd better turn back — " Crane said.

"McArdle?"

"At least he's a man. Here, we could find anything."

"True on the last. But, McArdle, I wonder . . ."

They were saved further argument. Crane glanced at his watch. "If McArdle was still following us he would have been up on us by now. Let's face it, Polly. We have the map — the half-that gives ingress to the Map Country from the east — and McArdle doesn't. We were following that map and we came here. He won't."

"That's his hard luck." Polly stared ahead, trying to see over the brow of the hill flanking the curving road. "All right." She frowned. "But what's that up ahead?"

Crane looked. At first he thought it was a brewed up tank; then he recognized it as the wreck of a truck.

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"That'll be Colla," he said flatly.

"Well — " Polly took a breath and started the car. "We're here. So let's do some of the things we said we'd do when we started out on this."

Crane realized, as they rolled forward slowly, that events hadn't panned out as they'd expected. His whole entry into the Map Country had been as different as he could have imagined. But then, difference, strangeness, the very breath of the unknown — all these were implicit in the present precarious situation. He waited as the car pulled up beside the shattered truck.

Liam had spoken the truth. Three suitcases lay on the splintered wooden floor in the back. They were scratched and blackened, as though subjected to heat, and when they were opened some of the diamonds within must have been burned. But the remaining flashed a stunning sparkle of light in the sunlit air.

"Cripes!" Polly said, flabbergasted.

"Remember, you're a lady, Polly. And sling the cases into the boot. Remember, they'll have cost me a cool hundred thousand."

"Mercenary, blood-sucking capitalist," Polly said. They both knew the infantile line of back-chat was covering the fear that made them want to drive screaming from this spot.

Crane took one quick look around the cab. There was no sign of Colla.

"Now look, Polly. We can't go on. It'd be madness. So okay. We've found the Map Country. And it isn't as we expected. We're pretty sure we'll be killed. Let's get out."

"What about Allan?"

"He's been gone five years, Polly. You've grown accustomed to thinking of him as dead. Why try to change that now? And, anyway," Crane finished with a brutal directness that sought to cover the flaws in this new argument, "he is probably dead now. Like Colla."

A set look of stubbornness fixed itself on Polly's face and Crane sighed and felt an impending and unpreventable disaster. But to his surprise, she said: "And you?"

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"I've discovered there is more to worry about in life than a map or map-hunting. So I wanted to reenter the Map Country. I don't think I can help Adele now. I feel badly about that; but to me it seems an unshakable truth. So I'm here. Now all I want to do is get the hell out of it."

Polly gave a strangled laugh. "Maybe that's an impossibility. Maybe we got to hell in it, already."

"Maybe. Come on —"

"No, Rolley. I'm sorry. Look, you can walk back to the mist line and walk out safely by yourself if you must. But the sun is shining and there is no immediate sign of danger, it all looks quite and peaceful — and I feel rebellious. I came here to find Allan. I can't turn around now, now I'm almost there, wherever he is, just because —"

"Because you might get killed?"

She made a face. "It's not quite like that." She stood beside him in the dust of the road, stirring patterns with her toe. The countryside lay around them, still and peaceful, charming, restful. "Anyway, I'm going on for a little."

She looked determined. She was determined.

Remembering his first encounter with her, Crane did not try to argue any more. A leather satchel lay in the dust of the road and he bent to pick it up. Grenades. He remembered Liam speaking of them. Oh, well, he had used them before and had a good throwing arm. He put his arm through the shoulder strap and adjusted the satchel so that it rested comfortably on his left hip. The weight there and the purpose contained in the satchel reminded him with a vivid stab of memory of the regimental grenade-throwing competitions. He'd always managed to do adequately in practice and competition; but the memory of the times he'd used grenades live against those terrorists remained most strongly — his range and accuracy had gone up by over fifty percent then. But he'd never taken to it as he had sharpshooting; effective — but messy — grenades.

His fingers were fumbling with the stiff leather of the strap and the corroded metal of the buckle when Polly screamed.

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He looked up fast.

A memory of his childhood rushed back. He felt bleakly exposed.

Across the grassland angling towards the road, sprung apparently from nowhere, rushed a shining, fire-breathing, many-armed clanking monster.

His childhood remembrance had not played him false, then. Maybe the distant fire and smoke and towers he had seen as a child were not visible now — they must be on the far side of this fantastic country, accessible if you held the other portion of the torn master map — but the monsters were real enough. Real, and clanking and flailing prehensile arms — real, and charging straight for him.

There were two of them. Critically, with the experience of the years and his training in anti-tank techniques draining away much of that enervating supernatural fear, he recognized the tank tracks, the prehensile jointed arms and the tentacular coiling arms, the ruddy flare of some inner power source vomiting through venturi-styled exhausts, the low-domed turret-type excrescence riding the main body of the vehicle, and he could rationalize the whole into a vehicle of war, made by — and then smart rationalization broke down. These charging tanks had never been made by the hand of man.

His own hand reached for and found the familiar pineapple feel of a grenade, an old World War Two Mills Thirty Six, and his brain was in the middle of wondering if the thing would still work as his body went through the motions of pin extraction, of checking and of hurling with muscle wrenching force. Then he was diving into the car and Polly's foot was pressing the accelerator to the floor and the engine was threshing in agony as the tires spun.

"Come on, you brute!" Polly was yelling.

Crane remembered his father and the way the big old red tourer had roared with spinning tires. He sweated. The grenade fell beautifully.

The leading tank reared to one side like a hamstrung horse, a track blasted from a sprocket wheel and flailing into smaller

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and smaller whippings as it coiled around the driver. The banging sound of metal on metal reached him clearly over the Austin's engine noise. Bad design, Crane thought fleetingly, as he watched the second clanking monster gain with every yard.

For a few seconds it was touch and go.

Then the gallant Austin showed her speed and the clanking and fire-vomiting venturis lagged, faltered, and dropped away.

"That was a near thing," Polly said quite calmly. She held onto the wheel and her trim body was firm and without a tremor. She'd probably had the shakes when Crane had been jumping about outside.

"Too near." He looked back through the leering eye of the smashed back window. The clanking monster was still coming on along the white ribbon of road. The sun struck errant gleams of gold from its hide. For the first time he realized the things had been painted red, a bright, garish, out-of-place vermilion daubed against the serene rolling green countryside. The red dot followed on remorselessly along the winding white road.

"You realize, I suppose," he said, "that we're heading straight into the middle of the Map Country?"

"I had noticed."

"So?"

"That's where Allan is likely to be. You can knock out those clanking beasts, tanks or whatever they are, with your grenades. You've done it once. You can do it again."

And that, he reflected with due solemnity, was Polly Gould to the life.

Around them as the car fled along the naked strip of road the country unfolded, green dales merging gradually into a broad and monotonously flat plain, dotted with clumps of trees and threaded by the glint of lazy rivers. Distant purple and silver mountains marched forever just on the edge of vision, hurling their peaks against the sky, a wickedly beautiful frieze of spears. Aloof, the sky remained high and blue and distant, speckled with drifting cotton-wool clouds, and in the air mingled scents told of wild thyme and fragrant herbs

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and heavy-headed flowers sensually filling the world with a bouquet to relish. This was a country in which a man's spirit could expand unconfined by pressing walls of concrete and steel and his lungs could breathe a pure air uncontaminated by carbon monoxide and diesel fumes. In other circumstances the scene would have been peaceful and enchanting. But not now, not in the wild and misty bog-lands of Ireland, not where it should be dark with night and hazed with mist and rain and the shredding scurry of the storm-wrack above.

The sun did not look to be at the right declination for this time of year. Crane took out his pocket compass — without which no map-enthusiast is correctly dressed — and flicked open the cover. After a moment he took a deep breath, shut his eyes, and then opened them and looked again at the compass.

"For your information, Polly," he said carefully, "the north magnetic pole is now situated somewhere around the south pole. I thought you might be interested."

"How can you be sure? Oh, yes, I know the north should be on our left; but we might have got twisted around —"

"No soap, Polly. For two reasons. One is the boastful one that like a number of people I have map-sense, natural orientation. Lead me around the maze and I know — but how I know I don't know, if you follow — just which way is the right way to get out."

"Lucky you."

"Don't mention it. The other reason is hanging up there in the sky. We might just have become twisted about enough to be traveling west instead of east, and I might be wrong in imagining my map-sense has stuck with me into the Map Country. But the sun shows we're traveling east. The north magnetic pole is now down deep south."

The look on Polly's face surprised Crane. He had expected incredulity, perhaps, after that first remonstrance, or a girlish indifference to odd scientific facts. Instead she nodded with certainty, and said: "Wasn't the north magnetic pole in the Antarctic about a million years ago, last time?"

"Last time?"

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"Well, even I know it has changed poles from time to time in the course of Earth's development. I believe the last time compasses would have pointed south was a million years ago. Wasn't that one of the results from I.G.Y.?"

"So you're suggesting that the Map Country exists a million years ago, that we've gone through into the past?"

"Could be."

She was damned matter-of-fact about it, Crane grumbled to himself. Far too contained and perky — or was it merely that he was the old woman of the party, the chicken-hearted, the frightened?

The tank had now dropped behind them, lost along the road beyond the gentle undulations that appeared so slight and yet were enough to hide the clanking monster's metallic vermilion body. The flat plain was in reality like a petrified ocean, ridged with long rollers athwart their line of passage.

"And still only one damned road."

"We can't go back," Crane agreed. "That's certain. Not, that is, unless we knock out that second tank." He was stubbornly determined to think of the clanking monsters not as that but as mere tanks. They were probably robotic or remote-controlled; he didn't care to dwell on who or what might be driving them otherwise.

The car slid gently across the crown of the road, skimmed the offside verge and then, as Polly turned the wheel, surged back onto the left-hand lane again. Crane looked at her.

"I don't suppose they obey the Highway Code here," he said. "And you needn't bother about driving on the left; but what was that swerve for?"

He hadn't yet sorted out an acceptable formula to enable him to suggest he take over the driving without upsetting her or running the risk of a blazing barrage of scorn.

Polly bit her lip. "I don't know, Rolley. The car just went by itself — whoops — here we go again."

The car snaked up the road. Crane gripped the door strap and held on anxiously.

"I know we've had a hectic day, followed by a bizarre night

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and I should feel tired. But I don't. Perhaps it's the air here; but I feel more alive than I have in ages."

"Me too."

Polly wrestled with the wheel, spinning this way and then, as the car skittered across the road, spinning that. The frown of concentration on her face, the grim set to her jaw, all added to Crane's fear.

"Maybe the steering's gone haywire Slow down!"

He was looking hard at her; yet a movement beyond her profile attracted his attention. Out there on the plain the trees thrashed in wild motion. He saw a clump with their strange towering trunks and feathery clumped heads bending and bowing, lashing down until they brushed the ground and then whipping back the other way like giant stockmen's whips so rapidly he felt sure their trunks must snap.

"Slow down!" he shouted again, stricken with unreasoning panic.

Out there the whole plain was moving: the long rollers of grass were rolling in reality, were surging forward and up and down like the monstrous waves of a blasphemous sea. His mouth open in horror and his eyes staring, Crane saw that maelstrom of solid earth, and he cowered down on the seat of the car.

"Good God!" Polly screamed. She stamped on the brake.

The Austin slid to a halt. Now they could clearly see the sinuous writhings of the road; like a rippling length of white rope it gyrated away before them.

"What's happening?"

"I don't know. But anything can happen here — and it evidently does!"

"I feel sick, Rolley"

"This is just about the most basic fear a man or a woman has to face, Polly. The ground beneath your feet is a part of everyday life, so natural and permanent a thing you don't even think of it at all. But when you're caught in an earthquake and the whole ground begins to move beneath your feet, then you're faced with the destruction of sanity itself. You can hide from thunder and lightning, take shelter from

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rain and hail, fight free from a flood and even escape a volcano. But an earthquake when the very ground shivers in fear . . . there's nowhere to hide then, Polly, nowhere to hide at all. And your mind can't accept that. If you just let your unconscious instincts take over, you're finished, old girl. You have to think and reason your way through — it's the only way"

Crane had been desperately wondering just how long he would have to keep up this pretentious line of talk before Polly caught the spark, hit back, regained her blend of scorn and cockiness towards him. She sat back, pressing her slender shoulders back into the leather coat, breathing deeply.

"Look, Rolley," she said at last. "The road remains firm. It goes up and down and around; but it is nowhere broken. It stays there all the time."

And Crane knew she had conquered her basic fears.

"Reminds me of those fantastic inventions the wheezes boys got up to during the war. They built a road from links and slats across the sea ready for D-Day. They sent a truck across it and then a motor torpedo boat sailed past at full knots. The road waved around just like the road we're on now." Crane smiled; but he didn't reach across and touch Polly reassuringly. "But the truck stuck on as though glued; it looked somehow impossible, to see a truck chugging along a road swashing up and down in the sea."

"I've seen film of that on television." Polly pointed towards the clump of trees that had first taken Crane's eye. "The trees — they've gone. They've been sucked down. And, look, over there — those rocky crags have just been upthrust."

"Whatever's happening out there, then," Crane said slowly, losing some of his own elemental fear now that Polly had calmed down, "is purely on the natural level. The road, the man-made — or the what-have-you-made — artifact is unaffected. It's all part of nature."

