

NEW WRITINGS
IN
SF.24

EDITED BY
KENNETH BULMER



In *The Ark of James Carlyle*, Cherry Wilder depicts an island populated by quogs. These small creatures, not unlike baboons, wept when their mee-haw tree was cut down. But Carlyle evacuated them before their island submerged beneath the flood. And between Carlyle and the quogs there grew a strange affinity ...

A Strange and Terrible Sea is the story of ten-year-old Sammy, who was partially paralysed: the result of a blow struck by his father in a drunken rage. Sammy read a lot of books on astronomy, and sf—but could this account for the weird repetitive dream he had each night? When he was put under observation in the Dream Research Establishment, it seemed that someone—or something—was trying to enter his mind ...

Was Bamfield-Taylor trying to be the *New Canute*? He was no tourist, visiting the Time-currents of Cirene merely to relish a taste of 'Time-terror'. His request to be taken back to a specific *minute* in time worried the skipper of the Time-boat in which Bamfield-Taylor was an out-of-season passenger ...

David S. Garnett's *Now Hear the Word* brings horribly alive the resort of Sunville—a place of sanctuary for the rich and the old—while the rest of the world went to hell. Howard Felix, the Sunville reporter, tampered with his newscasts out of boredom. But the events he foretold had a disturbing way of coming true ...

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TO

DIANE LLOYD

Science Fiction's staunch ally

FOREWORD

by

KENNETH BULMER

THE energy crisis which is generally predicted for around 1995, although ominous early effects are already with us which will grow progressively more serious, is just one more example of the stupidity of attitudes of some of the inhabitants of this planet. The exhaustion of all fossil fuel resources was an inevitable outcome of using fossil fuels. There is a certain amount. When that is gone we cannot, at the moment and for the foreseeable future, replace a single gramme of it.

This fact, a known fact without any mystery or secrecy attached to it, has not prevented colossal plundering of coal, oil and natural gas in a wild squandering that has accelerated at the rate of doubling demand every decade.

When the deposits of oil and gas were discovered beneath the North Sea—potential resources of approximately 1.5% to 1.8% of all known resources—delighted cries went up and lavish plans were immediately introduced to exploit the finds. Eagerly we were told there were fifty years supplies under the grey waters. Leaving aside all mention of the alleged incompetence in the financial arrangements, did anyone query what was to happen after the fifty years had gone by?

Writers and readers of sf are accustomed to thinking in terms of millennia rather than mere half-centuries, and tend to identify with problems of the future in ways that have brought scorn upon them as unsophisticated day-dreamers. The sf reader obtains—after the first dazzlement with the shiny surfaces of some sf—an instinctive over-view of time stretching from the far past to the distant future which is denied to the non-sf reader.

In thousands of stories sf has drawn attention to many abuses and possibilities, and the destruction of fossil fuels

has been a cause of concern to many writers, so that although there is no pleasure in it, sf writers can say those hateful words: 'We told you so.'

As an instance, a story called 'Advertise Your Cyanide' was written in 1955 just about the time President Eisenhower, by announcing the Vanguard programme, began the process of forcing people to realise that sf readers were not mentally deficient in believing that men would one day travel in space. 'Advertise Your Cyanide' was published in NEBULA for April, 1958 and drew attention to the waste of Qs. A 'Q' is the amount of energy required to raise one pound of water one degree fahrenheit, to the power of one million million million, and seems to be a measurement out of fashion these days when we face a world shortage of oil just over a decade from now. This story posited the exhaustion of almost all irreplaceable natural resources and suggested that the advertising industry which, by its urgings, has done so much to spur on the conspicuous waste, might redeem itself in the acquirement of basic resources. The over-view that science fiction confers means that no sf reader could say: 'This is a problem for our grandchildren.' Those people who have said those cruel and callous words stand condemned before the bar of history.

The day when all irreplaceable natural resources are exhausted will surely come. Even with the crisis warnings plain before them, people are still talking of the crisis as basically one of investment rather than of reserves, a clear indication of a lack of the over-view of the science fiction reader.

The chemical industry can supply synthetic oil; but it seems likely that this will be used almost solely for lubrication unless water-lubrication can be made feasible over a wide area of needs. Alternative supplies, such as tar sands, suffer from their irreplaceability, however valuable in the short term.

Perhaps sf has been too optimistic in suggestions for harnessing solar and wind and tidal energy. Recent calculations indicate the enormous lateral areas needed to transform sunlight into significant quantities of usable electricity. One

system that may be tried could well involve placing the tremendous solar mirrors beloved of sf into orbit and beaming power down. The plastics industry may well cease to exist. Forests will become the wealth ardently craved by every businessman and multi-national conglomerate.

This dubious future is certain, unless, as is the happy knack of *Homo sapiens*, we come up with an answer. There are already many projects in—if you will pardon the irony—the pipe-line. Liquid hydrogen could be a fuel to answer the problem, although demanding quantities of electricity for the electrolysis of water as can be cheaply obtained only through nuclear power—and that breakthrough may take twenty years. Nuclear breeder-reactors would answer and fusion reactors if we can hold a chunk of the sun in a test-tube. As is the way of life, and as sf so often points out, an answer will probably be found in an area of science completely unknown today.

Mankind does possess this happy knack of finding answers. The years immediately ahead will be tough; but a belief in humanity indicates that ways and means will be found, and sf can look forward, as it so often does, to a wider and more pleasant future.

It is not too ridiculous an idea to suggest that sf itself will, in the stories to be published, actively contribute its own thoughts on the ways and means. Warnings and dystopias must still find a place; but stories attempting to grapple with the positive problems of the future will be written and published. Those writers who see in sf only a tool for irony or satire not only do themselves a mischief by reducing the human values and the scope of their work; but they do sf as a whole an injustice.

New writers are always welcome, particularly in *New Writings in SF*, and would-be authors should bear in mind the simple fact that everyone has had to start at some time. In his latest collection 'The Early Asimov', Isaac Asimov lays out for our inspection and interest his early work, how it came to be written, how it was rejected and accepted and his thoughts and reactions at the time. This proves enthralling reading. The stories themselves, of course, are

marked by the pulp traditions of the time, traditions, incidentally, that should not be too severely condemned and which are to be found in greater or lesser degree in all writers emerging from that area. While 1974 would not tolerate such crudities, equally it must be said that the pulp tradition brought life into the humid backwater of the novel, in which, it has been claimed, no major novels have been produced to compare with those written before the 1914-18 war.

Further evidence of the beginnings of successful sf writers is to be found in the fascinating series of articles now running in FOUNDATION.* These pieces, apart from being valuable historical documents, do lift some of the veil of mystery surrounding writers' original attitudes, and are particularly illuminating for what the writers do *not* say.

Therefore it is particularly pleasing to report that in this volume of *New Writings* alongside regular and established contributors there are no less than three writers appearing as sf authors in these pages for the very first time. Significantly, two have had material published outside the sf field. *New Writings* is only able to select from stories submitted for publication, new writers are always wanted, and while the competition is keen through pressure of space, every story is eagerly read in the hope that a new talent will be discovered.

Here are seven brand new stories covering a wide variety of themes and visions of sf, presented in seven different styles. It is with particular pleasure that I present the very first story by a woman writer to grace the pages of *New Writings in SF* and, happy to obey the old dictum of Ladies First, I feel it entirely proper that 'The Ark of James Carlyle' should lead off this volume.

Horsmonden,
June 1973.

Kenneth Bulmer

* FOUNDATION: The review of science fiction. Available from: The Administrator, The Science Fiction Foundation, North East London Polytechnic, Barking Precinct, Longbridge Road, Dagenham, Essex, RM8 2AS. 6op.

THE ARK OF JAMES CARLYLE

by

CHERRY WILDER

This high-spirited account of watery events written in a delicate and evocative style is the very first story by a woman to appear in the pages of New Writings in SF and is an occasion worthy of note, giving me a keen pleasure I am sure will be shared by all our readers. Mrs. Cherry Wilder is an Australian and has published widely in literary and general magazines, although this is her first published sf story. She writes that she has recently moved into a new house out in the bush where she is sure the landscape will provide a considerable incentive to the writing of more sf. We can only hope the quogs will never run short of mee-haw trees.

THE ARK OF JAMES CARLYLE

ON the ninety-first day of his Met. duty Carlyle stepped out of the hut and gazed desperately at the cloudless sky. There were no quogs to meet him on the platform; the oily purple sea sucked gently at the wooden piles; his instruments had assured him there was a light westerly breeze. His delusion persisted and he had nothing to support it ... not even the tangible evidence of an aching bunion. He did not dare call the station. How would he begin?

'Something tells me ...'

He decided to walk round the island but he found an ancient quog, the one he called the Chief, squatting at the foot of the ladder. He beckoned him on to the platform. The quogs were cryptorchids so for all he knew perhaps this was a Chieftainess: it was difficult to tell.

When he had first taken up his duty, before the boat brought him to the island, he had seen Mary Long, a young anthropologist who had tagged along with the landing party to the plateau, sexing a herd of quogs. She walked among them, picking the creatures up and solemnly examining their genital pouches. She was engrossed in her work; twenty or thirty quogs surrounded her and gently stripped off every stitch of her clothing before Carlyle or the other men could intervene. They sat round her and stared, their luminous eyes full of innocent curiosity.

Not a great deal of work had been done on quogs; they had been described as small land mammals, semi-erect bipeds, modified baboons. They were docile, certainly, and capable of performing many tasks; but they were also ugly, elusive and rank-smelling. Their odour had already ceased to bother Carlyle but he noticed that the quogs still kept upwind of *him*. He found himself describing them differently: they were like trolls, like squatting goblins, like little old men. At night he listened for one of their rare sounds,

the qwok-qwok-qwok, hardly vocalised, that had given them their name.

The Chief, who was a big fellow, fully three feet tall, scrambled nimbly on to the platform.

'Where are the others?' asked Carlyle.

Every other day the platform had been lined with quogs who gave him berries, limpets, burrowing shrimps, in exchange for bacon cubes. He had tried them with everything he had: orange juice, vegetables, vitamins, but they liked the bacon best. Now the Chief tried to explain their absence. He could be heard only by cupping his long bluish hands before his tiny slit of a mouth to amplify the sound, the way Carlyle made owl-hoots as a boy.

'Mee-haw,' boomed the Chief faintly.

At first Carlyle did not understand. The mee-haw was a tree; in fact it was the only tree. The vegetation on AC14 was low, luxuriant and undistinguished except for the mee-haw trees, which reared up, with straight trunk and spreading crown of leafy branches, one hundred metres and more above the bushy islands in the still, purple sea. The timber, resembling balsa, was particularly easy to work. The platform on which Carlyle had his Met. hut was made entirely of the single mee-haw tree that had grown on the tiny island. The quogs had wept to see it fall down. Carlyle had had the uneasy notion that the mee-haw tree might be sacred to them.

Now the Chief pointed to the island; Carlyle was shaken again by his crazy premonition.

'Come on,' he said.

He climbed down from the platform and followed the Chief up the brush-covered slope. All the quogs on the island, about thirty of them forming one family group, were huddled together on the broad stump of the mee-haw tree.

'Why?' asked Carlyle. 'Why?'

The Chief cupped his hands and answered with a third quog word.

Carlyle strained to catch it.

'Aw-kee?'

The quogs on the stump waved their fingers; this was a

way of laughing. To Carlyle's surprise they all began to vocalise, even the babies, pale blue and completely hairless, cupping their tiny hands. 'Aw-kee' was the nearest he could get to it.

'What's that?' asked Carlyle.

He already knew. He went into a mad pantomime, begging the quogs for confirmation, then he ran back to the Met. hut. He called the satellite without a glance at his instruments. He announced firmly :

'There's going to be a flood.'

The receiver crackled. What were his readings?

'The quogs told me,' said Carlyle.

The crackle became indignant. Readings please. Carlyle turned hopelessly towards his instrument panel and his heart pounded. The barometer had dropped thirty degrees and was still falling. The wind had swung round to the south. The room became dark as he completed his report and huge drops of rain began a tattoo on the roof of the Met. hut.

He ran out on to the platform. The sky was a dome of blue-black cloud above a darkening sea; the waves flashed emerald and purple-black and broke in iridescent foam upon the shore. The word for it, Carlyle decided, was unearthly. Already drenched to the skin he cowered in the doorway of the hut. He was worried about the quogs; he guessed that their instinct to seek higher ground would keep them huddled on the mee-haw stump. The fragile shelters where they slept and did their weaving would be no protection against this rain. The picture of the quogs twisting their endless ropes from native flax lingered in his mind. He wished, idly, that the mee-haw tree had not been cut down.

Carlyle gave a cry : 'The tree !'

He peered out into the downpour, staring up at the dark centre of the island where the mighty mee-haw tree had stood, ready to shelter the quogs in its dense foliage. They made ropes ... probably sent up a young male to loop slings over the branches, then the whole tribe went up.

There was a splashing and scrabbling at the foot of the platform. Carlyle knelt down and saw the Chief, already

swimming awkwardly; the water had risen three feet in twenty minutes. The rain was a blinding cataract; a man who lay on his back would drown, thought Carlyle. He dragged the old quog aboard and bundled him into the hut. They sat gasping, the water pouring from the quog's grizzled hide, from Carlyle's coveralls.

'How far?' gasped Carlyle. 'How high does the water ... ?' He gestured with a horizontal hand, staring into the Chief's bulging dark eyes.

Carlyle was suddenly aware of an earlier moment. When the mee-haw tree came down ... the day the quogs wept ... he and Ensign Weiss noticed marks on its great trunk. A series of wavy bands, between three and four metres from the lowest branches ... more than eighty metres from the ground. Carlyle understood, with another thump of fear ... water marks. The water would rise until only the mee-haw tops rose like islands out of the purple sea. The only high ground on the entire planetoid was the plateau where his expedition had touched down briefly, far to the north. It had a large quog population ... and no mee-haw trees.

The Chief touched Carlyle's knee gently with the tip of his prehensile tail.

'Sure,' said Carlyle. 'Sure. We have a real problem here, old buddy.'

He was calculating ... One life-raft, inflatable, fully provisioned and powered, capacity six humans. All he had to do was launch the thing. And figure out some way of transporting thirty quogs to the plateau. The receiver gave his call signal but Carlyle paid no attention. He rushed out on to the platform again, into the deluge, and saw with alarm that the water was up to the cross supports. The scrap of beach and the lowest rank of undergrowth were already submerged. Sea and sky were joined in a blue-black curtain of moisture. Suddenly Carlyle gave a triumphant cry that brought the old quog scuttling to his side; he had realised that they were standing upon a raft.

He explained it to the Chief as he dug out the axe. The tribe must come aboard now, pronto; when the water rose he would knock out the supports of the platform and they

would be launched. The wind and the current were driving towards the plateau ... Maybe they could use the power pack of his own inflatable boat ...

'Come on!' he shouted. 'We have to get them aboard!'

The Chief had been dancing and shivering at Carlyle's side, stretching out his arms to the island. He pointed through the rain and Carlyle saw that the quogs were coming.