Polly laughed, still a trifle too shrilly. "If you can call a sea of solid earth natural, then, yes, you're right."

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VII

AT FIRST they didn't realize what happened next. Then, when the soft white flakes began to drift silently into the car and disappear into tiny patches of moisture, gleaming in the sun, they had to accept it.

"It's snowing!" Crane said, and was surprised he could still feel surprise, here in this maniacal other world.

Polly had regained her usual poise and Crane felt a quick stab of admiration for her unalloyed by his habitual sense of inferiority toward her. She put a hand to her hair and shivered as the snow built up with unbelievable speed, so that a carpet of white covered everything outside.

"If this is what it was like a million years ago then I'm glad I wasn't born then."

"No. We weren't born then. But we are there — now."

"If we're there. We don't know where we are."

"Except that we're in the Map Country."

"Yes. The Map Country." Polly's voice held steadily.

Crane decided he'd better show a little spirit.

"And it cost a cool hundred thousand."

Polly didn't laugh. But she said: "Plus the hotel and crossing expenses and the hire of the car."

"The car!" said Crane. He ducked his head fast and jerked. "We've less than half a tank left."

"You've only just thought of that?"

"Yes." He kicked himself mentally very thoroughly. The lack of fuel would have been a trump card to have played in persuading her to turn back to their own normal world.

"H hadn't we better think about — ?" he began uneasily.

"Our pal's catching up," said Polly crisply, looking in the rear view mirror.

Crane sighed. "Okay, okay. Just a minute."

He opened the door and stepped out onto crunchy snow.

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The road had quietened down now although the ground beyond still rose and fell uneasily. He waited until the tank was at the optimum range and then tossed the grenade very accurately. He ducked.

When he looked up after the blast the tank had fallen on its side off the road and its starboard arms were going up and down with the movement of the ground. A wisp of smoke rose from it. After the noise the silence hung menacingly, broken only by an ominous hissing from the wrecked tank.

Again Crane felt he should exert himself. Polly was so much of a personality, so tough, so dominating, mentally even more than physically, so independent and youthfully modern a character.

He said: "I think I'll take a closer look at that clanking monster." He used the old name deliberately. "Hold on."

He wasn't surprised when she joined him. Together they walked across the snow-covered road, leaving large and splodgy footprints. It was not at all cold now and the snow gradually ceasing had no power to lay. Their feet rang hard on the old road surface by the time they reached the wreck.

The hissing noise had stopped.

"Something hot against the snow," surmised Polly.

Crane walked up the road to the tank warily, wishing he had a gun and yet recognizing the weak fallibility of that.

"Yes," he said, not taking his eyes off the machine.

The body, he could see more clearly now the thing was in repose, arched out into a rugged barrel-shape, with plenty of room inside for power-sources, controls, radio-equipment — and people. The tank sprocket system appeared at first glance to be relatively simple and uncomplicated without an armored skirting to protect the return rollers. The bogey wheels were small and set in three pairs of four, each set sprung on a rocker arm and coil springing. He eyed the mess of tracks snarled around the driving sprocket.

"Reminds me of our old Mark One Infantry tanks, as far as suspension and tracks go. No wonder a grenade could do

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all this. The track snarled up on the sprocket, probably a link jammed in and held. Nasty mess."

"You sound sorry for it, Rolley. Were you in Tanks?"

"No, thank goodness. But I received an intensive and highly unpleasant training in dealing with them." He added out of the pit of his own dissatisfaction with his military career, "Not that those poor devils of terrorists used tanks."

"Well," Polly said brightly. "You'll be able to use your tank-busting technique around here. Quite fortuitous, really. And you're doing all right so far."

"Why do you imagine I volunteered for an anti-tank course?" Crane fairly snarled the words at her. "D'you think I'd forgotten the clanking monsters when I joined the Army?"

And, at once, they were both contrite and apologizing to each other.

"Anyway," he said after the spate of words that neither really understood, "the Infantry Mark One had leaf springing and only two sets of four, rubber and steel bogie wheels. The old bashers did well for themselves, too, I'm told, before Dunkirk."

"That's all ancient history, Mac. What about *those*?"

And Polly pointed one slender finger at the tank's flail-like arms.

"They do pose a different problem. Have you seen anything like them before?"

Polly shook her head. "No. Can't say I have."

Crane mused, worrying at odd memories, trying to bring into focus an elusive picture. Those sinuous tentacular arms were really alien; but the jointed arms, now, they rang a bell somewhere.

Beneath his feet the group still trembled slightly, a diminishing shudder that rippled in dying waves out across the land from which the snow melted visibly in swathes of irregular gray and green. The sun began to pull steam from the sodden fields. Somewhere—and most strangely—a bird was singing. Now there seemed to be more trees than before, thick groves and clumps of them stretching out in all di-

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rections. A river, too, had appeared, winding slowly close to the road. Glints sparkled from its surface. Fish plopped satisfyingly, rippling the surface.

All the time he stood there Crane was aware of the background thought in his mind: *What happens next in this nightmare world?*

Polly said: "Only things I can think of are cranes." And she laughed.

Crane smiled weakly. "Yes. The arms are like derricks. But it's not that"

He pushed the elusive memory away and bent closer to the smashed tank. He could see no hole or hatchway by which he might have entered. On the broad back, canted now, protruded three radar bowls and a mat of complex and incomprehensible design and purpose. Whip aerials rose springily from the rear where the dramatic venturi showed blackened and pitted orifices. The metal looked blued and tough and the bright vermilion paint a scabrous unnecessary growth, peeling here and there, scratched, bubbled by the sun, slapped on carelessly — odd.

"We could build something like this if we had to with our present techniques," Crane said slowly. "But it would all be fakery. There'd be no need for half of all this dramatic appearance." He touched the venturis disdainfully. They were still warm.

"How about the arms?"

"They'd be more difficult — " And then he had it. "Of course. They remind me of the long-range handling gear used by nuclear physics men behind shields when they deal with hot stuff. You put your hands in controls and operate the remote extension metal hands and peer through the glass — that's it."

"So someone could sit miles off and control these things by radio, see by tv and radar, and manipulate the arms?"

"Something like that."

Polly shivered and turned away. "Let hope he — or it — isn't watching us now."

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"I think my grenade fouled up the works inside when the thing went over. It looks pretty defunct to me."

"Come on, Rolley," she said suddenly, sharply. "Is it really necessary to spend hours gawping over your kill like a big-game hunter?"

He turned away at once. Then, gently, he said: "There's an old saying, Polly, admirably suited to our present position. 'Know your enemy.' That tank could yield us a clue to whoever — or whatever — lives in the Map Country."

Walking back with her was an ordeal. He wanted to keep rotating his head on a stiff neck and look back. He fought down the impulse. "If they are watching us then there's not much more we can do." He put a hand on the car door. "You realize that the way back is now open?"

"Yes. But I believe more firmly than ever before that Allan is up there someway." She pointed ahead. "That way."

Without another word Crane entered the car.

After a time in which the Austin purred comfortably along the white road between the river and groves of the tall, top-heavy trees, Crane said musingly: "Allan went into the Map Country from the east — as I did the first time — and we are entering from the west. The actual point of entry, we know, is where the map is torn."

Polly sat up with a jerk, pulling on the wheel. Her rounded chin went up too, defiantly.

"You mean there's no way of telling how much country lies between the two points here?"

Crane shook his head. "No, Polly. I mean that the lines of directions we took crossed. If Allan was going one way and we the other and we both entered the Map Country at the same point, why, then —"

"We're going away from each other!"

Crane had the decency not to say anything to that.

The car stopped precipitately. Polly switched off at once, propped her elbows on the wheel and put her head on them.

"All right, Rolley. What do we do now?"

The result of his remarks surprised Crane. Then he chuck-

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led to himself. Polly was working up to something; she was too fire-proof to be much shaken by his revelation.

"If that theory is true, then we can never enter the same part of the Map Country as Allan. While we hold the map, that is. When we go back to enter his half, we'll pop out through our torn map into the real world."

"So?"

"Alternatively — " Crane snapped his fingers. "Let's have a look at the map, Polly. It might give us another idea."

He took the wallet out, pushing that enigmatic chain back more firmly into his pocket. The wax paper crackled as before — and then the map was in his hands. He opened it cautiously. His attention centered at once on the torn edge.

"An old all-rag paper," he said, feeling and looking. "Made before they cut down Canada for the daily scandals. And the edge is rough, far rougher than you'd expect. Look — "

He fibrillated the fibers gently.

"That's linen — real good solid-cellulose base, with a bit of cotton for bulk. And the edges have been savaged."

Polly looked at him sideways. "Well, Rolley?"

He smiled. "I believe the other section of the map is as jaggedly torn as this. That means there is a fair size section of map actually missing — if you like, a long narrow stripe of nothing down the middle." He tapped the paper. "And that, my dear Polly, is the Map Country."

"So Allan is on the other side of this narrow strip." She turned the ignition key and started the car. "Good. So we can get on. All that flap was for nothing."

Crane looked at her disgustedly. "Women!" he said.

Despite their flippancy, despite the offhand manner in which they both talked about the macabre events about them, both of them, Crane was acutely aware, were tensing up and, as it were, wincing back from the terrors ahead. For now these phantasms of the imagination were about to take on flesh and blood and come stunningly alive; they could not long be delayed. Liam refused to reenter the Map Country. Colla had never returned from it. Men had been snatched by

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lambent ovals of light. And Allan Gould and his girl had vanished completely.

Crane sat nervously fingering the grenade bag, wishing he had enough courage to tell Polly to turn the car around and enough force of character to do it. But, being what he was where women were involved, he did nothing and let her have her own way. Yet he knew wryly there was more to his reluctance to dominate her than that; the manhood in him refused to allow that he, too, wasn't man enough to venture on into the unknown, and the essential rightness of what they were attempting accorded with his own unspoken wishes — despite the blue lights and the funk simmering in his mind. And the anticipation of fear screwed down with every revolution of the wheels.

"There's one thing in your favor." Crane stared out on the weird landscape, stable now but marching past, as the car moved, with the drunken irregularity of unfinished scenery from a theater workshop. "If this road is the only stable artifact here then Allan is likely to be on it. Or near enough to spot us."

"So I trust."

"What's he been living on?"

"Berries, fruits, game — we passed a whole herd of ruminants back there. You were looking the other way."

"Oh? If this is a million years in the past the most recent Ice Ages won't have started yet, so I'd expect this sort of climate — the climate we're experiencing at this moment," he added with unnecessary explanation, "and vast herds of animals. But —"

Very seriously, Polly said: "I don't think we're in the past, either. We're in some — some *other* world."

"And if we were sensible people we'd get out of it — quick."

"Must you keep on?"

"Sorry."

"Look — there's something beyond those trees."

Crane took one look, leaned across the girl and wrenched the steering wheel around. The car left the white road in a

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tortured shriek of tires, jounced across yielding grass and came to an outraged stop beneath the trees. Shadows fell from the branches. Crane opened his door and clutching his bag of grenades to his side leaped out and darted back the way the car had rolled, crouching, taking cover behind the boles of trees. He peered out and along the road.

"What is it, Rolley?" Her clear voice reached him, no hint of panic there.

"Quiet!" he said softly, waving her down. She walked up behind him with the selfconscious stealth of a lioness on her first kill.

Together they stared out from the trees, taking good care to remain well-hidden in the shelter of the trunks.

"The Moving Heath," Crane whispered. "I never thought to see that come true."

Moving from one side of the road to the other in a steady and unhurried stream marched lines of ambulant bushes. Each bush had grown perhaps five or six feet in height and as broad across, bearing many tiny leaves glittering silver and olive green as they flashed and fluttered in the light. Concealed within that fairy foliage lay clusters of glistening golden berries, delectable at first sight, bringing the sting of anticipatory saliva to the mouth. The trunks rose stocky and solid, dark gray, seamed with a cracked bark, ancient. Crane concentrated on one bush and looked hard and carefully.

The thing extended a long pinkish root before it, secured a firm anchorage — the root could not have penetrated much more than six inches or so into the ground, like a worm — and then up-anchored other roots to the rear and moved forward again with the slightest of tembles until the first root was again freed to probe forward. The bushes moved at about two miles an hour, Crane judged, although assessment of speeds that low was always difficult.

The roots twisted as they went into the earth, like drills, twisting up on themselves, their length adequate for the number of turns required to bore down six inches. Caught up beneath the center of each bush and looking like the bundled and wrapped roots of roses and bushes sent from nursery-

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men back on Earth, a globular mass of earth interpenetrated by matted fibrous roots obviously provided locomotive sustenance.

"I don't believe it," Polly said indignantly.

"See how they move — purposeful, determined, unyielding."

"I read an article in some magazine saying that fictional anthropomorphic plants were quite impossible. Absolutely nonsensical. I don't remember the reasons why, now; but the writer said they just couldn't be."

"He hadn't been into the Map Country."

"But it negates all our biology!"

"Agreed. It has been proved impossible by biologists. But I expect these bushes only move now and again; they don't keep on the prowl all the time."

"You think they move to escape the living earth?"

"Possibly. One reason why perambulating plants are said to be impossible is the slow absorption rate of nutriments from the soil. But if they carry a whole knapsack full of soil around with them, feeding on that, and then dig down deep with their thick roots when they lay siege — well, it could be done, I suppose. Don't forget, this chaotic country has tossed the rule books out of the window."