It made sense of course; the platform was a little higher than the top of the island. They came swarming through the bushes and flung themselves gamely into the water. Their awkward quog-paddle was very efficient; the first wave—pregnant females and mothers with babies on their backs—was already nosing towards the supports. The turbid water was alight with their bulbous eyes. Carlyle knelt down beside the Chief and began to heave the dripping creatures aboard. More than once Carlyle saw a big quog dive and drag up a half-drowned cub. The oldest animals took it pretty hard, they fought to stay on land; but the younger ones thrust them brutally into the water. All along the platform in the plunging rain the rest of the tribe were gently dancing and stamping, reaching out their arms in encouragement to those still in the water.

As the last of them were dragged aboard Carlyle herded them into the Met. hut and went over the side with the axe. The Chief and four husky off-siders watched him wallowing in water up to his neck and hammering with the back of the axe-head at one of the supports. The mee-haw piles had been embedded in heavy silt to a depth of two metres. Carlyle reckoned he could slide the tops of the piles out of the groove cut for them in the platform. But the first pile moved inward with a lurch the moment he hit it; he saw that the silt was swirling away in clouds as the water rose. He was treading water now, catching an occasional foothold on a rock. He moved under the platform, beat at the pile with the axehead, then heaved it outward with all his strength.

As the silt let go its hold the pile swung upwards in the water and the platform sagged down at one corner. Instantly two quogs were in the water grasping the mee-haw pile and

using it to restore balance. Carlyle swam to the diagonal under the far corner of the hut and knocked it out like a loose tooth; two more quogs hove up out of the rain and balanced the platform. Carlyle knocked out the remaining leeward pile and felt the whole structure buckle and shift. He yelled to the quogs and scrambled back on to the platform. The decking heaved about crazily. The last pile on the seaward side gave way. Carlyle watched his two pairs of assistants climb expertly inboard and tapped the loose piles free of their grooves as they rode up on the surface of the flood. Leaning down he caught hold of one long pile as it clung to the side of the platform and shoved off from the island. The quogs on deck gathered to help him, bracing their leathery underbodies against the pole; the platform shuddered, then settled gently. The wind was rising and a strong current ran to the north. The mee-haw raft floated free upon the waste of waters.

Carlyle and his deck-hands carefully drew in their oar; he felt an extraordinary sense of well-being as they clustered around his knees. The rain had slackened but they still pressed forward into a wall of water. A gleam of violet penetrating the low ceiling of black cloud showed that the Star was shining. Carlyle glanced down at the Chief, who blinked solemnly through the rain. He remembered that he must answer the call signal and led the way into the Met. hut.

The quogs had packed themselves in snugly under the big plastic dome. Carlyle couldn't think of any species who could carry off the situation better. Humans? Monkeys? Bedlam and filth. Okay, the quogs were a spooky lot, and the smell, *en masse*, was like camphorated garlic, but there were times when he appreciated their stillness, the way they organised themselves. He lifted aside a tiny blue paw, resting on the communicator, and called the satellite.

The signal was faint.

'Readings ...'

He gave the readings.

'We observe dense cloud,' piped the signal. 'Evaluate.'

Carlyle switched over to voice, although he didn't like talking to the computer. He made a report. The androgynous voice snapped.

'Evacuate. Use liferaft.'

Carlyle said: 'The emergency is way past that point. I have evacuated the native population.'

The quogs were vocalising gently in the background ... qwok-qwok-qwok ... There was static, the voice signal was faint.

'Follow emergency procedures. No record ... population. Save ... self ... data.'

Carlyle repeated stolidly: 'Evacuating with quogs.'

'Follow ... procedures. No deviation ... losing contact.'

Carlyle said coarsely: 'Screw yourself tin-brain. Give me emergency voice contact.' He slammed the red button and Garrett answered.

'Jim ... Jim? What the hell is going on down there?'

Carlyle gave his report all over again; the reply was broken and distant.

'We're losing signal.' Garrett was worried. 'What in blazes are you doing with those quogs?'

'Evacuating them. The island is submerged by now I guess.'

'But why? This is no time ... Tough luck ... the quogs. No ethnological value ... plenty more ...'

'Hell!' said Carlyle. 'We cut down their tree!'

'Jim!' cried Garrett, with the static closing in. 'Take care ... crazy raft ... Can't allow ... deviation emergency procedures.' The receiver went dead.

Carlyle felt a surge of panic as if his lifeline had snapped. His morale sagged at the thought of the satellite ... warmth, filtered air, human company ... He felt his conditioning slipping away. He was on the verge of apophobia, Weltraumangst, the fear that grew in interstellar space from contemplating vast distances. He remembered poor Ed Kravetts, a cadet in his year who tried to cover up a bad case of 'Yonders'. He staggered through his classes on the station red-eyed and queasy; a glance at one of the monitors made him sweat; the checking of an air-lock or a simple space

walk left him shocked and pale. To see Kravetts struggling with a quantum equation was to apprehend the void: all the black miles that separated them from the tiny spinning globe of earth, a pin-point of light seen through the wrong end of a telescope.

Carlyle dragged himself back to his own world. 'Identify with the place you're in,' wasn't that Eva's way of saying it? Eva, E. M., Earth Mother, Commander Magnussen, come beautiful Eva, aid me now. He sent his prayer off into deep space and doled out bacon cubes to all hands before striding out on deck. The rain had really eased off and the cloud was lifting. The mee-haw raft rushed on faster than before. With the current and a rising wind they were making maybe five knots. The Star was down; the brief blue night had settled on AC14.

The Chief leaned on his knuckle-pads beside Carlyle; they stared together over the wine-dark sea. Low waves came at the raft from the south-west, as the wind swung round. They were long, uncrested hillocks of water, that surged under the mee-haw logs and disappeared into the dusk, rolling in line across the surface of the endless sea.

'Those waves better keep low,' said Carlyle. 'Does the sea get rough?'

In his ninety-one days of Met. duty he had never seen a choppy sea, never felt a drop of rain, never observed a significant drop in barometric pressure. He made wave-motions with his hands and the Chief replied with 'Aw-kee' and some new words. He thought of the sea rising up into roaring crests, high over the raft, huge rollers, hills and valleys where the pink foam boiled. He had to shut his eyes to shake off the nightmare picture of those waves, superimposed upon the harmless scene he was watching.

'I better get some sleep,' Carlyle muttered. He was wet and shaky, his morale still down. The whole project, the solitary Met. duty, was a test of his survival qualities and his potential as a colonist. Perhaps he had blown it with Garrett by evacuating the quogs . . . He stumbled back into the hut, found a way to his bunk, put on a fresh warm coverall from the thermopack. He didn't dare take any

medication in case there was a sudden alert. Most of the quogs were sleeping; he caught the gleam of an eye here and there, the flicker of a blue hand. The Chief materialised at the foot of his bunk with two even more ancient creatures, so old that their skin was grey. They stared at Carlyle and clapped their long hands soundlessly. He felt an instant of revulsion ... sleeping in a hut crammed with animals, for crissake. Then with a surge of weariness and a sense of strange well-being he fell asleep.

... He was wide awake in a dark room with a low ceiling. A range of scents and sounds assailed him; fresh air, wood-smoke, perfume, the waffling roar of a jet refuelling, insects, someone strumming idly on a moog. Earth. He was on Earth. Carlyle knew that he must be dreaming; he savoured his dream, taking in the outlines of the room. It was night; he was standing beside a window that opened on to a balcony. He glanced down at the thick, unpatterned carpet. A memory stirred. Had he been in this room before? Or was it simply the colour, a rippling mist-green, an earth colour. There was someone at the desk; Carlyle felt himself drift closer.

He peered at the dark figure ... A caftan, a long fall of dark hair, he couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. Yet something in the attitude of the head made him tremble, in his dream. Slowly Eva Magnussen turned until she saw him. She blinked into the darkness of the room, switched off her cassette and removed the earpiece as he had seen her do a thousand times.

'Jim?' her voice was husky, hesitant. 'Jim Carlyle?'

'Eva?' In the dream his own voice was muffled.

'Where are you?' she asked. 'Is this some kind of experiment?'

'It's my dream,' he said. 'You know where I am.'

'Jim ... I can see you.'

'I thought of you,' he said. 'I have a situation going here. My communications are gone. No word from upstairs. Seeing you helps a lot.'

'You're not alone,' she said. 'Who are they?'

'Quogs,' he said. 'They are great little guys. You might

find a short report on them in the file on AC14. Not enough work done on quogs.'

'You say you are sleeping?'

'Sure. Eva the sea is purple. Wine-dark sea ...'

'Oh, Jim ...'

'Don't!' he said. 'Eva ... Don't cry. Think about what I said. I'm not one of your cadets any more. We could take a colonial posting.'

Then as she rose in her chair the dream tilted; he was looking down on the room. He saw the figure of Eva Magnussen, his instructress, Commander Magnussen M.D., specialist in space psychology, rise up from her chair and run forward on the green carpet. He felt an instant of amazement and fear ... it was like watching something else ... real life ... not a dream. He heard Eva cry out across the abyss of space and time:

'Jim ... Jim Carlyle ... I love you ...'

Then the dream vanished in a swirl of colour and scent; he was back in the dark, in the flood, in the crowded Met. hut, with the quogs whistling in anxiety and the Chief tugging his arm.

'Okay!' said Carlyle. 'I see what's wrong.'

Rain was falling heavily again; the wind had become violent and ripped one of the panels out of the hut. The raft was bumping about in the water as the wind tore inside under the dome.

'I'll relax the panels,' said Carlyle to the Chief. 'I may need your team.'

The Chief summoned them up in the eerie violet light of dawn, while the rest of the passengers cowered away from the driving rain.

Carlyle went to work on the expanding ribs holding the panels. The hut began to fold down and the raft settled. Finally he grappled with the damaged panel, but he had the order wrong. He had been too busy providing shelter for the quogs—the torn panel should have been folded down first. He felt a thrill of warning, the eyes of the quogs glowed around him, he shot up a hand and turned sideways. The heavy strut holding one side of the panel broke with a

rending crack and came down on his head. Carlyle's last conscious thought was: 'I am seeing stars ...'

He was out, but not out cold for very long. He groped upwards towards consciousness through a fog of nausea and pain. Words whirled through the aching sunburst of his brain; he strove to move his legs, his hands, his fingers, to wrest open his leaden eyelids. He saw pictures ... ragged scraps of film ... the island, the satellite, a house in a green field ... where? He felt himself, flying, moving, uplifted ... lifted by a hundred strong, blue hands. He could see them so clearly through his closed eyelids. Whoever had blue hands ... ? He remembered and laughed in his pain-fringed dream. 'Their hands were blue ... and they went to sea ... they went to sea in a sieve.'

Carlyle opened his eyes. He was on his bunk, the quogs all around him, their saucer eyes alight with concern.

'Concussion,' mumbled Carlyle. 'Got to take—medication.' He could not reach his head but the Chief guided his hand. There was a shallow two-inch cut on his scalp above the left ear and blood had soaked and matted his shaggy crop of hair, known in the service as the colonist's cut or the Buffalo Bill.

'Must take—antibiotic.'

Carlyle was heavily conditioned to protect himself against alien bacteria. He fought to stay conscious.

'Hogan ...' he whispered to the Chief. 'Hogan the Medic. Up there. He can tell me what to take ...'

He sank into a confused nightmare of purple microbes and the capsules in his medical pack.

Carlyle's head ached still and he began this comical dream. He was in a cabin on the satellite, lying just above the floor, floating. It was some guy's bedroom, with his locker, pinups, a green video cassette. He heard startled voices and saw two people sitting up in the bunk, clutching the sheet around them.

'Hi Mary!' said Carlyle in his muffled dream voice. 'No clothes again!'

'Carlyle ... what the hell!'

It was Dick Hogan the Medic, naked too and for some reason frightened.

'Hogan!' cried Carlyle. 'You're just the guy I wanted to see.'

'Carlyle?' whispered Mary Long, the blonde anthropologist, 'Is it you, Jim?'

'Sure,' said Carlyle. 'I'm dreaming. I do a lot of dreaming down here. I have a concussion, Dick. Little cut on my scalp ...'

The two lovers sat there petrified, unable to move. Carlyle laughed and could not make it out. He wasn't about to report them for fraternising.

'Come on now!' He laughed, weakly. 'What do I take, Dick? Not functioning too well ... what antibiotic ... the label ... ?'

'UCF,' said Hogan automatically. 'You know that. Orange capsules.'

'Thanks ...'

Then Mary Long pointed and began to scream.

'Quogs! I can see quogs!'

And the dream swirled away taking Carlyle with it.

After he got the Chief to feed him the orange capsules he slept long and heavily while his head mended. He woke at night, out on deck, with the raft still moving steadily in the grip of the current. They passed islands—no, not islands, but the tops of mee-haw trees, and on the raft the quogs danced, holding out their hands to the distance, to their brothers in the dripping branches. He woke in the hut and saw a patch of indigo sky with the Star shining down. Carlyle turned to the Chief; he was still light-headed.

'Far and Few ...' said Carlyle. 'How does it go?' He struggled drowsily on to one elbow.

*Few and far, Far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live,
Their heads were green, and their hands were blue,
And they went to sea in a sieve.*

Carlyle was laughing and the quogs waved their fingers.

In his sleep he heard someone calling his name; he woke up and found the Chief, vocalising through his hands.

'Cah-lah-ee!'

'Good try,' said Carlyle, flexing his limbs and feeling stronger.

He pointed to the Chief, who slid across his nictitating eyelids in a show of quog bashfulness.

'Tell me *your* name,' urged Carlyle.

The old quog boomed shyly: 'Sheef.'

Chief. The name Carlyle had given him, though he didn't recall ever calling him that, unless in his delirium. He let it go, puzzled. Either the quogs had no names or they were like cats, who had special sounds they used to communicate with humans.

Carlyle checked his instruments; the stormy conditions were abating. A mee-haw off to port showed a fraction of trunk. The flood waters were beginning to recede. His chronometer told him he had been out of action for three days. The Star hung low in a sky of aquamarine; he saw the plateau dead ahead with the black cliffs rising up sheer. The current was no more than a ripple and the mee-haw raft moved sluggishly through the purple water.

He checked the plateau through his glasses, trying to make out a possible landing-place that he remembered where broken columns of black basalt had made an alien giant's causeway. He saw a disturbance in the water, a line of foam. Before he could register it properly he sensed the anxiety of the quogs, growing into fear. Behind him they huddled and whistled, crowding into the ragged heap of the Met. hut. He stood on the raft, sandwiched between two shock waves ... the low wedge of foam moving towards them and the almost palpable fear given off by the quogs.

'What is it?' cried Carlyle.

The Chief, all of them, could give no answer, only this immense welling up of terror. Carlyle gazed at them blankly. A whale? A giant ray? The Great Horned Toad? He pushed through the crowd and took down a regulation

magnum; then as an after-thought he reached down the new Fernlich, the automatic missile carbine. As he feathered its vents he heard the sound, a high vibrant scale of notes, swinging up and down on impossible frequencies. He might have heard it before, far out on the sea at night, so sweet and distant that it could be something he imagined. The quogs writhed in fear and pain, clasping their hands over their round ears, burrowing under the paraphernalia in the hut.