"I'm ready to believe anything now."

"And me." Crane stiffened. "Look! There in the sky! Swooping on them!"

"Good Lord!"

All the bushes turned from silver and olive green to a solid silver mass. Leaves curled and rolled into silver thorns. A perceptible increase in speed surged through the mass of bushes. There must have been two hundred or more. The leaders were already across the road, hurdling the strip of unproductive barrenness, their roots probing the soil beyond and taking them into the shelter of the trees.

And on them, from above, dived the birds.

Birds?

"Well, then," said Crane. "Animals with wings and tails and feathers and wide reptilian heads and jaws, and yet

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nothing like the museum reconstructions of Archaeopteryx or Archaeornis, and they'd be a hundred and seventy or so million years ago. And if we were that far back in time there'd be no grass or trees like this — no angiosperms. I doubt we need to worry about dinosaurs yet."

"Thanks," Polly said sarcastically. "But I'll believe that when we're out of here without meeting a friendly Allosaurus or Tyrannosaurus Rex." Still her voice was firm and controlled. Crane felt like standing up and running, screaming blue bloody murder.

The birds dived in steep stuka attacks on the bushes, screaming a raucous ear-piercing screech as they sliced down through the air, tearing at the branches with teeth and claws. The bushes lashed back, striking down the bright-colored bodies, sending feathers puffing in punctured eiderdowns of clotted blood.

"They're after the golden fruits hanging on the inner branches," Polly said, enthralled. She was watching all this macabre conflict as though from a guinea seat in the stalls. "Evidently the bushes of this world don't require birds to do their propagating for them."

"No," said Crane, chuckling weakly at the macabre idiocy of the thought. "They can get about quite well themselves, thank you."

"And the birds don't take kindly to that sort of brushoff. Whee! Look at that one ripping up that bush — or — look, the other bush lashed out . . . The bird's all bedabbled . . . He's falling . . . Oh, Rolley — it's horrible!"

She turned seekingly towards him and he put an arm around her, not surprised that she had suddenly awoke to the vicious horror of the scene. Polly took a long time to see evil in anyone. Her continued friendship with him proved that, for he equated his indecision with evil in the eyes of a self-confident girl like Polly; and he was convinced she was far too independent and rawly honest of mind to care for his money enough to subdue her own feelings. So he held her comfortingly, feeling her body firm beneath the leather jacket. They watched the struggle in silence for a while.

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In struggling forward the bushes gradually congregated under the trees on the far side of the road where their massed silver-thrusting defense at last put the birds to flight. Heavy winged, the birds rose, squawking.

For an excruciating instant Crane thought the birds would spot the two crouching humans and attack; but to his inexpressible relief they flew off sluggishly, and he relaxed with a shaky sigh. His arm was still about Polly. He left it there.

"This is a chaotic place," she breathed, shakily.

"Agreed." She still trembled; but she rose briskly enough from his circling arm and walked off to the car. "A real madhouse. But we have a job to do here."

Crane stared after her, frowning. He decided he had to speak plainly to her. By this time it was clearly apparent she was acting under the stimulus of excitement and the drug made her reckless and uncaring so that she wasn't fully responsible for her actions. The sight of the battle between the animate bushes and the reptilian birds had shocked her back partially to a realization of where they were; but the very extraordinary nature of the experience itself deadened her understanding. Crane had seen that automatic response and that feverish activity in battle.

When carried to the extreme it was not pretty.

He said: "I'll drive, Polly."

Before she could protest the wheel gripped hard and slick beneath his fingers, the offside door slamming solidly. She walked around the back of the car and got in the near side.

"All right, Rolley. If you like."

"I'm going on down this road another mile. After that, if we see nothing, I'm turning back. If we do see anything, well, let's hope we'll still be able to turn."

She opened her mouth to argue, but Crane switched on and revved the engine unnecessarily loudly.

They bumped out onto the road and swung around to face their direction of travel. The animate bushes swayed

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and swiveled, getting set again after the fight; but stayed rooted under the trees.

"A madhouse," repeated Crane.

"Rolley," she said thoughtfully after a time, "have you noticed the sun isn't moving in the sky?"

Crane had. Now he said: "I believe you're right."

"Does that mean it's always the same here, then?"

He glanced at his watch. "We've been here just over three hours by my watch. The sun should have moved noticeably in that time."

"It hasn't. I'm sure of it."

"And I don't feel at all tired yet. Normally after all we've been through I'd be yawning my head off."

"That must be another magic property of the Map Country."

"But we're still using gasoline. That, at least, hasn't changed here."

"I wonder what McArdle's doing?"

"He knows about the Map Country. He must realize we disappeared off his road. So he'll be waiting for us somewhere when we emerge." Crane pushed the grenade satchel more comfortably around on his left side. He didn't say any more about that.

"I'm sure all these things are connected in some way," Polly went on, addicted, it seemed, to chattering when she was a passenger. "This other world place doesn't operate on the same sets of natural laws as does our world."

"Could be." Crane peered ahead, half listening, watching for the first glimpse of — of what? Of what he didn't know; but whatever might loom up next he intended to be ready for it. And the mile was nearly spent.

The road crawled up a slight hill, and before the car reached the top Crane could see the fiery glow beyond. He stopped the car below the crest, got out and walked on and up until he could lie down and look over and across the undulating plain and the rivers and trees to the scene on the horizon. Polly dropped at his side.

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"That's it," Crane said with satisfaction. "That's the sight — factory, city, hell, what-have-you — I saw as a child."

"It's a long way off."

"Just as well. Look." He pointed to the road, a thin strip of whiteness running directly to the distant buildings. "Tanks. Half a dozen of 'em. All trundling this way. Fast. After our blood."

VIII

THOSE DISTANT specks of bright vermilion stained the white road like spots of blood. Polly caught her lower lip between her teeth. "You think —?"

"They're coming out to find out what happened to their buddies, why the two we knocked out don't respond to signals." He looked more closely at the city. "I think we'd better get out of it while we still have the time." He felt unnaturally calm.

That roaring, fiery, gleaming monstrosity over there had last been seen by him when, as a child, he had been enjoying a country holiday with his father and mother and sister Adele. Now his father and mother were dead and Adele was — well, Adele was now just as she had been then in everything except physical age. Distance hazed detail. He caught tantalizing glimpses of that monstrous branched tree and that silver bowl from which flames licked ruddily. His memory had not played him false, then. The lowering Gehenna had existed — *did* exist still. Through the surging currents

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of memory and anger and fear the impudent thought occurred to him that he should have a camera. But, then, people would scoff at what they would dub camera trickery. He slid back and stood up.

"Come on, Polly. We can't do any more. You've just got to face it about Allan."

She didn't answer. But her face distressed Crane.

Back in the car and driving fast in retreat along the way they had come, Crane wrestled with the heavy sense of defeat permeating his acknowledged relief in traveling in the right direction. Hell! What more could two rational people do? If they had gone towards the city, or whatever it was, the tanks would certainly have dealt with them as they must have done with Allan Gould and Colla. The best bet was to return to the normal world and prepare for another expedition into the Map Country. They'd been pitchforked into it without warning, quite unexpectedly, without arms, food or a reliable method of long-term transportation. He glanced at the gasoline gauge. Just enough to take them back to the torn edge of the map.

He continued to drive. The feel of the controls beneath hands and feet gave him a sense of purpose and a material task on which to fix his impatience. The miles fled back as the road unrolled. Twice the surrounding country went through stomach-churning upheavals with the solid land rolling like the mid-Atlantic; but through it all Crane kept the Austin going stolidly, compensating for each treacherous lurch of the queasy road surface. Polly sat huddled up at his side, not speaking.

They were, Crane realized with savage self-mockery, a forlorn little band.

Going back they saw, not only more perambulating bushes, but a whole forest on the march. The unceasing frieze of sky-pricking mountains changed, too, and from gaunt, coned summits fire and fury vomited forth, scorching the earth, spreading lava in a wicked trickle of flame all across the ground until the oven-heat licked at them from the roadside and they could hear the ominous hissing and bubbling and smell the rank sulphur odors from the depths of the earth.

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Shining white under the sunshine, dappled with cloud shadows from the belching volcanoes, the road tamed the lava and the furnace-filth recoiled from the highway.

Great birds swooped from the sky and once a raking talon scored all along the paintwork of the car's hood. Crane gunned the car, bashed it solidly into the bird's body, felt a sadistic satisfaction as the feathered reptilian flyer spun away, screeching.

Monsters with greenish-gray hides, slimy and rank, blundered from the river and stood glaring stupidly at the road and the fleeting car; but they did not venture further.

"They've been tamed by the tanks," Crane said. "This road is a single lonely streak of sanity running through the chaos of this world."

Up hills and down long slopes the car sped with smooth precision, the tires hissing and the air blustering through the smashed windshield. The rear-view mirror showed an odd glimpse of a clanking machine far off. The Austin had the legs of them. They passed the wrecked tank tumbled at the side of the road where they had left it. Ahead a black object appeared on the road and Crane tensed up. Then he relaxed, consciously slackened the grip of his fingers on the wheel.

"Colla's truck. And the first tank. Nearly there."

There was no warning.

The fuel gauge needle still confidently showed that half a gallon or so should be in the tank. But without a sigh or a cough the engine stopped and the car ran gently forward and gradually slowed to a stop.

Even as Crane cursed and jumped out, the leading tank breasted a distant rise behind them.

There was one last, desperate, seemingly hopeless chance.

"We can't run for it!" Polly shouted. "It's too far! They'd be on us . . ." For the first time she sounded really scared. Their situation was enough to make the toughest of tough characters drool in fear.

"Come on," Crane said, and started running for the wrecked truck.

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Their footfalls battered the road and their breathing gasped raggedly in straining throats.

The gasoline can he remembered seeing lashed to the back of the truck's side, alongside the suitcases stuffed with diamonds, beckoned. If the heat that had burned the diamonds had not touched the can . . . He panted up to the truck, wiped his forehead, took a couple of quick breaths, then unlashed the can. He shook it.

"Empty!"

"Oh, Rolley — what can we do? What can we do?"

The clanking monsters bore on remorselessly, nearer.

There was no time for finesse. Crane snatched out his big pocket knife, opened the spike, and, crawling under the truck, found the gas tank. He jabbed savagely with the spike.

After half a dozen frenzied blows it went through.

Gasoline spurted out, raw and red and beautiful.

"Black market stuff," he said. "I might have known."

He shoved the can under the flow. When it was full he stumbled out, scrabbling on the road, not worrying about the gasoline splashing away to waste. He sprinted back to the car.

"Stay there!" Polly, running behind him, checked at once. Then she went back to the wreck. Running, he realized with detached amusement that this was the first time she'd heard his parade-ground voice.

His trembling fingers made a hash of opening the Austin's gas tank cap, then the divine splash of gasoline gurgling into an empty tank reached him. His hands shook and gasoline splashed over the side of the car, rilled to the edge of the mudguard, dripped to the road. He stuck it until half the two-gallon can had been emptied, then raced to the driving seat, propping the can against the passenger seat, and switched off. Hood up, priming pump, thump up and down, the clank of treads in his ears like the trump of doom, race back to the driving seat, switch on, starter . . .

The starter whirled. Whirled again. The engine caught — and died . . . Starter again, whirr, whirr, whirr . . . Then the engine caught and held and he slammed into gear and moved

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forward. The mirror showed him the leading monster a scant twenty yards away. The tires spun.

He slithered to a stop beside Polly.

"Jump!" he shouted. They were racing forward again. "This petrol by rights should have evaporated in the years the truck's been here. You must be right. Time doesn't function here."

"Hurry, Rolley! Hurry!"

He hurled the car along the road, the accelerator banged to the floorboards and the clangor of the tracks behind began to fade. Yes, he began to think with tremulous hope, yes, they'd make it. He even began to look ahead, such was the elation of relief filling his brain, to the stories they might or might not tell about this mad escapade. And, there were always the gems . . .

A light outrivaling the sun grew in the air. Shadows wavered and then fled all together away from a blinding spot somewhere above the car. Polly shouted. Crane twisted to see but the car roof obscured his vision — a part of his mind recognized his luck — light of that intensity would blind him.

"Don't look up!" he shouted.

The car lurched and careened from side to side, tires screeching. He was flung cruelly against the door, his wrists cracking hard on the wheel. More pieces of glass dislodged and fell with a tinkle lost in the bedlam. A tire blew. The car slewed right around with a sickening sensation of loss of control, skidded backwards, vibrating, then toppled in a clangorous crunch into the ditch. The hood pointed at the sky. One wheel still revolved.

And Crane and Polly, unhurt, cowered in their seats as the fiery glow smote upon them.

For a heartbeat that might have lasted an eternity nothing happened. Crane risked cracking one eyelid. The light still beat strongly, still coruscated powerfully so that his eyes watered; but he could see enough to chance a quick slither to the road. He hunkered in the shadow of the wrecked car. In quick lurid glimpses he tried to make out what was happen-

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ing. The first and most important was the sight of the leading tank bearing down on him with arms outstretched, its vermillion hide glistening in the glow. Big grapnel-like jaws swung purposefully. He reached for a grenade, feeling the heat of the metal, and tossed it as well as he could.

The blast fell short of the charging tank.

Panic clawed at Crane. He had to get out of here, fast. "Polly! You can risk half-opening your eyes now. Come on. We've got to run for it."

Polly slithered out, her short leather coat flaring.

"Those damned things —"

"Run, Polly. For the torn edge and the mist. Run!"

The glow in the air beat all about them. They ran struggling over the road, their shadows black and distorted, fleeing before them, and to Crane the feeling of being an insect scuttling along the beam of a torch exploded the boil of anger. He stopped deliberately to turn and hurl another grenade. The violence of the fire in the sky made as nothing the grenade blast. But the pursuing tank slowed and skidded, shedding a track, and a writhing arm struck the car's roof with a note like a gong, sheared it away in gleaming metal. They ran on, panting.

Unsure of his landmarks Crane could not know when they would reach the mist, as yet invisible to them in that limbo between worlds; all he could do was run on, willing, hoping, desperately urging the mist to form around them at each fresh step. As far as he could see before him, with eyes that were adjusting to the intolerable glare, stretched the road and the countryside. A countryside, he was aware, he might never reach with the torn map in his possession.

"Oh, God!" Polly screamed. "Look!"

In the air, hovering a few feet above the ground directly before them, a pale lozenge of light winked into being. It shone with a pallid reflection of the monster glow in the sky.

He tried to halt his stumbling feet, to draw back, to recoil from the eerie phantasm. Slower than Polly to pull up, he collided with her and his left hand wrapped around her waist as they both staggered forward. He could hear her breath-

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ing, a tearing, rasping sucking for breath that drove him into savage action. He fumbled out a grenade and with vicious intent prepared to hurl it straight at the lambent oval of light.

His hand was raised, the pin out, the lever already easing up as his palm flexed forward, when the voice struck through to him. The lozenge of fire vibrated in time to the words.

"Do not struggle longer, little man. We are taking you away —"

Crane hurled the grenade with all the lost desperation in him.

The lozenge of fire swelled, grew, bloated with a chiaroscuro of living color rippling over it like tinted waters of a fountain. Crane knew — knew — that the alien oval of light had absorbed the bursting energy of the bomb within itself, feeding on it, containing it, neutralizing it.

Then the living fire swooped down to engulf them both.

Blackness shot through with the fire of agony and defeat crushed down on Crane so that he cried out in futile wrath. Polly lay in his arms, her body beneath the wide-opened leather coat firm and soft against him, her head lax on his shoulder. He gripped her tightly in blind defiance of what might happen. The blackness muffling them now must lie in the core of the living light as an alien paradox defying human nature.

The voice said: "Misunderstanding is always the lot of those who seek to improve the worlds."

Crane tried to answer and proclaim his defiance; but no words came. He could feel his heart thumping, deeply and painfully, against Polly. Then a wind caught at him, a wraith wind blown down no Earthly skies, and he felt with profound shock and panic Polly's body slipping from him.

The voice said: "Who is this man who possesses the Amullieh?"

And a voice answered from a great distance: "He is not Trangor . . . He is a man like the others . . . But he possesses the Amullieh. . . ."

And Crane's arms circled emptiness and Polly had gone.

His feet rang on the road surface. He stumbled as though

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clumsily dropping from a wall. Through water-brimming eyes he saw the road white with dust in the light of the sun. Thoughts pirouetted through his dazed mind. An ominous clank from somewhere to the rear swung him around, lurching, one arm half-raised defensively.

A tank rattled along the road towards him, another following in the tracks of the first. He saw the wrecked Austin in the ditch; beyond, Colla's smashed truck and the ditched tank showed half around the curve. But of the livid light in the sky and the lozenges of fire no sign remained to show they had brought with them terror and taken with them — Polly.

Crane did not think. The terror of the unknown festering in him drove his muscles into action and propelled him in a desperate lunge away from these onrushing monsters of destruction. He ran along the white road and he ran as a mindless idiot, gibbering in fear. The leather grenade satchel thumped against his hip and had there been time to take it off he would have done so, and flung it from him so as not to impede his flight.

All thought of Polly, and the map, and the gems, and of his avowed intentions, fled from his brain. He ran and ran and ran.

With the grinding of tracks and the horrible swishing of grapnel-armed tentacles in his ears he plunged headlong away from madness.

When mist swirled feathery tendrils about him he did not stop but careened on, lurching drunkenly like a man in a seizure, still hearing the metallic clanking behind him, loud and resonant through the beating of blood in his head. The mist thickened, coagulated, clotted into fog that roiled about him, thick and greasy and heavenly.

Mouth open and gasping, nostrils distended, hair tangled and sticky with sweat, he stumbled on, a scarecrow figure from the pits of hell, haunted, driven, tortured, a man running from himself.

For gradually thoughts formed in his overheated brain, a single word, remorselessly repeated over and over again in

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time to his hammering footfalls on the road. Polly . . . Polly . . . Polly . . .

The fog turned into real fog now, raw vapor that seared his throat and stung his eyes. The strength drained from him.

He was out of the Map Country. He knew that without elation, without any sense of relief. When he stopped running the ghastly whispered voice in his mind continued to chant: Polly . . . Polly . . . Polly . . . He was a beaten man. With the return of thought came the birth of conscience and remorse and deadly self-loathing.

He was out of the Map Country. Out of it. All the weariness he had not felt inside that accursed place struck him now. He could do no more. His stumbling feet carried him across the road, tripped against the tussocky edge, pitched him face down into the ditch. He lay there, exhausted, drained, and when at last he slipped into unconsciousness he went with a glad welcome for oblivion.

How long he lay in that rain-sodden ditch he did not know, but when he opened his eyes the sky above still lowered darkly but the rain had stopped. Polly. She had been taken by the living lozenge of light. And he had run away.

He had turned tail and run away like a gibbering idiot.

Crane licked his lips. He sat up. He looked at his watch. Five o'clock. The fog had gone and soon it would be dawn. It all figured.

There had been something odd — something wrong — about his reactions after the lozenge of light had taken Polly and rejected him. He had run and stumbled away in such fashion as would turn the stomach of any man. Why?

Oh, sure, the Map Country held enough horror to make any man a craven; but he'd been through it, he'd held onto his manhood, he'd met each threat and dealt with it.

"Something damn queer about that," he said, and stood up and stretched.

The whole sequence of events had been wrong; he felt that strongly. He wasn't a brave man, had never pretended to be; but he just couldn't envisage himself snapping and letting go

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so completely. He'd been behaving as though overacting the part of a coward in a cheap melodrama. The only answer lay in the evil lozenges of light; they had deliberately driven him mad with fear and hurled him on wings of his own cowardice from the Map Country. Maybe that explained Liam's reluctance to go back; maybe the old man had been subjected to those mental pressures.

Since awakening there had been in his mind no other thought than that his next line of action would be to return. He couldn't just tamely walk off now and leave Polly there. Oh, sure, he was still afraid; deadly afraid. But his fear had no chance against the burning conviction that he had to return.

He checked the grenade bag. Only one left. He took it out, held it a moment, then thrust it into his pocket and took off the satchel, tossed it down into the ditch.

He was hungry, tired, mentally exhausted. He had one grenade. He knew what he faced. But he began to march back up the road, heading steadily towards the Map Country.

"And that's damn queer," he said aloud. "Why did they take Polly and not me? When I have the map? Why didn't they snatch me?"

The muscles in his legs began to ache and stiffen and he stamped his feet as he walked. Darkness lay all about him, chill with the pre-dawn hush of waiting. At each step he expected the fog to return but still the stars winked cynically high above.

In that pervasive quietness he heard the car before he saw its lights and so was not completely sure from which direction it was traveling. He was aware of his quick relaxation of tension as the headlights appeared in front.

He crossed to the left of the road and waited, giving the car plenty of room to pass. The brilliant white beams splashed the road before him, hesitated, clung for an instant, and then whipped past. He didn't think it was McArde; but he still was not thinking too clearly, convinced that McArde must be miles away by now, still vainly searching for the Austin.

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Stepping back to the crown of the road as the car sped past, he set his face towards the Map Country and slogged on.

The engine note faded rapidly and soon he had the quietness to himself once again.

The hypnotic rhythm of walking worked on him more powerfully than the brisking chill in the pre-dawn air, and through his anticipatory fears of what lay ahead a mental drowsiness sluggishly drew the present away into vanishing perspectives, and the memories swimming endlessly in his mind rose seekingly for the light. Why Polly? What did he know of this girl who had erupted into his life one filthy rain-lashed night, clad in short leather coat and slacks, to bring with her a resurrection of a past he had thought his own alone? Who was she? She claimed to be a journalist and was modest about that. As the cousin of Allan Gould she came from a background with which he was unfamiliar, the intellectual, iconoclastic, middle-class new generation unhappy with their positions in life, hating the bomb, half-heartedly believing in free love, posing as authorities and lovers of jazz, proclaiming their rugged individualism against an acute and ever-present comforting awareness of the welfare state that made such postures safe. Maybe that was the world from which she came — but Crane sensed from his own desires of what he wished to be rather than from any external observation that she had left that world, denying its trashy values, keeping what was of value, and had become truly herself.

She had become a person, a fully-rounded personality in her own right, and for that he envied her.

Envied? There were so many emotions tangled in his estimation of Polly Gould that to track down each one of the conflicting skeins would be worthless, would add up to a minus value; all he knew was that she had been trapped in the Map Country and he had to go back and bring her out.

Allan Gould himself had made a break with that background when he'd joined the army; but the girl to whom he had turned, Sharon, typified one aspect of it so clearly as to illuminate Allan's inability completely to reject his own roots.

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Crane had been wrong to be surprised at Allan's choice of second-best girl friend. A great longing for a comrade to march at his side swept over Crane. Allan, now, tommygun at the ready, bush-hat tipped casually back, smiling, walking at his side as they had marched after the terrorists — that would have made sense, would have made of this expedition a joy — except for the horror of the living lozenge of light that had taken Polly.

It seemed clear to Crane, slogging back to what might be his own certain death, that Polly's efforts to reach the Map Country and find Allan could mean only that she still loved Allan Gould.

He remembered the occasion when the terrorists' ambush had worked perfectly and point had gone down screaming and he and Allan had plunged face-first onto the soggy ground with bullets kicking up muddy splashes into their eyes. He'd nailed the first charging fanatic with a snap burst; and then Allan had flung himself sideways and buried his commando knife into the lithe stinking body that dropped catlike onto Crane's back. Crane had scarcely felt the weight drop away, had time to say: "Thanks, Allan," when the other terrorist had risen ghostlike at the side of the trail, captured Lee-Enfield centered malevolently on Allan's back. His automatic pistol had awoken to life it seemed of its own accord and his lumbering charge had carried him across Allan so that the three-o-three took him in the shoulder instead of Allan's back. The terrorist's body, chewed as though in a mincer, had toppled away from the blast of lead. Yes, he wasn't likely to forget incidents like that . . . And if Polly wanted Allan then Crane saw plainly that he had to find them both, for the sake of his own peace of soul.

A dark figure rose silently from the darkness before him on the road leading into the Map Country. A torch beam licked out, dazzling him. The gleam of a revolver muzzle showed beneath the light.

McArdle said: "And I'll have the map now, Mister Crane."

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IX

BEMUSED, Crane held up a hand, trying to shield his face from the prying light, caught off balance.

"Don't waste my time, Crane. The map, hand it over. And the Amullieh. Be quick about it."

"I don't know anything about the map — or this Amullieh thing you mentioned."

McArdle showed only as a dark shadow behind the torch glow; there was less even of him visible than when Crane had seen him on the rainslicked Belfast street asking his way to the Queen's Bridge. But that grating, ear-serrating voice was the same.

"The Amullieh you broke from my wrist when your girl friend hit me . . . And don't think I've forgotten that!"

"The chain — You mean the chain. I'd forgotten about that . . ." Crane dug it out of his pocket, feeling the leather map wallet brush against his fingers. His hand snagged the chain and he dragged quickly upwards so that McArdle would not suspect anything else of value lay in that pocket. "Here."

As McArdle reached forward hungrily with an empty hand, and the torch splashed pallid light over the glinting length of chain between Crane's fingers, Crane slashed viciously with his other hand at the light, knocked the torch spinning away. A chance; but he doubted if McArdle was three-handed.

Stars and volcanic explosions burst luridly in Crane's head. He staggered back, arms upflung, tripping, as McArdle leaped forward to strike again.

"Try to be clever, would you, Crane? I may have put my gun away; but I don't need a gun to deal with a weakling like you."

Again the bunched fist holding the golden chain swung towards Crane. He ducked desperately, sought to grapple with McArdle. Another blow knocked him down and black-

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ness rimmed with red wavered like an aurora borealis over his eyes. He gasped once for breath, felt McArdle's fingers slide into his pocket, take the map, gasped again, and then gasped no more as McArdle slammed one last blow home.

He heard that grating voice laughing, heard McArdle say: "I have the map! The map! I have it! At last! At last!"

Holding his breath, eyes shut, feeling the road hard under him, Crane made his last effort. McArdle must be feverishly opening the wallet, unwrapping the wax paper, taking out the map. The man had to be sure he had the prize safely. So his attention would be fully engrossed.