Carlyle rushed out into the waves of strange music. The ripple had divided into ten, a dozen pink clumps of foam, approaching swiftly on all sides. He could almost see them now ... not too large, dark shapes swimming easily ... like seals, maybe, or dolphins, slipping, weaving, gliding, just below the surface of the water. Carlyle squatted on the deck, fascinated. The music thrilled around him, his head sang, he felt dizzy. A young quog, crouched at the doorway of the hut, rolled over and died.

Carlyle sprang up, gasping. With an audible pop something reared up out of a patch of foam. A smooth pink bubble ... At first he thought incredulously of a child's toy space helmet, then he saw that it was a bubble of foam. The bubble burst and a sleek black head appeared. It did look like a seal but the coat was scaly, black crystalline scales, dark mother-of-pearl, breaking the bluish light into an alien spectrum. The creature was dancing on its tail, waving sleek webs like forepaws, only a few metres from the raft. Then, with a glissando of sound, infinitely sweet, like a peal of electronic bells, a single scaly tentacle whipped out from a curled position below the head and seized the body of the dead quog. The seal-lizard flipped its catch into the air and caught it playfully. There was a flash of teeth, a minor chord, the quog's head was bitten off. A whistle of anguish rose from the burrowing terrified quogs crammed inside the hut. Carlyle shouted at the top of his voice.

The creatures had never heard a human voice. There was an excited humming, a swish of dark bodies passing around and under the raft. A colony of pink bubbles grew to star-

board, at a safe distance. The seal-lizards repeated what he recognised vaguely as the tone and pitch of his own voice. They boomed and cawed, bouncing about in the water. Carlyle accepted the invitation; he called again, telling them to clear off. The formation of bubbles began to move closer, tinkling, humming ... testing ... testing ...

With a ringing head Carlyle realised what they were trying to find. The raft was drifting closer to the plateau; he grasped the oar, still lying on deck, and began to drive the clumsy craft along. He would never escape this way before the seal-lizards found *his* death frequency—the sound which would make this new creature with the harsh, loud voice fall down to be eaten. The seal-lizards moved alongside in formation. The noise was unbearable; Carlyle sang, groaned, shouted aloud. A tentacle, then another, flicked over the timbers of the raft, plucked at his boots, probed towards the quogs in the hut.

Carlyle dropped his oar and fired the magnum in the air. The seal-lizards hesitated, then pressed forward. A new wave of sound broke over the raft; he screamed and rolled upon the deck, pressing his hands over his ears. Through the mists of agonising sound he saw the seal-lizards at the very edge of the boat. A row of neat, scaly black heads; narrow oval eyes, a structure of nasal beak and leathery appendages like whiskers ... even so close they looked amazingly like seals. He could not see how they made their music. Their comical mouths opened upon murderous fangs. A tentacle gripped his wrist and pulled gently.

Roaring aloud to counteract their killing whine Carlyle put one hand to the missile carbine and fired point-blank along the deck. A seal-lizard was blasted into mush. The missile that destroyed it passed on across the sea, then struck and exploded, sending up a column of water, fifty metres away.

There was a moment of utter silence, then the whole band of seal-lizards dived like one creature. It could have been the shock-wave that did it, or the sound of the carbine, or simply the death of one of their number. Rising to his knees Carlyle saw them emerge far beyond the raft

swimming in formation, fast and low ... a ripple bearing away to the south-west. He caught only a few notes of their music across the dark waters.

The quogs crept out and surrounded him, helping him to stand. Everyone, Carlyle included, was partially deaf from the encounter. The quogs held their heads sideways and bounced on one leg, like a human bather with water in his ear. Carlyle shook hands with the Chief; it caught on. The whole party, dizzy with relief, shook hands promiscuously.

They were already within the shadow of the plateau: Carlyle and his crew, working the oar, struck a rock or a shoal, then another. They were over the flooded causeway where he had embarked for the island three months ago. He levered the raft in towards a rock platform. The quogs had begun to stamp gently and hold out their hands to the plateau.

One moment there was no sign of life, only the glittering planes of the great stone mesa; the next, every plane and slope was alive with quogs. They spilled over the edge of the plateau in waves, until the black rock was blanketed with brown and grey and tawny fur. A strange noise, stranger even than the music of the seal-lizards, began to rise up from the multitude. They vocalised all together, by tens and hundreds, their weak voices blending into a vast muffled shout, that echoed out over the purple flood tide and reverberated from the chasms of the plateau.

'CAH-LAH-EE.'

As his own quogs pressed round him proudly, in silence, Carlyle recognised his own name. Then as the shout redoubled: 'CAH-LAH-EE,' he saw himself as a new creature, as the quogs perceived him: the clumsy, loud-voiced, white-handed giant of a new species. The dogged Cah-lah-ee, who made a marvellous craft from the looted remains of a mee-haw tree, who overcame the flood, did battle with seal-lizards and brought a whole tribe to safety.

The raft sidled into the platform and a nylon rope fell on the deck. The quogs were so thick that Carlyle had not seen the landing party, Garrett, Hogan and Weiss. The

sight of these men, his own kind, affected him powerfully. His sense of proportion was restored; he smiled and choked up, just as they all did. He felt as if he had returned from some other dimension, not a routine stint on AC14.

'Hey there!' cried Garrett. 'Some welcome you got here, Lieutenant.'

'Am I glad to see you!' said Carlyle.

They heaved him ashore; the quogs were whisked off the raft by hundreds of willing hands.

Carlyle turned back to the Chief.

'See the raft is made fast,' he said.

The men of the landing party turned back and watched as the Chief and his off-siders tied up to a pillar of rock.

'Everything ship-shape!' said Dick Hogan.

'They know the ropes,' said Carlyle.

The party ascended through an aisle of quogs, still hooting his name; Carlyle acknowledged the applause as modestly as he could. He was looking ahead eagerly ... Yes, there was the landing module on the plateau, among the bushes and the stony burrows of the upland quogs. He was going upstairs, back to the station. His limbs began to ache in anticipation of a steam bath and a bunk.

'How's the head?' asked Hogan.

'Oh fine,' said Carlyle. 'It was just a simple concussion.' Garrett turned to him.

'You get it, don't you, Jim? You understand what you've discovered.'

'I think so,' said Carlyle. 'I guess I knew all along. Or when they called out my name ... Did you know it was my name?'

'We worked it out.' They laughed and looked at Carlyle expectantly, waiting for him to bell the cat.

'The quogs are able to transmit pictures,' said Carlyle. 'They are natural telesends.'

'The first in the Universe,' said Garrett.

'There's more to it than that, Max,' said Carlyle. 'Some kind of group intelligence ...'

'They had us on the hop upstairs!' put in Weiss.

'What way?' asked Carlyle.

'Reports of hallucinations,' said Garrett. 'Weiss here saw you on the raft. Hogan ...'

'I saw Hogan,' said Carlyle. 'Spoke to him. I thought it was a dream.'

He and Hogan exchanged glances, straight-faced; no one said a word about Mary Long. The quogs certainly had a trick of embarrassing that girl.

'Communication can extend over vast distances,' said Max Garrett.

He was smiling in an odd way; the men were still watching Carlyle closely. He couldn't read much in their faces, no pictures came to him; for a moment he wished they were quogs. Hogan dug him in the ribs.

'You got the prize, boy,' he said.

Garrett cleared his throat.

'We had word. Commander Eva Magnussen put in a report. She has also requested a P.I.C. with Lieutenant Carlyle.' A Personal Interplanetary Communication: something flashed from Earth to Armstrong Base to a chain of a hundred satellites. It was the spaceman's version of compassionate leave; marriages were contracted, births and deaths announced in this way. 'She has requested a colonial posting.'

Carlyle smiled foolishly and the men all shook him by the hand.

They were anxious to get him upstairs to sick bay; but Carlyle excused himself and turned aside. He bent down to the nearest quog.

'Where is my friend the Chief?'

There was an immediate response in the scattered groups of quogs returning up the sides of the plateau. A strong impulse, stronger perhaps because of the numbers involved, directed him to a low cave some distance away. He strode over and found the Chief, with his wives and children, being regaled with berries and limpets and sweet-bark. He realised that he had been aware for some time that the Chief was in fact a male; he found no difficulty in sexing quogs at a glance. The Chief knew that he was leaving.

'I'll come back after a few days,' said Carlyle.

The pair of them stood in a clear space, looking out from the height of the plateau. The three giant causeways in the rock were explained, three great chutes that drained off the deluge of rain from the high ground. The purple sea spread out beneath them; the mee-haw trees marked the submerged islands. In a series of quick superimpositions Carlyle saw the great day when the flood receded altogether; when the star approached its apogee and the islands became dry land again.

'Yes,' he said. 'I'll be back to see that.'

As he turned to rejoin the landing party Carlyle took in the scene. The three men beside their vehicle, tall visitors in regulation silversuits, and a fourth man, unkempt and hairy, in ragged coveralls, communing at a distance with the members of a new species. The men looked curiously towards Carlyle; their anxiety did not quite diminish as he came closer. The distance between Carlyle and the landing party could not be taken up in a few small steps. They saw tomorrow's man, who by some chance operation of goodwill, some accident of understanding, reached forward into new modes of being.

AND WHEN I DIE...

by

PETER LINNETT

We want everybody, dead or alive, to be truly happy and the well-known pickling effects of al-co-hol can be poured into the service of this Great Cause. In this heart-warming story of a man's truly noble devotion to his fellow men and women Peter Linnett makes his first appearance in New Writings, and we all sincerely hope that this intense integrity in the search for the good life that makes each day perfect will be well-and-truly preserved for the future.

AND WHEN I DIE...

"... how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?"

1 Corinthians 15:12

TODAY was going to be a good day, I could feel it in me. There are some days in which everything seems to click, so, and there was no doubt this was one of them. I experience many such days in my job, but this one, as yet only a few hours old, already seemed to be sketching an exceptionally bright pattern on my mind. I was aware of this as I entered my office that morning. An office? To many, an office represents the ultimate in boredom and depression; not to me. I have the love for my office and its geography that comes from old, familiar things—things intimately connected with my personality.

I went in and stood by the door, gazing, and it was all still there—unchanged. There were the pictures on the wall, the famous clients: politicians, artists, actors, scientists. They are all brought to us; people know that through us they can truly gain a measure of immortality. And the mottoes, those wise, inspirational words; I gain strength through them every day. The rest-home models on my desk were a reminder of just what a service we do render the community.

It was Friday. Every Friday I go on a tour of the building, visiting each department; an employer must have contact with those in his service. All too often he remains a lofty, unreachable entity; detached. In this way I maintain contact, and can see that everything is running smoothly. I also enjoy observing the way in which everything works. So this tour has a three-fold purpose—this I quickly point out to any person questioning my actions.

After brushing up, I went over to the window of my

office and looked down into the street below—it is a fine view anytime, but now it was accentuated, heightened, all that evidence of life and activity if possible bettered my mood. The day was shaping up well. After saying an enthusiastic good morning to my secretary, I began making my way.

On this, the ground floor we have advertising, accounts and administration—the three As. As always, I went first to the advertising section. Here the creative atmosphere can be felt by the visitor; a testament to the fact that the men here really do work hard. And they get results. I would say there is hardly an adult in the country who has not heard of us. When a member of the family passes, the name of Larssen is the first that occurs to them; the service we offer is second to none. The advertising men have a big job informing the nation of this, and they do it admirably.

After speaking with two secretaries for one or two minutes, I went on into the main office, where the eight advertising personnel get together on a project. Five of them were in there at this time, grouped around a drawing board on which had been placed a piece of white paper with letters cut from black paper laid across it. This, they explained to me, was one of the first attempts they were making towards a series of posters, black letters on a white background, designed to leap out at passers-by. They were considering various messages for these posters. One which I liked was ARE YOU AWARE THAT THE PASSING OF A DEAR ONE NEED NOT MEAN THE END OF YOUR RELATIONSHIP? This seemed to combine the right qualities. The reader would then read these words below the message: *The Larssen Preservation Organisation can help continue this relationship . . .*

This was conclusive proof that the boys were, as usual, on the ball, a fact of which I informed them. They replied, with sincerity, that it was much easier to sell something the worth of which they believed in. There is no doubt that it pays to have dedicated employees such as these. But the advertising men need to be especially dedicated;

for they have to be constantly creating, constantly bringing forth something new. This must impose a strain. When faced with these thoughts, however, they say this is not so, that there are endless possibilities to be explored, and these are merely waiting to be opened up. It is obvious they enjoy what they do—clearly a necessity, for a man must be happy in his position, if not the whole company will suffer. Because they are of a creative nature, the ad men are perfectly suited to their job.

I went through to one of the smaller offices, where three of the other men were labouring over a desk. Various photographs were laid out across it; each showed a different aspect of our service. The men were trying to arrange them into some kind of pattern. This seemed to me a very imaginative method of direct communication, and I told the men this. But, they said, they were continually coming up with ideas, this was just one of them. Yes, I myself sometimes wish I were of a creative nature, but we all have our part to play.

With that I said goodbye for the week, and headed for the next stop, accounts. People may say accounts are dull and dry, and, yes, to a certain extent they are; which renders their keeping no less necessary. The reason I enjoy my tour of the accounts department is that it makes me understand in greater detail the comings and goings of our money. As our advertising states, we are not in the business purely to make a profit, but it is pleasant to know that some is indeed being made. This means we do not drop out of existence just like that when what can be termed 'hard times' are encountered. At the moment the situation is not, I can say with certainty, difficult. The fact that what we deal with is ever-present, also helps.

I went round to as many desks as possible, as I always do, spending as much time as I could with each person—usually only a few seconds, unfortunately, for there are so many people here that if I spent even a minute with each one it would be time to go home before I got through. A few seconds however is sufficient; in most companies I would not be seen at all.

After visiting the manager and the chief accountants I moved on once again.

From there my next stop was administration, a department housing not only our executives, the higher echelons of the Organisation, but the employees who take calls connected with a person's passing, and who set things rolling.

The Organisation makes its way to the caller and removes the person who is passed. From there the person becomes subject to our various processes. Administration arranges the preservation ceremony, after it has reserved a cubicle in one of our rest-homes. This occupies much of its time, as we are the recipients of many calls throughout the day and night, and therefore administration must remain in close contact with all the other departments. This cycle is a continuous one, one which would eventually force us into bankruptcy if it ceased to flow. But as I have said, the first ingredient required is always present; the only problem is to bring to the public knowledge of our existence, and that they most certainly have.

On this day there was a cacophany of ringing phones in the department: an assurance that the situation was normal. Employees were scribbling details on their pads at a great rate, then setting the cycle in motion as they had done countless times before. There was more discernible activity here than anywhere else in the building.

From here I went up to the second floor, to the two departments whose activities I always find fascinating. I have visited them on countless occasions, but their interest for me never diminishes. The first of these is the receptacle department. This is really a kind of small factory, made up of a series of workbenches, where our receptacles are put together. These are made up of rounded segments of glass fitted together in an oval shape, according to the size and weight of the particular person. This is an intricate process requiring skill and patience. A person's measurements are brought up, and the employees go on from there. One of them outlined it to me once; I think I can remember the main details. First, the right number of glass segments has to be ordered. Each of these has to be of a certain size,

according to the person. Then two large pieces are cut from a flat section of glass, to fit the top and bottom exactly. The section above the head and shoulders is separate from the rest of the top section, and is of clear glass—the remainder of the top and the whole of the sides are of frosted glass; only the head and shoulders are seen. When all the segments are ready they are fitted together; the top section is removable so that the person can be placed inside when he or she is ready.

All this takes time, but once the process is complete, the receptacle will last for ever. The point being, of course, that it *has* to, because the person inside will also. Almost. If a receptacle fell apart suddenly who knows where we would be?

The employees here are hard-working, and all are craftsmen. I like their layman's explanations of their work; they do not carry on a one-sided technical discussion, but stay with language that is easy to understand. Even so, a lot of what they do cannot be detechnicalised, and I admit I have not been able to understand all I have been told on various occasions. Nevertheless, I find all this absorbing. Often when I come in the men are in the middle of a difficult and exacting task which they cannot withdraw from. So I merely stand and watch, and it is in this way one can begin to appreciate what they are doing. On this day they had just received a large number of orders, and were busy deciding on the amount of material they would need.

And then, to the preservation department. This is another small factory, characterised by the smell of chemicals. (Used in the preservation process.) A long time passed before a completely safe system evolved, but now it is here, and it is truly fascinating to watch it being put into operation. The person is laid out on a velvet cloth, on a table, and it is here that the preserver works, with his equipment and his various chemicals. I myself have no idea of how the process works. A certain substance is spread over the skin, injections are made at certain points over the body (this is in fact done at the person's home so as to keep him in good condition until he can be brought to the factory). But this

system is perfect—we commissioned a team of top scientists to explore avenues in this direction—and nothing whatever is allowed to change. When I say this ensures the person will last for ever, I do not mean for ever *and* ever, but certainly for several hundred years, long enough to satisfy relatives and descendants. If we could not ensure absolute satisfaction then preservation would not be a part of our service. And, as everybody knows, preservation is our service.

The men who carry out this process go through extensive training, until they know what they are doing and can do it without error. Because it is known that one slip can lead to disaster we could be sued for every penny. But these men know their job and that slip has never occurred. On this day there was quite an amount of work going on. There were at least ten people lying on velvet throughout the department area, and by each stood a preserver. Their concentration could be felt, for here of all the departments is concentration needed. If the wrong chemical is injected, if anything however minor is incorrectly executed—everyone is only too aware of the consequences. Peace and quiet are therefore needed, so I stood by the door and took in the scene. Yes, I thought, life was good, my good mood was enduring, as indeed it should throughout a tour of the building, with the activity and with the knowledge that one is actually doing some good.

Here one of the men broke off from work and I went over and stood by him. I have not recounted conversations so far, as they were many and fleeting, but I had an interesting conversation with this man Max.

‘How are things going, Max?’ I asked him.

‘Great guns, Mr. Larssen,’ he said. ‘People, people, people. They never stop coming in. Keeps us on our toes, at least.’

‘Tell me, Max, what do you think about when you are performing the preservation operation?’

‘Well ... I have to concentrate on the job, because you know what’ll happen if I don’t. But I sometimes spend time trying to figure out a person’s nature, his personality, by

looking at his or her face, you know. I try to look *inside*. I usually don't get very far, because I have so many conflicting opinions I'm forced to give up. Then that person goes, and I get another to work on, and I start trying again. But it leads to a dead-end, because I can never know for sure. Still, it makes it all the more interesting.'

'Yes, I sometimes wish I was not at the top, Max, with all that responsibility. A job like that would suit me.'

'Really, Mr. Larssen? In that case, I'll gladly change places with you! But I admit I'm happy where I am.'

'Good. I'm glad of that. But I must be off, good-day Max.'

Then I was off on the final stage of my tour for that week. Down to the basement, where materials are stored and distribution is taken care of. Huge trucks seemed to be always coming in or going out. There were men moving around in continual activity, among the receptacles and various materials for our rest homes, sheets of glass, piles of paper and countless other things necessary for the continued functioning of the Organisation. To be frank, there are too many people here for me even to say hallo to, and on this day it was worse as there was a board meeting at 11:00, and I did not have much time remaining to me.

So, knowing that the men would hardly lose any sleep over my not talking to them, I had a conversation with one of my favourite characters here, a man named Leon Burnett, whom I always make a point of seeing.

He was leaning against a wall, next to two sheets of glass, sipping through a straw at a bottle of coke. When he saw me he came over and took hold of my hand, gripping it tightly. It was a gesture of friendship; the fact that I was the top man and he was a storage worker did not enter into it. I see to it that position is of relative unimportance in the Organisation.

'Nice to see you,' he said in his rough, yet likeable manner. 'Say—they're kicking off at a great rate, ain't they? Good for business, eh?'

This is the one thing I dislike about Leon. He makes repeated embarrassing remarks about people 'kicking off',

and about the corresponding profits. This tendency I always point out to him; but it never seems to do any good.

'Leon, please—people are not "kicking off". They are—well, you know what I mean; "kicking off"—' This always throws me off. 'We don't refer to the—ah—final state, like—that. Too crude. Suggestive.'

Then he said something I can only describe as horrifying. 'Final state? You mean death?'

Death! I hope I never see the day when I hear that word again! It is nasty, and, yes, *dirty*, with connotations I would rather not think about. With the increasing circulation of that word goes everything we are trying to build up. But one of my own employees using the word, and among his fellows—Leon had never gone this far before. I had a hard time controlling myself.

'Leon, do not, I repeat *not*, ever say that word again! No one else heard it?' I could hardly stop myself shouting.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Larssen,' Leon said in a suddenly humble voice. 'Didn't mean it.'

I did not want to lose my temper and ruin what up to now had been a flawless day. 'That's—okay, Leon,' I said. 'But—please don't entertain such thoughts again. Please.' I said good-day and made my way back to my office. I would not let this trouble me, I told myself. Nothing could be perfect, and this would soon be forgotten. I was determined that nothing would disrupt my good mood, and the incident soon left my mind.

It was now 11:00, time for the meeting. I gathered up what papers I needed—among which there was something special, which I will come to shortly—and went along to the board room, where two of my colleagues, Robert Barth and my close friend Grindley Casterton, were already seated.

'Your tour is complete, Mr. Larssen?' Barth asked.

'Yes, I have been all the way round, and spoken with countless employees. Things are going well.'

'So it seems,' Grindley said. 'Well, with such a free-thinker as you up top, Karl, we can't do anything but go far.'

'Come on, come on, Grindley. This should be the normal thing.'

'Suppose so—Ah, here come the rest.' The other five Organisation board members had just entered—a stick-together group—and were now seating themselves on the plush red leather chairs placed around the table. This is a large room, with a wide window which gives an extensive view of the surroundings.

'Well, gentlemen,' I said, 'I suppose I need hardly point out that the Organisation has never been in a better position. In all respects. I'll come to that, indeed I will ...'

'The way we've skyrocketed——' said Walter Merrill.

'You know, some of you ought to come with me on my tour on some occasion. It would do you good to see the dedication of the employees, the earnest way they set about their work. They are really the ones who have put us into the position we are in.'

'Perhaps you're right,' said Joseph Singer. 'All we do is make decisions.'

'And that can be hellishly difficult,' put in Peter Brent, missing the sarcasm. 'I wouldn't say we've got it easy.'

Clearly our meetings would degenerate into gossip sessions if I did not ensure we got down to business. 'We had better get down to business,' I said. 'Now, before I come to the main point of this meeting, is there anything any of you want to bring up? No? All right then.' I opened my folio and withdrew from it a sheaf of papers which I proceeded to hold above my head. 'This, gentlemen,' I announced triumphantly, 'is the financial statement for the Organisation over the past financial year. I have had only a superficial glance over it, as it arrived on my desk only late yesterday, but I saw enough to make me very happy. We are not merely successful: bear witness to these figures ...'

Needless to say, the rest of the meeting was conducted in quite a pleasant atmosphere.

I went out to lunch with Grindley that day, at a fine restaurant, with fine food and wine. As I have said, making a profit is not the main consideration with us, therefore it

makes us doubly happy when we do make one. If possible, my good mood had been even further enhanced by this time.

'Well, we can hardly say we're not well off now,' Grindley said as we sat in the plush elegance of the conversation-filled restaurant. 'Our competitors will really know they're up against something.'

'Yes,' I said. 'But our competitors haven't really got much to offer. It's a good thing. I hardly see where we can lose out now. There is no visible weakness.'

'Yes. The wife is happy to know I'm going to keep bringing home a good salary. Hard to get another executive position these days.'

'Well, I don't know! If you have brains and you know what you are doing, you cannot help but find a position. We don't bring in men who are dunces.'

'Ah yes, of course not.'

'By the way, I'm going out to the Laighton Rest-Home this afternoon—the Bedford Fensom ceremony.' Fensom is quite a well-known politician, with some power behind him. As with most such people, we were contacted. 'I believe it will be quite a big affair.'

'I don't suppose Fensom exactly lived in poverty,' Grindley said. 'When did he pass? Last week?'

'Yes. They rushed him over straight away, so the preservers could get to work on him without delay. I don't like giving priority, but it's one of the things we have to do.'

'No, the rest of our customers wouldn't know the difference—and how many would be held up? Two? Three? You do have to do such things.'

'Actually, I'm rather looking forward to this, as I haven't been to a ceremony for quite some time, I went out quite a lot not long ago, but in recent weeks I've had so much to take care of that I haven't been able to do so. I enjoy a walk round the grounds. It gives me a sense of achievement.'

'I think we all feel the same way. We'd all like to get out there more often, but there's so much work involved, often,

with those same rest-homes. I'd come out with you today, but the work has been piling up at a horrifying rate. One afternoon away and I wouldn't be able to cope.'

'Yes, I find myself in the same situation really, but considering that Fensom is such an important person, I felt perhaps it was my duty to be present, besides all the other considerations.' I glanced at my watch. 'I think perhaps I should be off, Grindley. Being late would be the last thing I would want.'

We went out together and then went our separate ways, Grindley back to the office, myself to my car for the journey out to the rest-home. I set off along the main road, whistling as I went. This area I felt would be depressing to anyone: long rows of identical houses stretching with no end in sight along the dirty streets, and fat women walking with their shopping bags in hand. My sentiments here are the same as anyone else's, and no doubt on other occasions this would have depressed me horribly; but today, no, nothing could. 'If I can help someone along the way, my living will not be in vain ...'

I hit a stretch of open country, and in five minutes there it was: the Larssen Laignton Rest-Home, resplendent and shining (forgive me if I get carried away here, but it is a common thing with me) in the summer sunlight. I drove through the gates, nodding to Charley the gatekeeper as I moved past. There were the green fields, the flowerbeds, the smooth concrete motorways, the magnificent ceremony halls, and the vast buildings housing the many persons who had become our clients over many years. Forgive me again for using such well-worn adjectives in description of the home area, but they are all true. It is awe-inspiring, wonderfully conceived and executed, and an eternal monument to the ingenuity of many men. But I am wandering.

The time was 1:20, and I made my way towards the ceremony hall where a large crowd had gathered. I sat at the back, grateful that no one had recognised me, and took in my surroundings. The design of the particular hall is an inspired combination of the old and the new, with soaring windows, a high ceiling with a modified psychedelic pat-

tern painted over it and plain walls. Seats are arranged in what approaches a semi-circle—lessening the feeling of formality—towards the front of the hall: The receptacle here stood against the front wall, immediately behind the rostrum, propped on a kind of inverted tripod, showing only the head and shoulders. The face was tranquil, displaying no hint of worry or turmoil. The shoulders were covered with thin purple velvet. Fensom's personality seemed likeable; I had never met him, and had heard him speak only once or twice. This was our first confrontation, so to speak. Photographs of him at various stages in his life were hung at selected points round the hall—showing Fensom as a young man, tracing his rise in politics, speaking at dinners, at rallies, at home with his family, and so on up until quite recently. This is intended to add to the feeling of presence in the hall, to convey the impression that the person in question is here and now, not something distant and vague. This method has been proved successful.

Then the priest entered from a side door, carrying under his arm the book from which he would read. It was once felt that undertaking to have priests perform this task had nasty undertones; but as time went by this disappeared, and the priest came to accentuate the feeling of presence I have spoken of. Besides, what we mean by the word priest nowadays is somewhat different from what was understood by it in the past, in the specific period referred to by complainants. That period, thank God, has gone for ever.

The priest went and stood at the rostrum, before the receptacle. He opened the book, which was thick and, I knew, heavy. Some say this is unnecessary; but I feel it adds to the atmosphere.

He began. 'The preservation ceremony of Bedford Fensom.' Then he looked down at the book and began to read from it. 'This man's qualities can be summed up as follows: kind, thoughtful, considerate, courageous, sincere, self-sacrificing, loving, forward-looking—' This information we get from Fensom's wife, a similar procedure to which is carried out in each and every case. Relatives are never hesitant in this, and it comes without inhibition. And

the more the better, for it adds to the feeling of the continuing relationship we speak about. Those gathered always appreciate hearing a large amount of information. Here the priest had enough in his book to continue for another three-quarters of an hour. The gathering sat enraptured, caught by the hypnotic effect the proceedings always manage to produce. The voice went on, but it did not drone, it did not drag: '—made wise decisions, the wonderful effects of which are still felt today. No other man in political history is looked upon with such affection. Not only was he an extraordinary politician, but Bedford Fensom was also a greatly beloved father. He——'

That voice: perfectly modulated, hitting just the right tone. I often wish I could achieve such balance. In the hands of anyone else the subject matter could become extremely banal; but we choose men with care, and the effect is unflawed. I decided after a few more minutes that I would leave—after all, this was essentially a private ceremony, and while my presence would certainly not be resented, I knew my absence would not be noticed. I made my way out on the words 'this man is well worth preserving'; the priest had already spoken for thirty-five minutes, and the ceremony would be over in a matter of ten. So no loss.

I stood outside wondering what I would do next, when the obvious thing struck me: my mother and father were in the Laignton Rest-Home! I would go and visit them. Strange I should forget such a thing. I made my way across to the Norcroft Building—named after a well-known artist who was the first person installed there—went through the foyer with its many pictures of famous persons in the building and took the lift to the third floor, where my parents are together. If I had wanted I could have had them installed in something above the ordinary—but I am not like that, and I am sure they would not have liked the idea either. Their allotment is the same as everyone else's.

I got out of the lift, and looked for Corridor 3. The room I was in has one door in each wall: leading to Corridors 1, 2, 3, 4. I opened No. 3 door and walked down towards the cubicle where I could see my mother and father.

Long rows of these cubicles went further than the eye could see. The ceiling was made up of large sections of clear glass, giving an almost uninterrupted view of the sky above. I arrived at the spot, Cubicle 2371 (A) (1b). I opened the door with my key, went inside and closed the door behind me. The cubicle is an area of about seven square feet, ventilated through two unnoticeable apertures, covered from above with frosted glass. At the back are two blank screens; below them, two blue buttons. I pressed both, and in three seconds both the screens came to life: a receptacle became visible behind each, and gradually the operating mechanism levered them up level with the screen. And there they were: mother, father, as they had been over countless visits down through the years. Never-changing. I sat on one of the chairs provided and gazed. I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that here we have worked a miracle. A miracle that is a wonderful public service. Anyone who would doubt this should look at the faces of the persons in the receptacles. A continued relationship. So true.