Crane pushed with his legs, rolled over, slid off the road and fell sprawling in the paling darkness into the ditch at the bottom of a ten-foot slope.

A small black-shadowed bush grew from the side of the ditch three yards away, just visible in the growing light. Crane tensed, about to wriggle for its cover.

The revolver above him spat flame, once, twice. Crane heard the bullets whicker into the bush, the crack as one hit a branch. He screamed as though in mortal agony.

"That's settled you, Crane! Good riddance. And now . . . *Now to return to my kingdom!*"

McArdle's harsh footsteps on the road above faded back — away from the direction of the Map Country.

Crane took a deep dragging breath. He was shaking. So McArdle had taken the dark shadow of the bush for him and had shot to kill. But Crane was still alive — bruised and shocked, but alive.

Alive without the torn map that was the passport and key into the Map Country where Polly had been taken captive by the living lozenges of light. Crane pushed up onto a knee, thrust down with a hand, stood up with his feet in water. He felt chilled to the marrow.

McArdle had gone back away from the Map Country; that could only mean he was going for his car; he had been driving the car and had stopped and walked back in a quiet detour and had taken Crane, lost in memories, completely by surprise. Crane felt a fool. But he had to get that map back, or,

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failing that, go with McArdle into the Map Country. He scrambled along the ditch until the bank dipped a little, climbed up broken turfs and muddy hollows, crept cautiously out onto the road.

The true dawn could be only minutes away. He had to reach the car and McArdle before the sun speared above the horizon and revealed him. McArdle would kill him, out here on this lonely bogland road, without compunction.

McArdle's car still faced towards Omagh as Crane, back in the ditch, crept level with it. McArdle sat behind the wheel and his shadowed silhouette against the reflected glow from the lights showed as an evil puppet-figure. The engine revved hard, reverse clashed excruciatingly and the car inched back. McArdle was afraid of running his wheels into the ditch. Crane reached the conclusion the man was a bad driver.

As the boot edged back over the ditch with the car jerking along as though on spring jacks instead of wheels, Crane slithered up out of the ditch on the near side, the blind spot, and reached for the rear door handle. As the car jerked, jumped, and then, as McArdle found bottom, moved forward, Crane opened the door with a single motion and bundled inside.

The car stopped.

"What's going on?" demanded McArdle. He looked back over his shoulder and now the light was sufficient for them to see each other's faces clearly at that short distance.

That fierce jut of jaw, that livid gash of mouth Crane had glimpsed beneath the downdrawn hat in Belfast had not belied the lean, sardonic, satanic look of the man. Heavy black eyebrows met over a long thin nose. Fierce, evil and utterly ruthless, McArdle stared at Crane, his brilliant eyes so dark they appeared black pinpoints of hate.

"You fool! Why follow me here when I failed to kill you!" McArdle's throaty rasp held only contempt and impatience. He wanted to get on, to get into the Map Country. "You've made so many mistakes, Crane . . . But this is your last." The revolver barrel snouted up over the back of the seat.

Calmly, quietly, Crane showed McArdle the grenade.

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He held it in his hand, the pin still between his teeth, and the lever nuzzled his palm like a dog's nose.

Crane spat out the pin.

"You know what this is, McArdle?" he said joyfully, his teeth barely opening to let the words bite out. "A grenade. You shoot me, my hand releases the lever and — blooey! Your head will be blown to mush."

"You wouldn't dare! What about you . . .?"

"Don't worry about me, McArdle. Worry about yourself. Think of your face hanging in shreds, your eyeballs dangling. Think of your brains splattered against the windshield . . . Go on, man . . . think!"

"No . . . No, Crane . . . I won't shoot . . ." McArdle's fears were, Crane realized with an insight he found curious, directed more towards preserving his life for a purpose rather than from terror of being blown up.

"You won't shoot. That's nice . . . Very nice . . ."

"But I won't give you the map. And you can't force me."

"Just drive on, McArdle. Just drive on into the Map Country. That's all I want."

McArdle's sigh of relief sounded genuine. He put the gun down on the seat beside him. Then he said: "Be careful with that grenade. It's a primitive weapon."

"Sure it's primitive. And you know what they say about primitive weapons. They're dangerous. *Drive!*"

The car started, jerkily, and McArdle crashed the gears in a way that would have set Polly's teeth on edge.

"And primitive means of conveyance like this car — they're dangerous too!" McArdle said savagely. He hadn't liked that grenade shoved under his ear one little bit.

"This is a pretty high-class piece of automobile merchandise," Crane said mildly. "It's only dangerous when there's a dangerous jerk behind the wheel."

"Primitive," McArdle said explosively. "Cheap internal combustion engine spewing filthy fumes, burning up gasoline, the precious heritage of a planet, in extravagant ignorance — not that I care about the way you run your world." A slow, vicious smile curved his thin lips. He had thought of

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something that pleased him. "But you're going into *my* world, aren't you, Crane? You're never going to see your own world again. And don't say I didn't warn you."

"You just keep your mind on driving this primitive conveyance, McArdle. If you tip us over into the ditch I'm likely to let go of this grenade . . ."

"I'm doing my best," McArdle fairly snarled back. "How would you make out driving a Roman chariot? Hey?"

"You have a point there." Crane could clinically recognize the reasons behind this fresh attitude he had fallen into. And not so fresh either, really. He had at last faced up to the unpleasant realization that he had to act as his instincts had once dictated, as he had acted habitually, the old Roland Crane, the one he thought he had buried when he'd shucked off the uniform and the three pips and the submachine gun and the parade-ground voice. And, of course, he was enjoying it all. He was luxuriating in this enforced return to violence. He enjoyed it and he loathed himself for enjoying it, and he thought of Polly and the clanking monster tanks and the lozenges of light and of McArdle and he felt grimly that, unpleasant though it may be, he had a damn good right to enjoy it.

"You seem to know a good bit about the Map Country, McArdle. Suppose you tell me —"

"The Map Country?"

"Oh. You probably don't call it that. But you know what I mean. What's your big interest in the place?"

"My business. I tried to warn you, Crane. I told you no good would come if you meddled and went after the map —"

"What are you after, McArdle? Money? Loot? Power?"

McArdle did not exactly laugh; the sound was a harsh, grating, surging of his voice, a serrated bubble of sound in the car. "I belong in what you call the Map Country, Crane. I know it. I understand it. And — *I can tame it!*"

Fog wreathed outside now, breaking up the silver pre-dawn light, speeding past the windows, floating in streaks up the windshield, gradually shutting down. McArdle slowed the car. "We're going in, Crane. Sure you don't want to get out?"

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"You can mock till you burst a blood-vessel, McArdle. What's this about belonging in the Map Country?"

The car crawled through the fog and with half an eye Crane peered ahead, waiting for that coiling chiaroscuro of rippling color to reveal the entrance to the Map Country. The last time he had sat like this Polly had been driving.

McArdle's ripsaw voice grated: "What happened to your girl friend, Crane? Lose her, did you? Leave her behind in the Map Country? Tasty offering to the Wardens?"

"Shut your filthy mouth!" blazed Crane. Then: "Wardens? What are they?"

"If you went through the veil you'd meet them. They keep the road clean of vermin."

"You mean the tanks. Well, I figured that's what they were for. If you know so much tell me what this Amullieh is."

"You carried it with you and you came out. You're not carrying it now and you won't come out. You'll be taken up by the Loti—" Sadistic satisfaction purred in McArdle's voice and a sliver of light from the sunshine ahead breaking through fog glanced from the line of his jaw.

"An amulet against the Loti, huh?" said Crane. "Well, if nothing else we're learning a few brand names. So that's why they dropped me as though I was poisoned bait. I'd like to know how you came by that golden chain . . ."

"I made it." Light from ahead aureoled McArdle's head and shoulders hunched in the driving seat; to Crane that halo personified the devil, gave a tangible form to McArdle's impression of supernatural evil. For McArdle *was* evil. And all the cozy chats in a car in the world — or in the Map Country — wouldn't change that.

"So you made it. Bully for you." Light punched in through the car windows and Crane saw the tooled red leather case with the gilt locks lying on the floor at his feet. With his left hand he snapped the locks, lifted the lid. He whistled.

"They're pretty, McArdle. Make those, too?"

"Yes. I had to use terrestrial techniques to contain my knowledge and the result is clumsy —"

"Don't do yourself dirt, McArdle. Let me do it for you."

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Crane bent watchfully and lifted one of the guns from the case. He could see what McArdle meant about alien knowledge and Earthly techniques of manufacture; the gun looked like a high-velocity express rifle, but the magazine and breech area bulked more heavily and the telescopic sights squatted integrally, giving the rifle a hard, alien look of power.

"Careful how you handle that!" McArdle spoke sharply and his eyes flicked back to the grenade clutched in Crane's right hand. But he meant the rifle.

Examination over, Crane put the rifle on the seat. "I think I could use it," he said quietly.

"But you've no conception of its power! A shell from that rifle holds twenty times the explosive force of that grenade in your hand!"

"And you had to make it and bring it along — for the Wardens. Thoughtful."

Around them lay the Map Country, shining and tranquil under the sun. The white road curved dustily away into the gentle folds of grass and the black wrecks of Colla's truck and the Austin looked like intruders. The two wrecked tanks were gone.

"Tidy around here," said Crane, "with their own rubbish. But they leave outsiders' junk lying where it falls." This time the tension in him drained at once as he went through into the Map Country. This time he was the old Roland Crane he had tried so hard to bury — and, with the need of the moment making its demands, had so signally failed to dispose of. He could relish using McArdle's rifle on a clanking monster.

The road lurched. A trembling ripple ran through the solid earth. Trees swayed in a breathless hush.

McArdle proved he was no driver — the car skittered to the offside of the road, the wheel was flung over far too hard in panic correction, and the car flipped neatly off the road and into a line of marching bushes fleeing from the earthly convulsions.

Silver needles tapped the body. The car groaned on its springs and moved again — sideways.

"Hold on to that grenade, Crane! For pity's sake!"

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"What do you know of pity?" grunted Crane; but he picked up the pin and shoved it back. At that, McArdle's rifle would be more handy. He picked it up and put the muzzle to McArdle's neck, under the ear.

"Get this heap back on the road. Surely you're not scared of a rolling road and a moving bush? Get with it!"

As the car pursued its erratic way along the road Crane was acutely conscious of where he was and who he was with. This recurrence of events seemed to him a nightmare repetition of normalcy; he half-expected any moment to awake and find Polly sitting at the wheel.

The road dipped and soon they were driving through a narrow gorge with beetle-browed cliffs glowering down on them. Strange animal shapes hopped and skittered about the rocks. Unspoken between the two men lay the compact that they were driving to the distant city — that fiery Gehenna of ice and flame Crane had only partially scrutinized from his hilltop. There, if anywhere in this chaotic other-place, lay the answers and Polly and Allan Gould.

"You claim to be able to tame this place," Crane said, nodding through the screen. "You're not doing much of a job. Look." In molten rock the cliffs fell away, pouring in liquid cascades of fire away into bottomless depths. Fumes rose and stank in the air. And the car drove forward into a wide plain that might have been plucked straight from Central Africa. "The place changes so fast that if you had to dress for climate you'd be forever in your underwear."

"Not always, Crane. This place is ruled by chaos, and sometimes a kind of quietness descends even in the midst of chaos. But the land is worse than I could have imagined. The Loti are losing their battle." The depths of hatred in McArdle's voice repelled Crane with the instinctive revulsion from the debased and debauched. "I knew they would never succeed! I told them! I warned them! But they would not listen — only a few, very few! But now my time has come! I, Trangor, will be master!"

Listening to McArdle's rantings, Crane began to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. All the crazy events began to

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slip into shape. He had not failed to notice the absence of the tanks of the road. When that distant prospect of fire and beauty and terror appeared on the horizon he leaned forward in the back of the car and the expectation of great deeds set an icy thrill down his spine.

The first lozenge of living light swooped down on the car as they breasted the last rise. McArdle chuckled his retching cough of laughter.

"Much good will it do the Loti! With the Amullieh I am invincible!"

Crane forebore to remind him that the Amullieh made Crane invincible, too — while he remained in the car.

Two other Loti gathered, their light playing across the road and car, casting disturbing shadows, dancing and pirouetting from side to side. Crane felt he had just about half the mystery solved now; but he dearly wanted to know the rest. He tried to estimate just how much of that golden-linked Amullieh he had broken off in his pocket when returning the map to McArdle; two links and a medallion, perhaps. Would that be enough to protect him from the Loti? Would it destroy the power of the Amullieh altogether?

Either way, McArdle was coming in for a nasty shock when they reached the city and their ways parted.

And in all that long journey they had seen not one clanking monster, not one tank, not one Warden.

The Loti clustered now, shining, casting wavering shadows that ran every which way like deformed dwarfs. The car reached the top of the rise and began to run downhill. Its engine stopped. The road rose a little, not much, just a gentle hump; but that slight undulation was enough to halt the car's forward progress. With a quiet sigh the car stopped.

"What are you waiting for, McArdle? Start her up. I want to see inside that city."

"The Loti have stopped the engine. It's easy enough. With such a primitive device little is necessary to derange it." McArdle opened the door. "We are within range of their instruments, now. I pity you, little Earthman."