I looked at them. They looked at me. This is what we have to offer, this is why we are so successful. Other firms who wish to know our secret should see this. Perhaps then they could begin to achieve similar results.

But here no further comment is necessary. I left the building and was considering going home, but then I thought it would be a good idea to pay a visit to Jack Sorrel, head man at the rest-home. I had not seen him for some time, and we used to get together quite regularly. And I could do with some of Jack's Scotch. I went to the small building which houses the administration staff here.

'It is certainly good to see you, Jack,' I said as I entered his office. 'I was present at Fensom's ceremony.'

'I see,' Jack said. Jack is a big, tough-looking man, with a hard face and glossy black hair, but in reality would hurt no one. 'It went off well, from what I gather. Wasn't present, you understand. Busy tying up details for future occasions. Scotch?'

'Certainly.'

He got up and opened a small cupboard by the window, withdrew a bottle and two glasses and poured, then handed me a glass. I went over to the window, through which a direct view of the grounds, dominated by one of the halls, can be had.

'A good view, Jack,' I said. 'Good to be able to see what you have dominion over.'

'Sure. Reckon it beats a city view. But tell me, are you swamped with work, too? It can't be too bad if you're able to come out here.'

I smiled. Then Jack said, 'Ah, I must check on this.' He turned to a medium-sized screen set into the wall by his side, and pressed the button beneath it. This gives a view of the room in which relatives are allowed to make contact with a person who has passed before he is installed in his receptacle. Fensom's wife and children were holding his hands, caressing him. This observation is necessary for occasionally a person gets out of hand—but only very rarely. Here the situation was satisfactory. If it were not, a man standing outside the room would be alerted via walkie-talkie and would intervene. Jack pressed the button and the picture faded.

'They seem to be okay. I don't like having to do this, but as you know it's necessary.' He lifted his glass and drained what was left in it. I did the same.

I glanced at my watch. 3:00. 'I must be off, Jack,' I said, getting up. 'I think perhaps I will take the rest of the day off. I've earned it.'

'You're the boss,' Jack said. True. Often I forget that.

I said good-day and went out to my car. Driving home I reflected that this had been one of the best days of my life so far. There had not been a smear; it had been perfect; and yet it was only three o'clock! So much had happened. And in this situation it could go on for ever. No doubt of it at all: *life is good*.

As I entered our driveway, my wife came running out to meet me. She asked me what sort of a day had I had? Wonderful: it's great to be alive, I replied. And meant it.

THREE ENIGMAS: III. ALL IN GOD'S MIND

by

BRIAN W. ALDISS

These stories form the third trio of Brian Aldiss's Enigmas to appear in New Writings in SF and are by his special request dedicated to the memory of Betty Grable, who died on 3rd July. As he says in an illuminating and eerily-nostalgic word: 'Somewhere in the ghostly barrack-rooms of our memory, a light has gone out.' By now Brian Aldiss has completed a number of these triplets, much to the pleasure of his many readers, and they are tending to a longer length. They are also seeing publication in other outlets of the sf field and from his latest letter I am happy to quote Brian Aldiss's very own words: 'But remember—you saw them first in NW in SF!'

ALL IN GOD'S MIND

*The Unbearableness of Other Lives
The Old Fleeing and Fleeting Images
Looking on the Sunny Side of an Eclipse*

VII THE UNBEARABLENESS OF OTHER LIVES

My wife said she would wait in the foyer of Immortality.

I was forced to leave with Bickersteth Sweet-Erscott, who was still talking. What he had to say about Resurrection was, I knew, of great consequence, but I could not concentrate on his interminable sentences. We went together on to the escalator, the steps of which were colour-coded in some eight hundred shades, most of which I had managed to memorise an hour before.

We were on azure fleece. The sign said: BLUE FANG.

Looking back as we rose, I saw that Liddice had already turned away and was affecting to examine some flutes in a rack; she let a finger wander vaguely over the instruments—I was still close enough to see each flute light in turn. If I called loudly, she might glance up, to bathe me again in the warmth of her green eyes.

Only one glance, Liddice, one glance more! How many aeons is it by universe-time that I have known thee, and yet still strain my heart for one more tender look!

'... and not only do we think we understand the philosophy of the Resurrection-transfer, but we think we understand the actual mechanism of the transfer—which proves, as with many other things, to be simple once it is discovered. Work has still to be done, yet it is already apparent that the prime mover of the transfer, so far as mind is concerned, is the cellular sodium pump, as possibly you are aware ...'

Already we had risen to the first stage. The well in

which the escalator moved was wide open, so that one could look down over the rails to the foyer. Liddice was clearly visible. I might even be able to leap to her side without doing myself injury. If only she would look up, we might still read each other's expressions. She still absorbed herself in the flute-rack. Her stance was characteristic of her—her weight mainly on one slender leg, the other leg slightly bent, with its toe just curled behind the heel of the supporting foot. A graceful posture, suggesting flight. In my dreams, she often appeared as a bird with speckled plumage. Especially during my first Resurrection—how she had called to me in the caves at Antioch!

To live is so precious: which is why it costs so much to be tied to life. The foyer fell below us, filled with its zebra-music. Still Bickersteth Sweet-Erscott talked on.

'By the grace of God, the pump was an integral part of the metabolism of all higher animals although it appears that, after Judgement, only Man was able to utilise a higher function for it. Which is why we alone are on this Plane and collaborating with Him on the project for a new Creation. With regard to the specificity of the cellular sodium pump ...'

Orange light from the second stage, to which our two heads now presented themselves as rising suns, cast a sickly glow over his face. Momentarily, I saw every human exchange as another sort of pump, with energy transferring from consciousness to consciousness, always with some heat-loss. Bickersteth Sweet-Erscott functioned essentially in reflexive fashion, unable to hear his own voice or sense that the response he awoke in others was other than the one he desired.

I contrived to stand on the escalator in such a way that I could pretend to listen to him as if wrapt in the speculations he aroused, whilst in fact looking down at my wife, who was already growing distant. Her figure was foreshortened, yet she was still distinct. If only she would look up, then I would be able to read the contours of her face, and see again how that suggestion of pussy-cat about the jaws married so affectingly with the faun about her eyes.

She continued not to look up, although it may have cost her an effort. By universe-time, she was perhaps just over a parsec below me. Of the millions of souls who walked by her in the foyer, or on the floors through which we were passing, I took no heed.

As the distance between that dear dwindling figure and me increased, however, the sheer weight of other humanity intruded itself. At every stage, other souls were stepping on to the escalator, which grew ever wider as it rose.

Inevitably, many of those about me had a lowly place in the Hierarchy. Although their conversation was banal, that very banality bore itself in on me, dividing my attention still further.

'I was talking to Voltaire, and he told me that he thought it perfectly absurd to wear a wig in the Afterlife; nevertheless, he continued to do so because he had a firmer belief in the Absurd than in the Deity ...'

'The institution of the adrenal gland as the seat of the circadian mechanism was ingenious in its time, but would scarcely be adequate in any more sophisticated metastructure such as He envisages ...'

'Yesterday, Lupino Lane and I walked through three hundred and fifty-two thousand, nine hundred and eighty-nine variants of Frankfurt am Main. Some of them are extremely beautiful, and we are going to investigate a few billion more when the chance arises.'

'The pterodactyls were disappointingly small.'

All this while, Bickersteth Sweet-Erscott gave up his hymn of information about the cellular sodium pump.

We passed by the third stage, then the fourth. I could see that Liddice was looking about her. The nervous movements of her head suggested some sort of apprehension. I was too far distant to read her facial expression, even had steepening perspective allowed it. In her dreams, she often found herself trapped in the Forelife.

On the next stage, we were joined by souls from some of the remoter universes. A group of younger ones stood by us. They were talking about love, a topic which contrasted with the drone of Sweet-Erscott's voice.

Two young ladies had met for the first time. 'Do you miss the fashions?' 'I came from an epoch where even the fashionable has gone out of fashion. But I do miss having appearances.' 'The fluidities are gorgeous, of course, but oh, for a real skirt!'

'He loved her, and had done so for at least forty-eight hours.' ...

And another soul was talking about drunkenness, with daylight flickering by and the sun like molasses in a forest of rusting derricks.

'The pump was such an important mechanism because it kept up a metal ion-concentration gradient across the cell membranes. We are fortunate on the project in being able to study it under nul-life conditions.'

The sixth stage, the seventh. Light hours separated us. How could I tell you that I fear for you, without wounding you still further? That your need for not-being-intruded-upon should itself not be intruded upon? That that very need in you slays the opposing need in me? That when you hold yourself apart, it is me you isolate?

Oh look up, my darling, while I may still see the dear blur of thy face! Dost thou not know how far away from thee I am being carried? Even Heaven grows dark when thou art not near!

Now the escalator was changing direction and speed. We also were elongating. Sweet-Erscott's physiognomy lengthened and sharpened like a shark's snout, and the scent of geraniums was about us. Although I still looked down, it was becoming almost impossible to discern Liddice at all, as the frightening flares of doppler built round her.

The stages continued on one side, their numbers flickering by. On the other side was a grand view of blue.

My glance was distracted for a moment. When I looked back, the lowest floor was no longer discernible. The straight lines of the pillars which supported us had taken on distinct curves. My love had been dissolved in the Uncertainty Effect.

Somewhere ahead was the greater glory. The moving

scene was thick with myriads of souls, continually growing as they travelled. They also were destined to collaborate in the redesigning of Creation; each had his assignment.

I turned to Sweet-Erscott and said, 'Inside the cells, we find that potassium ions predominate over the sodium ones. Outside the cells, in the extracellular fluid, the reverse situation obtains, and sodium ions predominate. The sodium pumps expend considerable energy to prevent over-all equable ion distribution and to keep the sodium ions pumped out. There has to be a way of making over-all equability a positive, and thus saving energy.'

He said, 'We'll draw up a list of Departments with which we should immediately consult in a random selection of, say, five hundred million galaxies. That should be enough to begin with.'

It was no longer possible to say how long he was, or even what he resembled, so greatly had the escalator accelerated. His pupils gleamed with far luminences.

My eyes, too, were already catching other images.

We were nearing the Throne.

Liddice was lost.

Glory won.

VIII THE OLD FLEEING AND FLEETING IMAGES

THERE was a saying in Heaven—'In the beginning was superabundance', and the truth of it was regularly borne in on me.

On one occasion when I was not working on the New Creation project, Liddice and I found ourselves on a level named Adastral fern Yellow Hammock 509G Star Peaches Goolagong VII Branch Ypsilon Korltiy 49UMO2948. Here were stored all the dreams that had ever been dreamed by the inhabitants of the planet of the particular galaxy referred to.

'Heavens, why ever should they want to keep all these weird old things?' Liddice asked. 'Surely a selection of some of the most beautiful ones would suffice?'

She was in her own form on this day, except that her

hair extended into infinity, floating in a spiral orbit, parsecs wide, above her lovely head.

'It's the old heavenly problem, which was recognised even in the Forelife without its full implications being understood; everything is indestructible. Consequently, when anything—even these old fleeing and fleeting images—has faded out in the universe, its nul-life positive nevertheless remains here.'

'I suppose if someone from Goolagong VII looked in here, they could find all their old dreams. I wouldn't want to go through mine again.'

'We might look them up some day for fun. They'll be here somewhere. I'd like to see your dreams—even your baby ones.'

'I'd be ashamed!'

An ordinary white horse was pulling a strange carriage. It reached a street-corner and went mad, rearing and fighting until it broke free of its equipage. People were standing on the corner in heavy lumpy garments, watching without excitement. A man jumped from the crowd and flung himself at the horse.

The horse was a strong white mare. She seemed to grow as the man leaped on her, throwing up her head and showing great yellow teeth.

The man had three pairs of arms, and a body and legs stocky enough to support these extra appendages. I could not see whether the other people were similarly equipped, for they had faded from the dream and there were only the man and animal in mortal combat, occasionally rolling against the carriage.

In a fury frightening to behold, the mare threw herself down and rolled on the man; but he was quick to scuttle round her great body and avoid real injury, his extra arms of course giving him extra purchase. When she next reared into the air, he clamped three arms about her neck in an attempt to throttle her. I saw madness in his glaring face.

She hurled herself against the carriage, dislodging the man, but he kicked her so violently on one of her shanks the very moment his feet touched ground, that he was

immediately able to grasp her again. Like a great crab clinging to her belly, he climbed steadily, despite her movements, punching with a spare fist all the time. The mare plunged and kicked out wildly with her hind legs, but an arm and then the man's apoplectic face emerged between the beast's heaving thighs, as if he were some awful progeny to which she was giving birth. He heaved himself on to her back, kicking savagely at her tender parts, never relenting.

Of a sudden, she acknowledged defeat, standing stock still, trembling all over in extremity, her head low, her tangled mane about her eyes. He however was not yet finished with her. Grasping her firmly with all hands, he began to lift and turn her over.

There was a discontinuity in the dream. The next thing I could make out was the carriage itself. I looked into its plushy over-stuffed interior as it moved off. The man was there, red in the face and breathing hard. Beside him sat the white mare, crumpled up on the seat, head bowed but eyes still as wild as ever.

'I never thought I'd spend nul-life watching other people's erotic dreams,' Liddice said, with a small laugh.

A member of the angelic staff who was passing caught the remark and paused in flight to say, kindly, 'That's just one of the privileges of Eternity, honey. Total experience of the universe can be yours if you require it.'

Liddice said, 'I'll never get acclimatised to this place. You see, my idea of Heaven was that there would be *less*, not so much more ... I mean, *frugality* always seemed to me far more of an ideal than prodigality. This place—well, of course I'm not criticising, but Eternity seems horribly like a sort of blown-up parody of a twentieth-century terrestrial supermarket ...'

She floundered to a stop, for the angelic one's face had clouded; but he merely said, 'You were all much nearer to Heaven than you thought.'

'I didn't mean to criticise. But to find that every last stray image in every last sleeping mind has been preserved ... It takes some getting used to. I mean, was this place

empty at the beginning of creation, before the universe was set in motion?’

‘Oh, no. I suggest you consult your brochure, honey. In the beginning was superabundance. In the Republic of Heaven—the Kingdom, as it used to be—nothing can be depleted, only added to. Where you come from, there’s just a pale negative impression of this place, with all the wrong entropy gradients.’

‘I know. But I can’t help feeling a little disappointed . . .’

I began to grow anxious and said to the angel, ‘I’m afraid we’ve taken up too much of your nul-time.’

He ignored me and answered Liddice. ‘A lot of you Caucasians say you’re disappointed here. Everyone else loves it, especially the Chinese. They admire the scale and the smooth functioning. *And* the prodigality. Still, if you want frugality, honey, try Chartreuse sky Sailor’s Sigh 99075 Star Humility Blind Descant V-through-XVIII Alpha Mergnory 310AWQ6155 level. And try to remember that we’re all in God’s mind.’

‘Bloody queer!’ I said, as the messenger flew off. ‘That’s the trouble with everything being indestructible—even personalities go on for ever and ever amen! I wonder what that guy did in the Forelife?’