"If we have to get this near before they can stop our so-

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called primitive engine they can't be so formidable." But Crane knew he was puffing air even as he spoke. He, too, alighted from the car and his grip on the rifle tightened.

On McArdle's face grew a ghostly look of unendurable longing as he stared at the clustered, swaying lozenges of light. He half-raised a hand and then let it drop to his side with a gesture of renunciation. He turned to Crane and in his eyes the glitter of unslaked ambition revealed what Crane could only believe to be the true man.

"Go on, Crane. Walk down to the city and knock upon the door. For your woman is there. The Loti have taken her as they have taken much else and she is there, waiting for you. Why do you hesitate? What pales your cheek? Has fear touched you too deeply?"

"And when I walk down there — as I am surely going to do — what is to prevent you from shooting me in the back?" Crane lifted the rifle until the muzzle centered blackly upon McArdle.

"You won't shoot me, Crane. Not defenselessly like this. And I won't shoot you. For you will begin my work for me. You will open the doors, break down the gates. The weaklings who cower in the city can be conquered by you — *for me!* Go, Crane. Go and rescue your woman — and then seek to flee, for I am coming to take my own and on this planet nothing will stir but by my will. Go!"

Crane hesitated only for a moment, caught in the jeweled snare of the moment and the situation. He could not shoot down this man — if man he truly was — in cold blood. So he began to walk down the road, keeping an eye on McArdle, the rifle ready to lift and fire the moment McArdle brought out his own weapon, conscious of the strange truce of hatred between them.

Slowly and casual seeming, McArdle walked around the car. He vanished from Crane's sight. Instinctive reflex sent Crane into the ditch. He waited, the rifle thrust forward, aimed at the car. He thought he caught a glimpse of movement through the windows, and then he saw McArdle walking steadily away from the car, away from the road, at right-

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angles to it, heading out into the shifting perspectives of the untamed Map Country.

On McArdle's back was strapped a large box from which a whip aerial sprouted like those aeriels rising from the backs of the tanks, under his arm he carried the twin rifle to the one held by Crane, and he marched as though imbued with a purpose that had fired his flinty heart.

Crane watched him go, even then undecided whether or not to pump a shot after him. But the man had, looking back, merely offered to warn him and had taken the map at the point of a gun — then Crane remembered that callous shot at the bush in the ditch and his finger tightened on the trigger. But he let McArdle go. The man — if man he was — had been right. Crane couldn't shoot a defenseless man in the back when there appeared no need. Then McArdle disappeared behind a tree that lurched forward on its insensate line of march.

X

CRANE CLIMBED the last flight of green and gold-veined marble steps and stood looking up, one hand resting on the alabaster urn with its draggle of scarlet poppies crowning the handrail. Behind and below him the hundred-yard wide staircase dropped away to the point where the road ended. Only when he'd stepped off the road, onto the first marble step, had the importance of that road in the scheme of things struck him. It had been like a first solo.

His eyes squinted a little as sunlight bounced back from the

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tower before him. Glistening white was that tower; tall and wide and round, a drum tower, crenellated, loop-holed, flanked by curtain walls almost as tall as itself. In the center of the tower, directly facing him, the door seemed odd, out of place, small, black, mean — and shut.

He stared at that wall and that tower and that door and the thick heady scent of the poppies hung in his nostrils like a warning. The feel of the rifle in his hand could give him only passing, illusory comfort; for here he envisaged joining battle with beings that were not of the Earth that had borne him.

"Well," he thought, for his own comfort, "better get on with it."

He lifted the rifle. From what McArdle had said the problem of ammunition supply would not arise; the arm was charged and would last what, oh — five thousand rounds? Something that would normally burn out the lands into inaccuracy in mundane weapons. He body-aimed, ignoring the sights, and touched the trigger feather-light — but three distinct crumps of light splashed over the door and battered it into shredded rags hanging from warped hinges.

He smiled. "This is a real jim-dandy piece of ordnance," he said, admiringly, and began to tramp the remaining distance to the tower and the shattered opening.

Under the arch he paused. Murdering holes leered down on him; but nothing spurted from them and he had long since formed the hard opinion that nothing lived in these ramparts girdling the city. His goal lay over there, in the city proper — if city it be. Glistening with pimpled light like a Christmas tree a missile gantry lifted — high, higher than any he had seen before on any film. This was real. This towered. It was the tree he had seen as a child and from which he had lately fled. Multiplicity of lattice-work and elevators, of pump lines and conveyers concealed the ship within — she *was* a ship. Crane knew that simply enough. A missile that size could blow half the Earth into mushrooms.

Beside the gantry, workshops and hangars crouched low,

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busy with fire and thunder. Vast areas of roof covered industries stretching for acres. Streets bisected in neat patterns. The towers and turrets of his childhood vision resolved now into a complex of engineering workshops and refineries from which the glow and flood of color illuminated everything about.

In dominant tandem with the ship gantry lifted the bowl — the fiery bowl like an Olympic flame magnified ten times the size of Wren's dome over Saint Paul's. That, still, he could not neatly docket into a file of understanding.

He began to walk down the metal slatted road into the city. He walked on an escalator, a moving road; but the treads had long since ceased to move and weeds and daisies grew from the dirt trapped between them.

The first scuttler poked a stalked eye from the crumbled ruins flanking the stalled escalator. Its body followed: bucket-sized, scuttling on six jointed metal legs, gnashing metal mandibles before it, scrabbling out with hostile intent. This time Crane's trigger pressure accurately released one shell. The scuttler vanished in a blooming detonation that rolled around the ruins in powdery echoes. Crane smiled.

"So the Wardens have baby brothers," he said cheerfully. The first evidence of tangible opposition cheered him; he lost the sensation of boxing shadows.

He knocked off three or four more scuttlers as he pressed on determinedly for the squat blue-columned, ocher-walled building supporting that enormous bowl. They skittered out at him from the ruins and then, as he pressed on, from between rows of factory workshops from which sounded the heavy beat of machines in full production. And he remembered that all the time he'd been with McArdle not one single Warden had attacked. Odd, that.

The Loti posed a different problem. He halted, rifle raised warily, at the corner of a power house with massive aerials rising from the roof giving clear indication that beamed broadcast power was a reality here, confirmed by the general absence of pylons and cables. The Loti hung about twenty

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feet off, glowing, vibrating, a luminescent oval in which the great sad eye flowed, appearing and disappearing disconcertingly.

Crane began to resent what he felt about that luminous mournful eye. The thing looked at him so reproachfully. But it would be no good loosing off a round; the lozenge of living light would merely expand, rippling color, and contain the explosion. The converse also held true. The Loti wouldn't grab him because they'd tried and he'd had the Amullieh. True, he now had only a broken link; but they weren't to know that. Unless they tried to snatch McArdle and discovered he had the Amullieh — then they might turn nasty. He slogged on towards the building of the bowl, keeping the Loti in the corner of his eye.

Two or three others joined the first, and in between blasting a couple more scuttlers and nearly reaching the last expanse of wire-mesh landing area before the building, he'd built up quite a procession of them. They tailed along behind him like the caudal appendage to a comet.

They didn't want him to go into that building. The clattery scratchy sound of scuttlers' feet on the wire-mesh sounded from all directions. Crane pushed his back up against a masonry tower supporting what at first glance looked like a statue of a wheelchair and began loosing off snap shots all around. Smashed and degutted scuttlers began to litter the ground. A nasty smile passed across his face as the shells crashed home. He crouched, and his reactions came lightning swift after the sluggish torpor of the preceding days. The opposition he understood — it presented targets as though in a shooting gallery. He was enjoying himself.

From the moment he had first clearly seen the enormous fiery bowl mounted atop its hulking blue and ocher building it had seemed obvious it was the place to make for. The focal point of the city, more dominating even than the giant missile gantry, it had drawn him. And now he was here.

The rifle hiccupped deafeningly six times. Crouched over automatically as though subject to snipers' bullets, Crane belted it out for the base of the building. His feet rang against

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the wire-mesh. His path carried him close by a Loti — and he could have sworn the lozenge of light swayed quickly away from him as he barreled past.

Then the floor came up in a leering hole and only some fast and fancy back-pedaling saved him from pitching into a square opening in the ground. He circled it, picking off two more scuttlers, and headed on for the building.

The door stood open — and that seemed wrong.

The Loti had been trying to prevent him from entering this building, hadn't they? Then why leave the front door open? Answer — *trap*.

He looked for another way in. Between the blue columns, the other walls contained tall, narrowly conceived lancet windows, the lowest too high for him to jump. He had to snap his attention back to the wire-mesh as a fresh gaggle of scuttlers charged. This time they each had different appendages: one a broom, another a shovel, a couple with drilling implements. He smiled again as he blasted them competently. So the Loti were bringing out the wash-and-brush-up brigade to deal with him. That was only fair, anyhow; to them he was vermin.

If he was going into that building after Polly then he was going to have to enter that door. There was no other way he could see. Testing every step before putting his weight on it, he edged towards the door, rifle ready to blast the first scuttling heap of machinery to show itself. He felt cool blue shadow drop across his shoulders as the masonry cut off the sun. Beyond the door lay a smooth marble floor and multi-colored walls. He couldn't smell a trap anymore — the obvious hadn't panned out this time.

The whole sequence of events since he had entered the environs of the city struck him as out of focus. If the Loti really wanted to stop him, then, with all their super-science so lavishly displayed around him, they should have found that no problem, no problem at all. He pushed on, puzzled and wondering.

Behind him the door shut with a click.

He whirled, rifle up, before he realized that it didn't matter.

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He wasn't going out that door without Polly; and when he returned to it he'd blast it as he'd blasted the door in the tower. If he returned.

Padding up the corridor he saw the light subtly changing, running through the spectrum so that he had constantly to adjust to it, ready for what might spring out on him. But nothing did. When he reached the huge and impressive ante-chamber to hell he stepped inside, an ant in a cathedral. The roof soared into corbelling high above; groined columns fluted into distance; under his feet the marble extended, vast and shining; and clustered thickly before him, waiting, hung a group of Loti, the living lozenges of light.

He looked about, faintly puzzled, not expecting this, ready to walk steadily on, into and through their lambent barrier. From a hidden source a bright actinic light stabbed out, lanced into his eyes. Blinking, eyes watering, he flung up a hand, shading, trying to see into multi-colored whorls of color and shadow beyond the light.

A voice cracked suddenly and shockingly from the great chamber, a woman's voice, Polly's voice.

"It's Rolley! It's Crane! *It's all right!*"

The light went out. When he could see again Polly was walking across the marble floor towards him. Her feet went tac-tac-tac across the floor. Then they speeded up and she flung herself into his arms, grasping him, clasping him, laughing and crying.

"Hold up, Polly," Crane said. "What's this all about?"

"Oh, Rolley! I never expected to see you again alive! We all thought it was Trangor."

"Trangor? You mean McArdle?"

"That's right. One and the same. The Loti said he was in the Map Country, with an accomplice, and we've been waiting — it hasn't been nice, Rolley . . ."

"We've been waiting, Polly? Who's we?"

"Why, who do you think? Allan and Sharon, Colla, poor Barney — all the others who've been waiting here —"

"You've found Allan?"

"Of course! Do be sensible, Rolley. The Loti have been

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very patient with us, and they're sweet — but I don't want to have to ask them to spell it all out again."

"The Loti — *sweet!*"

She pushed back from him and brushed a hand over her hair. She still wore her leather coat; but underneath she'd put on a white clinging dress, ending just above the knee, so that she looked like a Nymph from a Greek play. It was very becoming. Crane became bemusedly aware of other people moving up — and recognized Allan Gould. The girl with a dress like Polly's and a calm, serene face that contained no hint of her quirks of personal taste must be Sharon. Barney, too, he recognized; but the parking lot attendant, like Colla, tough and wiry and darkly Irish, and like Allan Gould, wore a short white tunic and sandals.

Crane put the rifle butt on the floor and leaned on the muzzle. He opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again, and said: "Tell me, Polly. Tell me what it's all about."

Off to the side the clustered Loti swayed and nodded and the weird notion hit Crane that they looked like a congregation of old men, bearded and near senile, nodding in muted approval. Allan Gould thrust up to Crane, smiling, holding out his hand.

"Polly told me you were with her, skipper, but we never expected to see you! You're looking fit. . . . It's been a long time. . . ."

"Check, Allan. And now that the pleasantries are out of the way, let's get down to cases. I want to *know!*"

"The first mistake we made," Polly said, still holding on to Crane's arm, "was to imagine the Loti were evil. They're not. McArdle was — is! — but he's a Loti, a renegade Loti, and the others here have outlawed him and feel sorry for him — but they're scared to death of him. . . ."

"So that's why he wanted to get into the Map Country — to return to his kinfolk."

"Yes and no. The story goes something like this — We've found out that there are other worlds in parallel with the Earth we know, other dimensions, by proving it coming through into the Map Country. The old idea was to liken the

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dimensions to a book, each leaf being a world — but the fact is many worlds impinge on each other, so that the last pages and the middle pages of the book really lie next to one another. It takes mathematics of an order I don't have to work it out fully; but formulas exist to explain it, and also to act as portals through the dimensions, just as the map McArdle made was just such a portal diagram — ”

“Diagram?”

“There was no magic inherent in the map, Rolley. When McArdle left he wanted to get back again, and so he took the key . . . ”

“The key! Of course . . . But he lost it — ”

“True. He had a double chance but he lost both sections of the map. The Loti don't know how and I'm only repeating what they told me.”

Colla motioned to them and they all walked slowly through the vast hall, eagerly talking, until they reached the wall and a small door that led into a comfortable lounge furnished in tasteful Terran fashion. As they sat down, Polly said: “The other dimensions are universes like ours; that part of it all is easily understood. But what took me longer to grasp was that, if that was so, then space travel, too, must exist in other dimensions. The Loti are not native to the Earth — this *other* Earth — they traveled here from their own planet in a solar system light years away, seeking new worlds to colonize. Oh, Rolley, they are a good people, kind and thoughtful. When they landed on Earth they found it in the most frightful condition of primeval chaos — ”

“The Map Country?”

“They've tamed it considerably. What we saw was only a flea-bite to what they had to contend with. They built this huge city and these machines to subdue the convulsions of the planet. It was a hard furrow they had to hoe. But they were winning, creating a new world for their children — ”

“Children!” Crane stared at the clustered Loti, swaying and shining at the door, those great mournful eyes staring unwinkingly in. “Lozenges of light — ?”

“Oh, Rolley, I thought you were with it! The Loti are

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people, not dissimilar to us, I'm told. But they're resting far below in their vaults. The living lights are only their means of looking and traveling in the outer world. Like perambulating television cameras, if you like. They're physically exhausted with the toil of subduing this world; and they're failing. Really, they're beaten. The ship is ready to take them back across the empty reaches of space to their own world."

"So the Loti did a spot of space travel in their own universe, came to the Earth's twin and found it to be a pretty dud place for colonization." Crane could understand that well enough, and sympathized with the defeat the Loti had suffered, their sadness and depression. Those mournful eyes were enough to give anyone the willies. "But what about McArdle, or Trangor?"

Allan Gould said: "He's a nasty piece of work, skipper. Apparently the Loti accidentally stumbled across the method of crossing the dimensions; something to do with immense strains imposed on the fabric of the universes by the nature of chaos in this place — Polly calls it the Map Country. The Loti prefer to call it the Unmapped Country."

"Figures. So?"

"McArdle was their chief manipulator. That means he was a sort of electrical and mechanical engineer, responsible for designing the Wardens and the others to frighten off everything from the road. The road is the first thing the Loti built. From it they tamed the rest of the country. Well, McArdle spotted our Earth and something happened to him."

"There's a black sheep in every race," Polly said, thoughtfully. "McArdle was weak from the Loti point of view. He saw our wonderful Earth, and this horrible place here —"

"And he jumped to the logical conclusion." Crane stirred restlessly on the seat. "But if the Loti are packing up shop and letting everything run down, why haven't they gone home already? Why stay on?"

"That proves you don't know the Loti!" Sharon spoke with eager intentness. "They're wonderful! While McArdle was still at large in our Earth and the map was not accounted for, the Loti refused to cut for it and run home. They knew the

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damage McArdle could do — and they stayed on trying to get the map themselves. For if McArdle regained his map, and put his plans into high gear — ”

“Yeah,” Crane said, standing up. “I see that all right. You’d have an invasion. He intends to take it all over — ”

“And the Loti cannot allow that. They colonize only worlds where the intelligence level of the inhabitants has not risen above a quite low level. War and invasions are taboo to them.”

Crane began to pace up and down, thinking. “Why haven’t the Loti spilled over into another one of the worlds in a different dimension?”

“Good question,” said Polly. “But it seems Earth is at a nexus of highly developed dimensions. The Loti have discovered many worlds; but each is occupied. And some queer setups they’ve run across, too. Races where people are used as computers; worlds where people struggle to lose every bit of wealth they’re born with; there is one particularly nasty lot called the Porvone, who are just golden caps, who squat on people’s heads and control them. The Loti debated a long while whether or not to take over there; but their laws are stringent. Just because an intelligent society is evil in their eyes does not stop it from being an intelligent society and taboo to takeover.”

Crane began to warm to the Loti. And he thought of McArdle out there in the Unmapped Country. No wonder the Tanks hadn’t attacked — they’d been told by McArdle not to attack the man who’d made them. Simple.

“McArdle’s up to something,” he said, worried. “He’s out there now — he seems to have the Loti frightened to death. Anyway — how come he looks like a human being?”

Polly answered that one. “He used his knowledge of scientific surgery to take over the body of a man — the real McArdle. That was some time ago. The Loti have been here a long time. They discovered the map was adrift and they set — well, call them enticements, to bring people in. Like old Liam and his diamonds. Specially made and cut to act as bait to bring him — and the map — back again.”

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"Y'know," Crane said reflectively. "Much as we know McArdle is a villain, you've got to feel sorry for the old devil. There he was, cut off from his buddies, desperately seeking his map and knowing if he didn't lay hands on it, his friends would leave and he'd be marooned on Earth. Hmm. Makes you think, does that."

"The Loti don't want anything more to do with him. And for a good reason." Polly's voice sounded somber. "He doesn't know — but he can never change back from the earthly body of McArdle to his Loti body of Trangor. They wanted to spare him that. If he tries — no one seems quite to know what will happen. But it'll be nasty."

"You give me the impression that Trangor was a sort of chief technician, not one of the big brains, a get-rich-quick social climber —"

"Maybe he is; but you do the Loti an injustice if you imagine their social class system to be anything as antiquated as ours."

"Well, whatever or whoever he is, he's out there now with an extremely powerful weapon, gathering his clanking monster pals. What's he going to do?"

Allan Gould, Crane noticed, had kept a careful distance from Polly. The atmosphere between them was tangible to him, and he suspected Sharon, too, to sense it clearly. But they did not act like long-parted lovers; and this gave a ray of hope to Crane, a ray like the infra-red against sunshine. Now Gould began to speak and it was like being back on patrol against the terrorists, not knowing behind what bush your very messy death lurked. "The Loti have kept the very minimum of equipment in operation to stabilize this little section of land where the city is built. As soon as the ship blasts off and the machines run down, primeval chaos will sweep back and obliterate everything. To keep the chaos outside they've arranged those encircling walls and if McArdle wants his own body back he's got to break in."

"He sent me up against the Loti first. Said something about me softening them up for him."

"Good tactics. What he doesn't know is the Loti are just

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about done for. They didn't stop you when they thought you were Trangor's sidekick — ”

“The scuttlers were pretty ineffective — ”

“ — and they won't stop Trangor. But in breaking in he may well disrupt the field holding the guard walls together. He *wants* this place, skipper; he wants it bad. With it he can control two worlds. Without it — he's just a footloose bum.”

Crane tapped the rifle that Gould had examined with deep professional interest and in a voice grimmer than he intended or liked, said: “McArdle made this in our own world using our techniques boosted by those of the Loti. It's some weapon. If he can do that, I scarcely rate him in the footloose bum category.”

Gould shook his head. “I don't mean that, skipper. Oh, sure, the rifle's brilliant, especially after you showed what could be done with it. But it's small-time stuff to a man craving for the dominance of two worlds. Look at the Wardens — the Loti knocked those together as soon as the road had been built — all flash and fire, shoddy but working — to make a big noise and scare off the wild animals. They work, you saw that. But you should see some of the machinery the Loti have below stairs — man, it's fabulous!”

“And it's all running down,” put in Polly. “Rolley, we *must* help the Loti! We've got to stop McArdle somehow . . .”

A long shuddering rumble rolled through the floor. A glass fell from a table, to bounce and roll under Gould's chair. He bent and picked it up as the tremors came again, held on an excruciating moment that set everyone's teeth on edge, then died to expectant silence.

“What was that?”

“That was McArdle starting his little campaign.” Crane tucked the rifle under his arm. “Is there a vantage point we can look out over the walls? The bowl?”

“Come on.” Gould rose and led them from the lounge.

By elevator and escalator and moving ramp the little party climbed inside the monstrous blue and ocher structure and all the time they climbed the living lights of the Loti followed, bobbing and weaving and in seeming anxious haste,

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illuminating their way. Crane caught Polly's eye and drew her back out of earshot of the others.

"You're all right, Polly?"

"Of course. If it wasn't for the deadly serious threat against our own old Earth I'd be enjoying it all."

"I was when I came back — but now . . . I don't know. It's too big. I felt, well, cheated when I got in here without a proper fight. But if McArdle wins it'll mean the end of the world as we know it."

"Some of our politicians have been working for that for some time. Bomb happy —"

"But this is different. And another thing. Colla looks remarkably cool for a man who's been here all those years —"

"Allan warned me about that. To each of them here it seems they've stayed, oh, a week or a fortnight or so. Time has no meaning here as we found out."

"But Colla's kid —"

"He'll be delighted with what's waiting for him when we get home."

Crane glanced at her, at her tough, beautiful face, her white dress and leather jacket, and looked away. He said: "We'll get back home, Polly. We'll get home."

They followed the others out into a high glass-walled gallery atop the blue and ocher structure. The sun cast down a vast semi-circular shadow of the bowl above them. Crane could look out over the sagging roofs of the city, past the chimneys, most cold now, over the checkered rows of workshops and foundries, out across the girdling white walls and into the Map Country — no — the Unmapped Country.

A glint of vermilion caught his eye among a fold of green and as he watched a Warden rolled out from the shadow of trees and started directly for the walls. Other specks of vermilion broke into view, a cordon, enveloping the city, all headed in like ladybirds crawling up the spokes of a wheel.

A foot behind his right ear a soft, patient, infinitely tired voice said: "So Trangor begins his last move. And it is a winning move for we cannot stop him. Alas, that our high dreams should end thus."

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Slowly, stiffly, his whole body rigid, Crane pivoted. He looked back and he saw his first Loti.

Polly had been right. They were people — oh, not quite like human beings from the Earth that had born Crane; but any sentient being with two eyes and a nose and mouth in a face lined with the years, calm and serene and yet shadowed with sorrow, a face that could belong to the wise grandfather of a centenarian monk from forbidden Tibet, was people.

It was as if he were sitting enthroned in a wonderful chair. The back arched up and over his head to form the support for a flexible mask that Crane guessed could be pulled down to cover his face. The arms were wide and broad, studded with a multiplicity of controls. The lower front curved up and concealed his legs. The whole chair rose from and was formed from a shell, its convex side a subtle curve, doming down against the floor. The smooth metal shone. The Loti sat in his great chair and the chair rested in its saucer of gleaming metal. The whole construction hovered three feet above the floor, silent and unmoving.

Polly said: "Hullo, Varnat. Don't give up hope yet. Mister Crane has joined us — and he has a rifle —"

"Thank you, my child, for your wise attempt to comfort us. But what do the Loti know of rifles, or weapons of murder and maiming? If we were given to remorse we would rue the day Trangor set foot aboard our ship for our high venture among the stars. But it is too late for that now."

"What bothers me," Gould put in, "is McArdle's strong-arm stuff. He doesn't know how weak the Loti are now; he'll come busting in here with his tanks and rupture the wall's defenses. He sent you in first to draw their fire, skipper. He anticipated you'd be taken up by the Loti almost as soon as you'd set foot inside — why weren't you, anyway?"

Varnat answered, his purple-lidded eyes heavy with weariness. "Crane possesses the Amullieh — or enough of it to prevent our transporting him. Trangor for all his wickedness was a master craftsman."

"I have abhorred violence," Crane said softly. "But it has

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been forced upon me again. If McArdle comes into my sights I shall shoot — ”

“Trangor no longer understands.” Varnat waved a pencil thin hand towards the horizon. “When he left us all that land was calm, cultivated, ready to accept the gracious villas we would build for our children and give to them the new life and new world we had planned. Now, look!”

Crane took his eyes away quickly. The ground beyond the immediate circle around the city heaved like a stew, gouting and roiling, hideous.

He looked again at the Loti. Withered and old Varnat appeared; but he recalled old Liam and guessed that disappointment and the burning out of a dream had ravaged the Loti past endurance. Sorrow for him welled up — and then the building shuddered again.

“He is burrowing in,” Varnat said calmly. But his hands played across those confusing controls with nervous vagueness.

From the face screen above Varnat's face a golden light issued. Like a genie from a bottle it grew, wavering upright and growing until it parted from its source. Crane stared fascinated as a lozenge of living light soared out and over the wall, swooped away towards the distant trees.

Varnat pulled the face mask down over his eyes and sat, entranced.

“So that's how they do it,” Crane whispered.

“McArdle knows the Loti won't fight.” Gould shaded his eyes and peered over the golden, writhing landscape. “But he also knows the strength of the defenses against chaos. He thought you'd help to smash them for him. And he's hurling the Wardens in attack and burrowing in below. He's really hurling in a terrible force, although to ordinary eyes it is not impressive. But — what he doesn't know is the true weakness of the Loti. He's using a bulldozer to shift an anthill.”

“It can only be a matter of an hour or two.” Polly turned bright eyes on Crane. “And, my dear, I think your rifle will prove of no avail.”

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"Faith, if we're to die," Colla said with true Irish pugnacity, "I'll take a few o' the spalpeens with me, surely I will!"

"There is only one," Polly reminded him gently.

And Crane thought of her saying "my dear" and in that moment of bitter acceptance of defeat her words were of far more importance.