‘Do you think when God designs the next Creation he will do something about destructibility?’

‘That sort of problem’s up to the archangels and philosophers. My department’s the cellular sodium pump, and Lord knows that’s complex enough. You see, you must maintain a metal ion-concentration gradient across the cell membranes——’

A small white bird fluttered down before me. I instinctively held out my hand, and it settled there. When it opened its beak, its throat looked like a rose.

‘Oh, it’s lovely!’ Liddice exclaimed. ‘It must be somebody’s dream!’

The white bird was laying eggs. It sang as it did so, with a sound like underwater bells. We were still walking along, fascinated. The whole universe had gone a soothing tone of blue about us. We walked on transparent cerulean.

I lifted the bird and there were eight little speckled eggs in my hand. They rolled out of my palm. Instead of falling, they began to orbit about a golden eagle that flew near. Green things broke from them, fans, ferns, moths, velvet animals and other marvels. The white bird plunged towards the golden eagle, still singing, and was immediately devoured.

'They really do have some *ancient* dreams here,' Liddice said.

We began to laugh, and comets burned among her floating hair.

It was impossible to stay miserable for long in Eternity.

IX LOOKING ON THE SUNNY SIDE OF AN ECLIPSE

WHEN I invited Liddice up to the Project Room, she was pleased and excited. I rejoiced; perhaps the aeons she had spent in Frugality had made her keener to be involved in the affairs of other people.

'You can join the project yourself, if you wish,' I told her as we rose to the correct level. Hosts of people were all about us. There was scarcely room to breathe—not that it mattered here, for in nul-life there is no breathing, just as there is no begetting; such things take place only in real-time, so called.

'I have nothing to offer the project.'

'That isn't so, Liddice. You're too modest. We all have something to offer. Ask anyone.'

'Pardon me,' said a voice near us. 'I'm Enney I, as it happens, and I overheard what you were saying. It is true that work on the project for the New Creation is voluntary, and that everybody has something individual which can be of use. It's in the charter.'

It was hard to see what Enney I really looked like, so fast were we travelling between levels. Longitudinally, he appeared very narrow and seemed to be made of old reptilian gun-turrets; latitudinally, he was long and finished in a fanfare of diamonds.

'Well, thank you, but I'll just have to see how I feel

when we get there,' Liddice said. 'I still haven't got used to the scales of things.'

Enney I looked offended. 'It took *me* some while to adapt to the idea of *skin*,' he said.

'She's been in Frugality,' I explained.

'How was it?'

'Oh, they have just masses of frugality there,' Liddice said. 'It was marvellous! You realise that ninety-eight per cent of Eternity is empty—and they store most of it in one big room? I began to feel spiritual for the first time since we arrived here.'

'You are evidently a very individual individual, ma'am. May I ask you which is your home galaxy?'

She told him and Enney said, 'Perhaps you'd care to join my section of the Project. We're working on the subject of personality, and how it might be improved in the next Creation.'

'It sounds more interesting than the cellular sodium pumps on which my husband is working. What do you actually do?'

'That might take too long to explain, but basically we are seeking to reconstitute certain of the basic emotions in order that a greater percentage of beings will enjoy life in the next universe, instead of hating it as they do in this one. I'll show you the work if you're interested.'

Quantal accretions of light warned us that we were nearing the Project Room. The music vibrating through our systems informed us that the Almighty was liable to show up on this occasion. It was a tremendous spectacle as we shed velocity and came down into the great Project Room itself.

If you have ever lain upon the grass in the Forelife, looked up at a blue sky, and played that game with your perceptions where you decide one moment that the sky is of infinite depth and the next that it is a flat ceiling a mile above your head, then you will appreciate the impossibility of describing the size and glory of the Project Room. Measurement does not enter into the case: it was at once larger than the universe and smaller than an atom—but

more actual than both, since the universe and all that therein is is a simulacrum.

Moving among the host assembled, Enney led us forward. I clutched Liddice's wrist. 'I'd better join my team. I'll see you later if you want to go along with this guy.'

'Do you mind if I go with him? Personality does sound my sort of thing. I don't want you to be lonely.'

'As long as you don't start worrying about your own personality again.'

'When I stop worrying about my personality, you start worrying about it. The point is, I do know I have something lacking. There must be some good psychiatrists or scientologists or something up here ...'

'Don't start that again, love.' I kissed her.

'Come with me, please!' So I went. There really was something to be said for Heaven; I could be with her for all Eternity, if she wanted me to.

Enney I and his friends, who numbered a few million, had a beautifully equipped lab. One realised immediately that money was no object. Gigantic tanks and flow charts sparkled on every side, while banks of monitor screens showed totally absorbing slices of everyday life from certain pre-selected planets.

'As yet, we're working on the basic emotions only,' Enney said, taking us over to a huge animated diagram, and putting a protective arm about my wife. 'That is, life-wish, fear, love, bravery, yergup, curiosity, cuzzun, pride and humility.'

'Cuzzun?' Liddice asked. 'Yergup?'

'Perhaps you aren't familiar with them. Not all species have the same basic emotions. To show you how we work, let's see a couple of examples.'

We followed him over to the nearest screens. Reading from a check-list, Enney punched co-ordinates and explained as he did so that we were watching a real situation taking place on a world he named. He told us how many such archetypal situations were taking place all over the universe at any given time.

The screen threw a total-D projection and we were im-

mediately in steaming jungle—literally steaming, for the strange trees, which towered no higher than our waists, had little fluttering valves all the way up their trunks which exuded water vapour. The vapour was being swallowed by numerous winged mouths, which then darted down to ground level and dived into a green pool. In the pool, a maiden swam, with flowing locks and languorous strokes.

I knew she was female because she was well equipped to suckle any young she might bear—twice as well equipped as any terrestrial girl. She had a sweet little seal face and long arms with eyes at the end of them. She floated unharmed among snapping mouths.

Someone was coming through the jungle. Stooping, I saw it was a young man with a weapon of some kind slung round his chest. He walked on what I would have thought were his hands, balancing easily with what I would have thought was a tail, which whirled above what I would have thought were the soles of his feet, except that they supported a bunch of tendrils.

He paused at the pool's edge, hiding behind a bush while his tendrils pointed quaveringly at the girl in the pool. Some winged mouths dived towards him, but the tail drove them away. The girl looked in his direction, heaving herself from the water until we could see that she was in fact three times as well equipped to suckle young as any terrestrial girl. He came from behind the bush and laid down his bow.

In a moment, she moved nearer the bank where he stood. He gave an inarticulate cry. She brushed away the snapping mouths and went to him, climbing out of the water. For a long while, they stood gazing at each other. He stretched out a hand. He touched her. Her eyes curled up at the end of their stalks. He embraced her. They lay down among the bushes.

'Well, that's one example,' Enney said, briskly. 'Here's another.'

We were standing in what might have been a desert region of Earth, were it not that the ground underfoot consisted of slowly rotating stones the size and colour of ripe

apples. A group of tribesmen were nearby, squatting in strange square objects which I at first took to be kinds of vehicles with no wheels. Men and women, all were pure white, with pure white hair, and their heads swivelled constantly. It took a moment to realise that they were covered with sleek white fur. All held long sticks or rods or spears, which rattled together. They were plainly agitated, and looked upwards frequently, as well as round about. Small animals of an equal whiteness scuttled among their strange vehicles. All—humans, animals and vehicles—emitted strange squeaks.

Glancing up, I saw a bite had been taken out of the blue sun that shone above their heads. Here was the cause of their anxiety. The bite sank more deeply into the sun, until half of it was gone. The shrill squeals of the assembled hordes grew louder. More animals arrived, some bigger than the people. Some began to sink into the ground, still squeaking.

Now only a thin slice of the sun remained, and the noise was painful to hear. Then the sun was entirely blotted from the sky. A great swift shadow rushed across the desert and covered the group before us. It covered us too, and its chill was like a blow for which we were unprepared.

Utter silence fell—silence and dusk!

Then, with one accord, all took flight. The vehicles sprouted legs with great pads for feet, lifting their bodies into the air, and were away, bearing the humans with them. The other animals followed close, for ever narrowly missing being trampled on. All headed for the horizon in absolute panic.

Switching off the screen, Enney said, 'Two examples of conflicting emotion governing behaviour.'

'What exciting work you do!' Liddice exclaimed. 'What had happened to the sun where those poor people lived? Was it just an eclipse?'

'It was,' said Enney, putting an arm about her again. 'But the term "eclipse" means nothing to those tribesmen. They were governed by fear. Fear of the strange, the exotic, though no danger was actually involved. On the other hand,

the other scene showed us the opposite, the attraction of the strange, the exotic, no matter the dangers involved.'

'You're very impersonal about it,' I said. 'What will happen to the people involved in the two scenes, or don't you care?'

'I both know and care. The boy and girl will generate a new hybrid species which will eventually exterminate both of their own kinds. And the tribesmen will gallop over a cliff in their fear and also be exterminated. That's where we come in on the project. We want a mixture of emotions, so that the strange is not too tempting, while even ignorant peoples can look on the bright side of an eclipse. Civilised peoples understand these things; but species-traumas set in early, in uncivilised times, and those we must guard against in the New Creation.'

'Basically, you want a more stable type of being, who will nevertheless be inquiring enough to be capable of development?' Liddice said.

'Well, that is roughly it. Will you join our team?'

She smiled. 'Thanks for the offer, Enney, but no thanks.'

Later she said to me. 'You know why I couldn't go along with them? They're looking for someone with a personality like yours, and I couldn't let them take you apart.'

I hugged her and told her not to tease me.

'Everything will work out eventually,' I said. 'That's what Heaven's all about.'

Meanwhile, I had a surprise for her. I took her along to the Garden level, where all the flowers that Earth had ever seen were still blooming in their prime, and a universe of roses shed never-ending petals on the superabundant lawns of paradise.

Running among the banks of bud and blossom, Liddice forgot frugality for a while.

A STRANGE AND TERRIBLE SEA

by

DONALD MALCOLM

Dr. Edward Maxwell, Director of D.R.E.A.M., has been busily populating the world since the birth of his first child, an event chronicled in 'Potential' appearing in the fifth volume of New Writings in SF, yet his obsession with the inner workings of the dreaming mind persists. Young Sammy read a lot of sf and possessed a highly developed imagination, so it was natural that he should experience weird and wonderful dreams, wasn't it?

A STRANGE AND TERRIBLE SEA

I

THE boy awoke from the dream and cried out. In the other room, his mother heard the sound and came through, trying to rub the sleep from her eyes. Her husband made a slurred remark about that brat disturbing him again, then turned over and resumed snoring. She sighed. John had been unemployed for eight months and had long since abandoned hope of finding a job, in the shipyards, or anywhere else. Invariably he stayed in bed until midday.

She switched on the dim bedside lamp. Sammy was wide awake and watching her calmly. She smiled at him and glanced over at her three daughters, still asleep in the big bed given to them by the local welfare people. Sammy had his own bed. Apart from being the only boy in the family, he was partially paralysed, the result of a blow struck in a drunken rage by his father four years previously, when he was six. That had cost John nine months in the infamous Barlinnie prison, and frequent bouts of maudlin remorse ever since. He had come to hate the boy, just for being there as a reminder of his baser nature. Now that he was unemployed, it was worse. He hadn't the money to drink as much as he would like and his wife made certain that he didn't get his hands on the State Family Allowances.

She sat down beside Sammy and took his hand.

'Was it painful this time?'

'Yes. That's what wakened me. And I had the dream again.' Leaning across, she wiped sweat from his brow and pushed the fair hair away from his face.

'The same one?'

He nodded. 'I see, mainly, a face. The details are hazy, like fuzzy television. It's there, but I can't quite believe in it.'

He wasn't looking at her, so he didn't see her expression. She did not believe it, either, and had tried to reassure him that it was a nightmare, nothing more. But he wasn't fully convinced.

'The face is round and slightly pointed towards the chin, what there is of it. The eyes are huge, with large pupils. I've seen photographs of animals with eyes like them. There is no nose and only a tiny slit where the mouth should be. And the head is hairless.'

Mrs. Kinloch shivered, and not only with the night chill. She knew the details of that face, almost as well as Sammy did.

'It's strange,' Sammy said, 'even though the slit never seems to move, I feel that the ... creature is trying to say something to me.'

She stood up. 'I'll get you a hot drink to help you get back to sleep.'

What was going to help her to sleep again for what was left of the night? She knew that she would lie awake, willing herself not to stir too much, in case she incurred John's wrath.

'I saw something else.'

She stopped and waited for him to continue.

'It was some sort of landscape, I suppose. The country was flat, no trees or shrubs, and colourless, drab. The sky had a narrow band across it, made up of many points of light, like Saturn's ring system. And there was a small white star balanced on the horizon, like a diamond.'

'Did you really dream all this, Sammy?' His mother was not succeeding in her attempt to put a note of severity in her voice. 'Are you sure your imagination isn't providing the details? You have been reading a lot of astronomy and space travel books, as well as those science fiction magazines. One of the covers shows a face much like the one you say you keep dreaming about.'

'It isn't *like* that, Mum. The face is there, in the dream. And now there's the rest of it.'

'I'll get that drink.'

Privately, she resolved to take him back to the doctor, who seemed to be keenly interested in Sammy's fantasies.

2

It was the third visit in a week. Small boy; big man. Small, white boy; big, black man. Patient; doctor.

'It's Sammy's head, again,' Mrs. Kinloch said, defensively, edging the child forward. She had most people's basic reluctance to waste a doctor's time. Sammy was so obviously scrubbed that it made Dr. N'Dola ache just to look at him. Martin N'Dola knew that all the soap and water had not been expended particularly for his benefit. If ever germs went on strike, it would be at Mrs. Kinloch's home.

The end of evening surgery was near and, being human, he was anxious to finish up and get away. (Not that any patient, if genuine, was ever hurried out the door.) He had to consider that Mrs. Kinloch, with a family of four and an unemployed husband, wasn't coming to see him three times in one week just because she found his face fascinating. Although she might very well—— he smiled inwardly. In his practice, in one of Glasgow's poorer—correction: 'materially deprived', the cynicism was someone else's—districts, he'd heard it described, in loud whispers, as 'black as the inside o' a pig's lug' and 'black as ma Grannie's lum'. There was a piggery in the area, as any functioning nose could detect; and, for many houses, central heating was confined to the glossy brochures in the local electricity showroom.

He could, and did, laugh at such descriptions. He had never inspected either of the places mentioned; but he suspected that the comments were true, as was much that was observed by the 'common people', perhaps the last repository of things real. The remarks were always by adults, although not made unkindly. Children didn't see him as coloured. He was The Doctor (capital letters very important), purveyor of appropriately black striped, sticky sweets, while tending their drastic wounds. He understood that everything was dramatic to a child.

Sammy and he were tuned into the same wave length.

'Tell me about it, Sammy. Every detail. That's right, Mrs. Kinloch, just you sit there.'

She had taken a chair by the wall. He'd reproved her on the second visit for talking too much and confusing her son. (But Sammy, he'd noticed, was not easily confused.) Most children could tell a straightforward story, without all the frills and meanderings of adults. He sat, not speaking, his hands clasped quietly, his eyes twinkling like agates. Mrs. Kinloch started to fidget and he glanced at her briefly.

'It was mostly like the last time, Doctor,' Sammy began, with all the seriousness of a ten-year-old, and went on to describe the landscape. N'Dola could sense Mrs. Kinloch's disbelief, and he ignored it. Sammy's story was different from the one he'd told on the previous occasions.

'Did you have any idea where it might be, Sammy?'

Mrs. Kinloch was having trouble in keeping silent.

He believed Sammy's story, improbable as it must seem to a Western mind. He came from a land with a long, dark tradition of witchcraft, second sight, the evil eye, death by suggestion. That, perhaps, was why he was such a sympathetic doctor. His finger was on the primeval pulse of life, which knew nothing of colour, creed or race. Ghana or Glasgow: people were still a collection of fears and chemicals.

'Was the headache worse this time?'

Sammy considered that. 'Not worse: more *intense*.'

N'Dola contained his smile at the neat semantic distinction. He had long since learned to prevent his features from betraying the thoughts behind them. His dark skin was an advantage, there.

'Mrs. Kinloch: will you consider letting Sammy go into a clinic for observation? It's in St. Vincent Street, so it's not too far away. I have a friend there—a specialist—who would very much like to see him.'

He didn't tell her that he had the Dream Research Establishment, Glasgow Unit, in mind.

She had come forward to the desk. 'Are you saying that

Sammy is——' She broke off, and made vague motions with her hands. Mrs. Kinloch had everyone's dread of insanity.

'Quite the contrary, Mrs. Kinloch—please sit down—I've seldom met a more normal boy, with well-developed, scientifically-orientated curiosity and the ability to observe and report accurately what he sees.'

'Those were almost the exact words his teacher used the last time I spoke to her, and she didn't think he was merely precocious. Is he in any sort of danger?'

'I don't know. But I want to find out more about the dream.' He added as an afterthought, 'The headaches could be psychosomatic. Will you agree?'

He could see worry and indecision on her face and he reassured her. 'He will be safe, probably more so than he would be at home, *should* anything happen. And I'll be with him as much as possible.'

She hesitated.

'It would give you a rest.' He knew what the situation was like at home. With Sammy at the clinic, tension would be lessened.

'Very well—if John agrees.'

N'Dola relaxed. John would agree. In his present frame of mind, he'd be only too pleased to get rid of the boy, even for a week. If John could get a job, it would open the way to solving many problems, Sammy's paralysis being the most important. The specialists had told N'Dola that the blow struck by John Kinloch had not, in itself, been serious. What had been serious was the effect on the boy's nervous system. He'd never seen his father drunk; that, and the blow, had caused the paralysis.

'I'll collect him in the morning, at, say, eleven?'

Sammy smiled.

3

Martin N'Dola was at Glasgow (Abbotsinch) Airport early the next morning to meet his friend, Doctor Edward Maxwell, who would be in Scotland for a week, visiting the D.R.E. units in Edinburgh and Glasgow in a supervisory

capacity while the Scottish Director was on holiday. He spotted the tall, broad figure, all square blue chin and hirsute hands, striding along the corridor, trailing behind him like the remnants of a shattered cometary tail his wife Jill and the children, James and Jillian. The four-year-old boy saw him and rushed upon him with all the energy of a steam locomotive, shouting, 'Uncle Martin! Uncle Martin!'

That raised just about every eyebrow within earshot.

N'Dola swept him up and went to meet Maxwell. They shook hands. 'Welcome to civilisation, Edward.'

'You're joking, Martin. You've got motorways here, too.'

N'Dola greeted Jill and her demure three-year-old daughter. Both of them gave him a kiss.

'When does your plane leave for Arran, Jill?' Martin asked, as they went downstairs to collect Edward's case.

'In twenty minutes, or so. I'm glad the London plane was on time. I don't like rushing.'

'Ladies *never* rush, Mummy,' Jillian said.

Shortly after nine-thirty, Edward and Martin watched the little Loganair plane dwindling into the clear summer sky.

'Take me through Paisley, Martin, please. I've heard so much about the Abbey and I've never had a chance to see it.'

Martin muttered something and revved up the engine.

'Stop those heathen incantations, Martin!'

N'Dola smiled and shot the car out of the airport.

'Now I know what the incantations were for!'

Within minutes they were passing the Chrysler car plant, brooding on either side of the road, and heading for Paisley. Martin pointed out the John Neilson High School on the left and Coats thread works on the right and thundered the car along the Broomlands like a runaway chariot.

'Don't you ever get booked?' Maxwell wanted to know, holding on grimly.

They paused to let Maxwell admire the superb Coats Memorial Church, then drove at what Maxwell considered a sedate pace down the High Street, through the Cross and parked outside Cochrane's store.

Maxwell grated: 'Who the hell built those concrete ramparts around that magnificent Abbey?'

'Shush,' said Martin, 'some official might hear you denigrating the administrative buildings—which, I must admit, have become decidedly grubby in only six years. Let's go and have a cup of coffee.'

'That must be the ultimate example of desperate architecture,' Maxwell said, contemptuously, following him into the store.

Over coffee, Maxwell gazed out at the twelfth-century Abbey and said, 'Tell me more about Sammy.'

'He has had a recurring dream about a weird face and an equally weird landscape—I described it to you on the telephone last night—and, knowing you were coming up here, anyway, I thought that you'd be interested in observing him during your visit.'

'Thanks, Martin. I'm very interested. We've come a long way since the initial research into dreaming was carried out at the University of Chicago in 1953. But even after twenty-two years, with twenty-five major establishments and numerous units, much of what happens during dreaming is still unknown to us. We know that the brain utilises dreaming time to repair itself. Also, we think it very likely that, during sleep, the mind is, somehow, released from its physical prison and can, at the dream periods, range through space and time. We're doing all right with space travel—at least, the Americans and Russians are—but dreaming might be the only kind of time travel we'll ever know. Tell me about Sammy as a person, Martin. Obviously, you know him well.'

Martin related what he knew about Sammy and his environment. 'He's a very sensible, level-headed boy. His mother seems to think that his imagination is being overstimulated and influenced by his taste in reading: astronomy, astronautics, general scientific stuff, science fiction. What do you think about his dream, Edward?'

Part of Maxwell's attention had been wandering down the centuries, mesmerised by contemplation of the tranquil beauty of the Abbey.

'Real or imaginary, you mean? At this stage, it's impossible to say. We probably know less about dreams than we do about the deeps of the oceans, or the Great Red Spot. And yet a full understanding of their true function could be the key to almost anything.'

'I believe in his dream, Edward, and it frightens me.'

'We all have our share of primeval fears. The African races don't have exclusive rights.' He stood up. 'Come on. I want to go into the Abbey for a few minutes.'

'You really have got to be joking. They don't just open up the churches any old time up here.'

Maxwell snorted. 'There's one consolation: it will still be there when those monstrosities have crumbled away.'

4

Sammy, for all that he was widely-read, was still only a young boy and everything that had happened, and was happening, to him, had taxed his understanding. After lunch a friendly psychologist drew up his personality pattern. He explained that the data collected from dreams were matched against the pattern. In turn, the findings were studied by a psycho-analyst, who tried to discover what motivated the subjects, what gave them the stimulus for their dreams.

The psychologist said: 'Everyone dreams, Sammy, several times in a night, but only at one particular stage of sleep. The times of dreaming are matched against a master graph to discover more information on the mystery of dreaming and why people dream.' He went on to tell Sammy that when a person drifts into sleep, his dreams are fragmentary, transitory and disconnected, as if takes of a moving film were blocked off at random.

The plunge into the deepest sleep is sudden, like stepping over a precipice. This period lasts about thirty minutes. The sleeper then approaches the lightest phase of sleep, reaching it just over an hour after falling asleep. On the average, the sleeper remains in this stage for nine minutes and has his first organised dream during this time.

A sleep not quite as deep as the first thirty-minute period again claims the person. Dream passages of nineteen, twenty-four and twenty-eight minutes occur at intervals until the final dream which lasts until awakening.

Mrs. Kinloch and Sammy went into the city for the remainder of the afternoon and returned at five o'clock. Martin N'Dola spoke to her before he took her along to introduce them to Maxwell, who, on his arrival that morning, had immediately gone into conference with the Scottish Director. Sammy wandered off into another room.

'I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to talk to you this morning on the way in here.' He had had another passenger in his car. 'Your husband—did he cause any trouble?'

She gave him an old-fashioned look. 'He was pleased to be rid of Sammy. You know the background.'

'We could do something about that, if John would let us.'

Mrs. Kinloch went off at a tangent. 'It's funny how people can change. John used to be so tender, kind and thoughtful. Now——'

'He feels guilty about Sammy's paralysis. Every time he looks at his son, the emotion is renewed. And not having a job does things to a man, messy things, deep, where it's hard to reach.'

He passed the evening paper across to her. 'That American company at Clydebank is expanding. That means more jobs. They'll want good men, so I suggest John goes along to the yard tomorrow. Did he have a reliable record?'

She scanned the paper. 'He was never late, never absent—a throwback to his school-days, I suppose.'

'Then he has a strong possibility of getting a job. Meanwhile, let's go and meet Dr. Maxwell.'

They picked up Sammy on the way. He'd been quizzing one of the technicians.

Edward Maxwell stood up as they entered and Martin made the introductions.

'Doctor N'Dola has told me all about Sammy, Mrs. Kinloch, and I want to assure you that he'll be perfectly safe here for the week.'

He detected lingering doubts.

'Doctor N'Dola is going to be here every night, Mrs. Kinloch.'

N'Dola confirmed that, adding, 'I want you to make the best of this week, get some rest and relaxation.'

'I'll be fine, Mum,' Sammy said. He had taken an instant liking to Maxwell, who returned the feeling.

'You can come and see Sammy at any time during the week,' Maxwell threw in, by way of final persuasion. He would have suggested that she stay with the boy for the first night, but Martin told him about the home circumstances. Besides, he suspected that Sammy was anxious to be on his own, to spread his wings, and that would be no bad thing. It could also help to unlock the barrier in his mind and thus release the paralysis.

Her fears allayed, Martin took her home. For once, John wasn't in a truculent mood and Martin advised him to go to the former John Brown yard in the morning and try to get a job.

'I've no surgery tomorrow morning. If you like, I'll drive you to the yard.'

'Why are you doing this for me?' John demanded, a mixture of suspicion and respect in his words.

'I want to help you and your family. Shall we say eight forty-five?'

John nodded, wishing to be grateful, but trying to avoid what he construed as being humble. He had always been a proud man and as fiercely independent as his position in life would permit him to be. Unemployment had shattered him, turned him into a cruel and selfish man, which was not in his nature. The prospect of working again both frightened and heartened him. Maybe then he could atone...

Maxwell waited until Martin returned, then they took Sammy to the room that would be his home for the next week. Things certainly had changed since the Dream Research Establishment had opened for business in London in late 1959. (Some wag had added the letters A.M. to the

name, as most of the work was done in the wee small hours and the tag had stuck as DREAM.) Gone were the clinical bays in which the subjects lay like a product of Frankenstein and Heath Robinson.

In the past, the subject had electrodes pasted to the scalp, the bony ridges of the eye sockets, the chest and the back. In 1973, the Chicago researchers had developed a lightweight skull-cap, which utilised only one wire. This led to a small computer in the control room, which combined the functions of cardiometer and electroencephalograph, for converting heart beats and brain rhythms into inked traces on calibrated rolls, situated under the individual television monitor screens.

The night nurse came in to report. 'Nurse Hunter, Dr. Maxwell.'

He smiled at Martin. 'Is this a take-over? Where are you from, Nurse?'

'Hamilton, Bermuda.'

'I've been there. I was researching material for a book on Watson and McCluskie, two Scottish blockade runners during the American Civil War.'

'I've read it,' she said, noting his raised eyebrows. 'I studied history before I decided to take up nursing. It was very good.'

Maxwell thanked her and took the report. There were six subjects in, including the boy. 'Everyone's ready, except Sammy.'

'If you attend to him, I'll make a quick round of the others. Do you want to come, Martin?'

'I'll stay with Sammy, Edward.'

When Maxwell returned, Sammy was prepared for the night. They left him, happily eating supper and watching television, an unaccustomed and luxurious combination.

'If you need me,' Nurse Hunter reminded him, 'press that little button at the side of the bed.'

Once they were settled in the control room, Edward said: 'You've never sat through a session, have you, Martin?'

N'Dola shook his head. 'I am familiar with the procedure, though. I'm sure I'll find it fascinating.'

'You will.' As he watched Sammy on the screen, Maxwell recalled some of his past experiences. Already the boy was drowsy and he would be the first to fall asleep. The other subjects were adults and they were presently engaged in various activities.

Martin seemed to read his thoughts. 'Sammy might not fall asleep as quickly as you think, Edward. From what his mother has told me, he doesn't sleep till around ten. She maintains that the books keep him awake.'

'He certainly has a scientific taste in reading. Still, we'll see who is right. He's had an exciting day, remember, which will tend to tire him. Care to take a bet?'

'You are trying to lead me astray. Anyway, I think you've won it before it can be placed. Look.'

Sammy had gradually slid down the bed and was lying awkwardly. Maxwell started to buzz for the nurse; but she was in the room before his finger found the button. She made Sammy comfortable, and switched off the television as she went out.

'We shouldn't have too long to wait,' Maxwell said. 'He'll go into a very deep sleep almost at once, more so because he's had a very full day.'

They passed the next hour in reminiscences. Sammy hadn't been particularly restless, although he did his share of tossing and turning. One of the other subjects, a spry sixty-seven-year-old, put away the model of the *Beagle* he was making out of wood, and went to sleep.

Sammy's general movements and twitchings had ceased; but the slow rolling of his eyes continued under the closed lids. A study of eye movements was often a reliable guide to the type of dream the subject was experiencing. They indicated whether the subject was having an active dream or a passive one. Sammy was now motionless and there was hardly any ocular activity.

'He's dreaming,' Maxwell whispered, although no one outside the control room could possibly hear him. Years of exposure to strangers' dreams had not blunted Maxwell's

attitude. Always, he was thrilled in anticipation by what might be revealed. Medical science had benefited in many ways from the world-wide research into the mysteries of dreaming.

Two more subjects went to sleep. Soon he would be kept fully occupied. He enjoyed being back in harness. Much of his time had been taken up recently by administration. With an average of five dreams per subject, he would have thirty-five dreams to monitor. That should sweat a pound or two off him.

The lack of eye movements puzzled him. Even the most passive dream involved some eye activity. He discussed it with Martin while they waited for Sammy's dream to finish in a few minutes. This, the lightest phase of sleep, would then give way to another period of sleep not quite as deep as the initial one.

Sammy started to twitch again and his eyes resumed their slow rolling. Maxwell activated a bell; its quiet pitch was keyed to Sammy's alpha rhythms and the boy awakened without being frightened or flustered. Maxwell switched on the tape-recorder. On most occasions he didn't listen into dreams as they were being dictated; but this time he was anxious to hear what Sammy had to say.