And then, shockingly, a bestial wave of violence surged through Crane's mind. His fingers gripped on the rifle savagely. "He's only one! And he can be killed in a human body! By God! I'll blow him to hell and gone!"

Turning and beginning to run so abruptly he collided with Colla and sent the Irishman staggering, Crane ran clattering down the stairs and escalators, leaping four treads at a time. He'd ask Polly why the Loti needed stairs some other time. Probably for their kids before they grew old enough to graduate to one of those marvellous chairs. His feet slammed the marble paving. Behind him he heard the rest of the Earth-people in full cry after him. The time for questions and answers was over. Ahead lay only the promise of action that would end, it seemed, in the inevitable death of them all.

And the destruction of the Earth he called home; that, too, would follow as Trangor's evil plans succeeded.

Crane shouted back over his shoulder, harshly, and the light glanced from the planes of his face, gave him a wolfishly devil's look of evil intent. "Keep back! If McArdle fires that damn great cannon of his he'll blow you all up! I'll tackle him by myself!"

Varnat's chair atop its shining bowl skimmed lightly down. "If many explosions tear at the foundations of this place, weakened as it is by the slackening grip of the forces holding chaos at bay, the whole will crumble and fall."

Before the Loti had finished the walls and floor shook to a subterranean rumble; pieces of marble facing fell and splintered in icy shards.

"Sounds as though he's doing all right already." Crane motioned to Varnat. "You know the way down to the vaults. Take me there. Pronto." And Crane flung himself up onto

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the rear of Varnat's bowl, grasped the seat in his left hand, pressed himself to the chair back. "Get moving!"

Down through the giddy perspectives of giant halls and the cyclopean architecture of a race of master builders, Varnat's chair flitted, leaving Allan Gould's cry dissipating on the air: "Hey! Skipper! Wait for me!"

Past marvel after marvel Varnat took Crane, skimming through a wonderland of scientific equipment so that Crane's mind reeled, stunned. He was roused as the Loti's quiet controlled voice spoke to him: "As death for us all is so close I am doing as you wish. For there seems nothing else to do . . . I am old and weary . . . I shall not be sorry to leave this sphere and —"

"Forget that sort of talk, Varnat. We're not licked yet. Okay, so we're going to die; but I'm an Earthman and until I'm good and dead I won't believe it! You know where McArdle — that is, Trangor — is heading for down here. Whistle us to it, fast. He took a shot at me when I couldn't do anything about it. But" — Crane hefted the rifle — "this time I can!"

And so, like a phantom rider in an hallucinatory dream, Crane rode the back of an alien other-dimensional chair skimming ever deeper into the depths of another earth.

McArdle had planned his campaign well — against a foe who had mighty defenses to resist him. Against the pitiful cobwebs remaining to the Loti, McArdle had knifed through like a scalpel opening a boil. Long before Crane reached the lowest level of the vaults the sound and fury of McArdle's breaching machines reached up, and smoke and fumes roiled up the descending spirals. He slipped off Varnat's chair as the Loti coughed and slammed down his face mask. The older couldn't take the fumes.

"Thanks, Varnat. You go back. I'll tackle McArdle from here."

"Wait, Crane —" The voice whispered from the mask. "Look — beyond the crystal screen . . ."

Crane looked.

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Set in a twenty-foot high alcove in the wall, ringed in purple shadow and yet haloed in silver light, like an alien and evil eye, a Loti sat slumped in his bowl-chair. Light splintered from an impermeable barrier before him. Away beyond the alcove the passageway wandered off into the bowels of the earth, lights dimming fainter and fainter with distance. In the air ozone stung the unexpected nostril, and rivulets of black earth ran from cracks slowly widening in the ceiling. But Crane, backed off against the far wall, riveted his eyes on the lone Loti, sitting his chair, immobile and silent in his tomb of crystal.

"Look closely, Crane. For you gaze upon the arch-traitor in person — *that is Trangor!*"

Without thought the rifle jerked in Crane's hands. How many rounds he fired with that feather-touch trigger jammed solidly back he didn't know. But light and smoke and the fury of ripping explosions thundered over the crystal screen. When at last he let his finger slacken, and let his breath out in a great sigh of defeat, the crystal wall stood firm and unmarked and flinging back its shards of reflected light.

"Mere force of that nature will never break down the shield Trangor left around his body." Varnat moved his chair and skimmed away. The last Crane heard of him, he was whispering: "Trangor must return here for his body, Crane. That is why I brought you here. Now . . . everything rests on your shoulders. . . ."

The thought of putting a shell into McArdle's hide sustained Crane in that eerie pit in the other earth beneath a tottering pile of masonry threatened by a man driven mad with dreams of avarice and power beyond the wildest schemes of all the dictators of earth rolled into one. The earth shook and more black earth sifted from widening cracks. Crane pushed back against the wall and leveled the rifle. When McArdle and his tanks and digging machines broke through he'd be met by a blast of his own death — destruction spitting from a weapon he'd fashioned himself. Crane liked the thought of that.

A hundred feet away the wall bulged outwards. It looked

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exactly like a house of cards toppling to destruction. With a roar that echoed in ear-punishing clangor up the corridor the wall splashed across the floor — and a vermilion body rolled through.

The tank had been fitted with a bulldozer shovel and immediately it began clearing a way through the piled wall debris. Crane blasted it into a heap of mangled wreckage.

The junk began to move, to jerk forward, slewing as a ruptured jag of hull caught against debris. A glimpse of vermilion metal showed behind as the second tank pushed its shattered brother out of the way. Crane blasted that one, too.

More sections of wall fell. More Wardens, hastily fitted for underground boring, waddled through. Crane fired with snap precision. He tried to clobber the tanks in the openings so they would hinder those behind. Smoke roiled in the close confines of the corridor. Heat built up so that he sweated, his face a shining mask, his chest beneath the shredded shirt shining slickly.

The noise and confusion of the battle dinned confusingly in the corridor. A sense of occasion swept over him, a realization that he fought what might be the great and decisive battle for two worlds, and had his temperament been different he might have sung an exultant battle song, there in the smoke and fire of conflict. There was no doubt he took glee in the fight. His regret lay in the unpalatable fact that Mc-Ardle was sending his tanks to fight for him and there seemed no chance of centering that dark sardonic face in the telescopic sights and blasting it to shredded destruction as he had promised.

Tanks broke through from the tunnel's opposite end, behind him, and he had to whirl and fire two ways, taking it in turns, clearing his ground as tanks broke and buckled beneath the fearful ferocity of the rifle's blast. Slowly, working to a pattern, the breakthroughs closed in on him. He was pressed back until he found a niche, little more than an eroded slit beneath the far wall, directly opposite the crystal-walled tomb of the empty husk that was Trangor's body.

A flailing-armed clanking monster bore down on the piles

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of wreckage, flinging smashed tanks left and right. Crane sighted briefly and expertly on the tank's vermilion hide and pressed the trigger.

The rifle did not fire.

He pressed again, harder, fiercely, willing the rifle to spit its orange tongue of death. Nothing happened.

He could never have fired through five thousand rounds.

But then, he had only McArdle's word as to that — and a voice boomed from the shadows beyond burning tanks, magnified, distorted; but recognizable. McArdle's voice, gloating in the moment of victory.

"You fool, Crane! Did you think I would let you loose even when doomed to capture by the Loti with a fully charged weapon? Numbskull! Your time is come . . . Now you die!"

A clanking monster closed on him. He scrambled up, the rifle held by the muzzle slashing out in a rending blow that caromed from the monster's shielding arm. A grapnel-claw seized him, thrust him back and down. Writhing like an insect on a pin he fell below the tank, jammed between tracks and the wall.

Through bloated eyes he saw a chink of light under the tank's tracks, saw McArdle's feet and legs walking cockily down through the sprawled mass of wreckage. McArdle was anxious, eager. He ran straight towards that crystal wall.

His senses fast slipping away, staring, the blood hammering frenziedly in his skull, Crane saw McArdle halt before the crystal screen, saw him bend, do something by the wall — saw McArdle vault lithely within the tomb, climb up to the narrow shelf behind the body of Trangor on its chair atop its shining bowl.

He knew that this moment represented McArdle's supreme triumph. With his Earthly knowledge and the skills of the Loti, he could not fail to win the dominion of two worlds. And Crane could do nothing, pinned to the wall by the grapnel claw and the tracks of a clanking monster that haunted the dreams of his childhood.

At any moment now, McArdle would shed his Earthly body, the body of the man whose name had been McArdle,

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and would reenter his own body, the husk of Trangor, waiting for him.

In complete despair and exhaustion, Crane closed his eyes.

The flash seared through his closed eyelids. The noise buffeted him in waves of pain-filled sound. He felt blackness shot with the lurid scarlet of eternity smash all across him — and then there existed only the blackness.

Everything stopped for Roland Crane.

Epilog

"If we share them out equally that should be fair." And Crane nodded towards the suitcases.

"You can have as many more as you wish. It is no problem to manufacture them." Varnat smiled and the years sloughed off him.

"Sure, and old Liam will be pleased. He must have been very vexed when those clanking horrors drove him off and me trapped in the truck." Colla held no rancor towards his father-in-law. Crane wondered what his reactions would be when he found himself the father of the tousle-haired imp.

"We must be going." Varnat nodded towards the spaceship in her gantry. The other Loti had boarded and only Varnat was left to say goodbye. Polly smiled at the ancient in his wondrous chair.

"Goodbye, Varnat. I'm sorry you never did tame this world. It's a terrible place; but almost anywhere is terrible

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until men come and tame it and make it a place for their wives to live."

Allan Gould walked across from the scattered ruins of the blue and ocher building, sprawled now in a chaos that matched the chaos outside the white encircling walls. He carried a rifle over his shoulder, twin to that still grasped by Crane. "I found it," he called. "McArdle must have dropped it when you ran out of ammo, skipper. He was too confident, too cocky by miles."

"Too confident for his own good," said Polly, holding onto Crane's arm. "He didn't know what the Loti knew, even though he was such a clever technician — he wasn't basically a scientist. He didn't have the necessary education in the higher techniques —"

"Still and all," said Crane, rubbing a hand across his newly-shaven jaw, "you have to feel sorry for the villain. After all he'd done, losing the maps and finding them, breaking in here using me as a front-runner to break up the opposition, bursting into where his own body was stored, lying down to change into it — and . . ."

"The Loti said the result would be nasty."

"It brought everything down," Gould said, indicating the ruins. "Luckily the spaceship remained upright; but it was touch and go."

"And thank goodness you were shielded by the Warden," said Polly, and she squeezed Crane's arm. Gould looked away, looked across at Sharon, and Sharon walked to him and took his arm. This potential four-sided triangle, at least, wasn't going to erupt in passion and envy, Crane knew with a profound sense of relief. He wanted Polly. He wanted her badly. And he thought she wanted him. But it was nice to know that there would be no ghost of Allan Gould to haunt their future happiness.

Varnat waved goodbye and his chair atop its shining bowl floated away up into the sun-drenched sky towards the open airlock of the ship.

"Farewell, people of this planet," he said, "even if you are

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not of this dimension. Maybe we will meet again, one day — who knows?"

But Crane, for one, knew that to be polite fiction; the Loti were gone from earth forever.

The airlock closed. A rumble, quickly cut off, shook the earth. Then, without fuss, quietly, the ship lifted, rose higher and faster, flickered — and vanished.

"They're gone," Polly whispered. "Across the empty spaces between the stars — going home."

Around them now stretched the ruins of the city, girdled by the white guardian wall. Beyond that the land heaved and wricked, lost in a torment of primeval chaos. Each person picked up a suitcase or a package.

"You'll have to watch out for Barney," Crane told Colla. "He won't know what to do with all those diamonds."

"Sure and we'll keep an eye out for him. Didn't the Loti talk to him, now? Isn't he as sane as you or I now?"

"Of course I am," said Barney. "And the quicker we get back to our own Earth the better. I have plans."

The world shimmered around them. A keening wind smote down for a moment so that their hair blew and their clothes ruffled and Polly clasped Crane harder. The land reared up. The sky fell, parted and drained away.

Then they were standing on the white road with the wreck of a truck in the ditch and an Austin slewed around backwards into the opposite ditch. Around them now lay the boglands of dear ould Ireland — and it was raining.

"Y'know" said Crane as they started the damp walk into Omagh, "I feel sad about the Loti. Such a decent lot of folks. They had super-science at their fingertips. Yet they lost out. They'd have lost out even if McArdle — or Trangor — had been pure as a saint."

"But he wasn't," said Gould. "And we nearly had our old Earth taken over by these alien beasties . . ."

"But, still and all — " Crane felt the mystery of the reasons why races were not the same. "If the Loti had been Earthmen with all that knowledge they wouldn't have given up. *We'd* have conquered and tamed the Map Country."

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"The Loti weren't as tough as we are. Only Trangor — and he reflected the worst side of human nature." Polly waved a hand. "But it's still there. It may be in another dimension unseen by us. But it's indubitably there. The Map Country exists. Maybe some day we'll go back and this time we'll know how to tame it — and will."

Crane tucked her hand firmly under his arm. "Or perhaps our children will be the ones to go back." They strode out along the road in the soft Irish rain. "Maybe some fine day they'll turn the Unmapped Country into the Mapped Country."

And they would.

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