'A face ... round ... small, pointed chin ... huge eyes, large pupils ... no nose ... mouth slit. Never moves ... skin pale, smooth. Drab, grey landscape ... flat ... no trees, shrubs. Something in my mind——'

Both men recognised that here was something new; but what?

'Gone again ... gentle, gentle ... band of light ... small white star ...'

Maxwell sat staring at the screen as Nurse Hunter checked to see that Sammy was all right. He was asleep again.

Maxwell played the tape. They were silent for a minute.

'"Something in my mind",' Maxwell repeated at last. 'What does that mean?'

N'Dola was disturbed. 'What does it *all* mean? Surely it's not natural for anyone to have a recurring dream, especially

one that seems, in some sinister way, to be evolving? It frightens me, I can tell you.'

'Recurring dreams do happen—a kind of subconscious *deja vu*, I suppose—but never quite as vividly as this one. We'll just have to wait and see what happens.'

'Shouldn't we stop this——'

'Martin, he was dreaming before he came to the unit. Whatever we do, I doubt if we can prevent anything that might happen. We can't stop him from dreaming. And we can't stop whatever might enter his mind via his dreams. Anyway, he's in the best place and in capable hands, should anything occur when he's receptive. I'm not saying it will. Sammy might simply have an intense imagination; but there's no sense in taking chances.'

Reluctantly, N'Dola agreed. After a pause, he pursued the conversation. 'Supposing something is entering his mind, do you think the events might reach a climax soon?'

Maxwell went through the drill for another subject.

'At this stage, we don't even know whether or not the contact—assuming there is one—is deliberate. Sammy might simply be a natural receiver, picking up random images——'

'But you don't believe that, do you, Edward.'

Maxwell looked at his companion, accepting the statement. 'No. I think that there is a deliberate effort to reach a mind—any mind—by an intelligent being somewhere ... sometime. Let's take that as fact. What really worries me is the purpose of the contact. Is it for good or evil?'

Nurse Hunter came in with tea.

Sammy's next dream was ordinary, and routine became the order of the night. His other dreams were commonplace, with no hint of contact with the strange intelligence.

5

The following day, Edward went to visit the Edinburgh Unit and he took Sammy with him. The boy had never been to Scotland's capital city and he revelled in the sights

and sounds of a great metropolis at work. Mrs. Kinloch came to see him in the evening and that helped to relax the excitement and tensions of the day. Her husband, John, had gone to the yard that morning. Particulars had been noted and he had been asked to call again on Friday morning. That, she said, had put him in a hopeful frame of mind.

Sammy's first two dreams of Tuesday night yielded nothing of interest. Maxwell and N'Dola listened to each one as it was dictated. They were both at a low ebb when Sammy began his third dream. Again, they noted the almost total lack of eye movement. Their pulses quickened when Sammy related the dream.

'The face is there. Something in my mind again. Firm but pleasant. Now it is . . . moving away from me, so I can see more of the landscape. Nothing seems to be happening. Wait! The face has come into view again and I can see the body. It's—shaped something like a flattened egg, with the head on the sharper end. It is inclined very far forward, almost parallel to the ground. The legs are short and thick and the feet are large and spread out.'

Maxwell discovered that he was forgetting to breathe and let in a gulp of air. N'Dola's features glistened with sweat and a drop rolled down the side of his nose.

'The being has very long arms and very thin long fingers. The scene is changing. I can see others like it, by a cluster of small rocks. I am moving towards them. The beings seem to be working by the rocks. The view is altering again. It's a close-up of a head, seen from the left side. It has no ears. The eyes are looking down at something. The body is sloped forward and the head is quite near the ground.

'Something is coming out of the facial slit, a thin tube. It is pushing into the ground between the hands. They have wide saucer-shaped palms. The tube has suddenly withdrawn into the slit. A white tendril is emerging from the hole made by the tube. It's whipping about. Another one is appearing beside it. The being has backed away slightly. A fat, round object, about the size of a tennis ball,

is breaking the surface and the being grabs it and clamps the ball at the base of its skull. The tube comes out again. The image fades there.'

Both men were in the grip of fear of the unknown and, for a minute, were unable to talk.

Then Maxwell said, shakily: 'That was no idle dream. It has purpose, direction, intention. I'm convinced those beings exist; but where, when? And why are those beings trying to make contact with another intelligence? Scientific curiosity, or——'

N'Dola was studying the tell-tales. 'Pulse and respiration are normal. The dream doesn't seem to be affecting Sammy, so far.'

Maxwell was pensive. 'Sammy says that the presence is gentle. We'll just have to wait it out, Martin.'

About ten minutes after Sammy went back to sleep, Maxwell said softly: 'Look at the boy. He seems to be dreaming again.'

'How can he be?'

'I don't know. But his attitude suggests that he is.'

He glanced at the tell-tales; all were still normal.

'Maybe the contact has been made,' Martin said.

'Two-way, you mean?'

Martin nodded.

Sammy completed his dream and they awakened him, fearing that, in some way, they might injure his mind. But there was nothing apparently wrong with Sammy.

'I am in a room, dimly lit by a pale yellow glow that seems to come from the walls and the ceiling. The place looks like a laboratory. I am looking at the left wall, just inside the doorway. There's a large screen on it, showing a view of the surface. Now I can see, in the room, low benches, strange apparatus. A being is working at something. He crosses to a table. There's another being on it. The eyes are shut. *My contact, of course!* The gentle presence in my mind.

'Many wires are attached to the being's head and they lead into an instrument panel. The tube from its mouth slit is—plugged into the tennis ball on its neck. The

other being adjusts one of the instruments, then returns to the bench. It's doing something with one of the tennis balls submerged in a container of clear liquid.'

Sammy was silent for a few seconds, then he continued, 'I'm in another room, now. It's an *observatory*! There's a really big telescope, formed out of a series of mirrors, with two beings working with it. And there's a screen showing a spectrum! And two more showing what are probably some kind of radio astronomy telescopes, on the surface.'

Suddenly Sammy put both hands to his head. His words were obviously no longer within the context of the dream.

'I can feel a gentle but insistent pressure in my mind——' He fell asleep and immediately began to dream again.

'Whatever is in his mind is determined to maintain the contact,' Maxwell said. 'Let's play back that last tape.'

They listened. When it came to the part about the being with the wires, Maxwell commented. 'That sounds as if they are conducting a dream experiment of sorts.'

'Dreams allied to telepathy,' Martin amended.

'Something like that. And where is it coming from? They sound like the remnants of a dying race. Perhaps Sammy is seeing into the past, to a long-lost civilisation on Mars.'

Martin considered that as Maxwell keyed in a subject who had finished dreaming. 'The robot explorers have found nothing on Mars to suggest that there was ever an intelligent race there.'

'Mars is a big place and exploration has only just begun. And if the race has been dead for many thousands of years, then artifacts and other evidence would be correspondingly more difficult to find. Look at the troubles archaeologists have on Earth with civilisations a mere five or six thousand years old. When men get to Mars next year, then things might be discovered.'

Sammy was still dreaming.

His eyes on the boy, Martin shook his head. 'I'm not convinced that Sammy's in communication with the past. It would have to be a very peculiar freak of nature to permit that. What would be the purpose of getting in touch with

the future? Surely that could be nothing more than mere scientific curiosity——'

'We both know that pure knowledge is in itself a worthwhile attainment, although applied knowledge is what we exist by,' Maxwell interrupted. 'This contact is a freak, just as many scientific discoveries are freaks. Even if this one never progresses beyond what it is now, then we will have learned a little bit more about dreams and dreaming.'

He ploughed on as Martin tried to come back. 'Returning to the question of location: if it isn't Mars, then where are the beings?'

'Possibly only Sammy knows that,' Martin replied, as Nurse Hunter brought them fresh tea. 'But we have a clue—of sorts. Sammy mentioned a screen showing a spectrum. That's the fingerprint of a star, each one unique, so——'

'Fine!' Maxwell riposted. 'How do we get the exact details of that spectrum? Could Sammy recognise it? Could he describe it, so that an astronomer would recognise it? I doubt it.'

'Deep hypnosis?'

'Possible. But I think we're putting the emphasis on the wrong question: not *where*; we can't ever meet them physically, exchange goods. I'm much more concerned with *why*.'

Sammy awakened and they were disappointed to hear him relate a commonplace dream.

Martin sighed. 'Maybe the contact has been lost.'

'I don't think so,' Maxwell denied, although he was full of doubts. The contact had been made through an infinitesimal chance. It could just as easily be broken.

6

The next night was a blank. Sammy had his normal quota of dreams, none of them dealing with strange beings. Maxwell began to wonder if Martin had been right, after all.

Nothing occurred during Sammy's first two dreams of Thursday night and Maxwell began to feel despair.

'Why don't you go and have a rest,' Martin said, sensing Maxwell's mood. He wouldn't be persuaded.

'Thanks, Martin, but I'll stay. I'm not convinced this is finished. There has to be a conclusion.'

With the third dream, the contact returned.

'The view is dim and wavery. I can see a large cavern. In the centre is a—a *spaceship*! It can't be anything else. Spherical. Lots of activity around it. On one of the cavern walls is a bank of screens, one showing the spectrum. It —looks different, somehow.'

He broke off. 'The gentle thing is in my mind, now, urgent ... powerful ...'

'Pulse and respiration accelerating!' Martin told Maxwell anxiously.

'We can't do anything.' Maxwell riveted his gaze on the boy, who seemed to be in a trance.

When he spoke again, Sammy's voice had altered in some indefinable way. His first words revealed why.

'I have studied your mind and I can speak in your language. It is very difficult for me, as we communicate with our minds alone.

'I speak to you across a vast span of time, but not of space. The Earth is doomed soon to be as a mere transitory flame in the solar holocaust. Shortly, the Sun will be a supernova. The ship I have shown you is about to embark on a strange and terrible sea, to another galaxy, carrying the last men. I use the word men, for that is how we know ourselves and we are proud.

'Only a few of us can go on this journey. In the past, men have travelled to the stars when the Earth was young, but none ever returned. Nor shall we, for Earth will be no more. We do not wish to go down into the long dark unremembered. Paradoxically, you, who are long dead, and yet live on in us, will be our memorial. I shall be here, when the Sun dies. I am a poet and I have sung my song.'

The voice began to falter and they caught the words '... in gratitude'.

Then it gained strength before fading for ever.

'Soon our end will blaze forth across the Universe. I must go and make my preparations. Goodbye. Goodbye ...'

'There was a very brave man,' Maxwell said, softly.

Sammy had lain down and Nurse Hunter was in the room.

'Everything's normal again,' Martin said. 'Sammy seems to be completely unaffected, physically, at least.'

Nurse Hunter came in and confirmed that.

Sammy dreamed and slept naturally for the remainder of the night.

Maxwell and N'Dola passed the time by playing the series of tapes through from the beginning and wondering who would ever believe them.

The following morning the two men were in the office. Maxwell was sitting behind the desk and N'Dola was filing reports into folders on top of a cabinet. Sammy knocked and came in and said: 'Good morning.'

Martin, half-turning to answer him, swept some of the files on to the floor.

Sammy bent down and began to pick them up. With his right hand. With his paralysed right hand. He was smiling.

How did that happen? Maxwell asked himself. *Could it have been anything to do with the dream?*

'It has,' Sammy said, looking steadily at Maxwell, who felt a stab of fear.

Martin was too confused by the apparent miracle of the hand and arm to catch the little by-play. The papers forgotten, he started to examine Sammy.

Maxwell, seemingly intent on N'Dola's examination, let a question filter out of his mind. *'Can you read my thoughts?'*

'Only partially,' Sammy said. 'I'll get better with practice.'

'Of course you will, Sammy,' Martin said, thinking that the remark was aimed at him.

For good or evil? The thought surged unbidden through

Maxwell's fear-torn mind. He fought to control the shaking of his body.

Sammy's parents were brought in by Nurse Hunter. After the preliminaries, Kinloch said to N'Dola, 'I got that job, doctor. Thanks very much for your help.'

Maxwell was still in torment. Sammy hadn't answered him.

Martin said, suddenly: 'Is there something wrong with your hand, Mr. Kinloch?'

The man flexed his right hand. 'Yes. It's been painful since last night.'

Comprehension of a limited kind showed in N'Dola's eyes.

Before he could comment, Sammy gasped and stiffened by his mother's side.

In a moment, whatever it was had passed.

Gone? Maxwell felt his fears receding and he had a momentary vision of a light that blossomed like a stupendous stellar flower.

'Gone,' Sammy said, removing his father's pain. 'For good.'

NEW CANUTE

by

MARTIN I. RICKETTS

It is always pleasant to encounter a fresh perception and although one might think the nostalgia of time has been fully explored, Martin Ricketts in his first story for New Writings in SF capably indicates how sf is superbly equipped to investigate the nuances of personal regret. sf is able to make visible what would otherwise be insubstantial and in an analogue from the literary generality to the personally particular the Time-currents might clothe in flesh the shadows of the mind.

NEW CANUTE

THERE are some people who, right from the moment you first set eyes on them, you know are not one of the crowd. It is this intangible something, this aura of character, this thing you cannot define that sets apart the 'born leaders' and the 'lives of the party' from the rest of us. One such man was Charles Bamfield-Taylor. When I first saw him I knew instinctively that he was one of the richest men alive—even though at that time I didn't have the slightest idea who he was—for his particular 'aura of character' was unmistakable. Yet, notwithstanding this, there was something about him that declared things were not as they should have been. Even before he first spoke to me I was convinced that there was some kind of conflict raging inside that angular skull of his, the mind of the well-bred aristocrat warring for the first time in its life with some baser human instinct—and the instinct, apparently, was winning.

On that particular morning I sat on the warm deck of my boat, polishing the side-rails and gazing out across the Ocean of Time which stretched calm and blue towards the horizon like a great flat mirror reflecting the sky and the hot sun. The temperature wasn't too high, and for a moment I almost thought I was back on the Old World instead of nearly four-hundred light-years away on a planet which had been my home now for the past fifteen years. Even the strange moon hung low in the sky in a pale, hardly discernible half-circle, looking much the same as Earth's moon sometimes did when the day was bright and clear. I didn't often think about the Old World, but that morning felt like one of those cool-warm days when I used to go swimming with Alice, racing across the water and watching her laughing face splash intermittently through the waves.

But that was long ago, and she was long gone.

I shook my head to exorcise the memory and continued polishing. I was still working when the hoverzine came gliding along the quayside.

I suppose that when I first saw the machine I didn't really consider that it could be carrying a prospective client. We Time-boat owners were always ready to leave at virtually a moment's notice, but between seasons no tourist ships ever stopped here and we all regarded our rather mobilised existence as something of a joke. But, as it turned out, this was one occasion when I was glad of it, even though I knew from the start that there was something unusual about this particular customer.

I watched the 'zine glide past the tiny sprawl of low buildings, its engine incredibly silent in the warm air. Its speed dropped gradually and it came smoothly to a halt, settling down on its invisible cushion of air. It was a beautiful thing, a deep metallic crimson with tinted perspex domes and silver flashes.

When the engine stopped, Bamfield-Taylor stepped out. He was a tall thin-faced man with tiny sunken eyes and a little pointed beard. He wore an expensive suit with a small shoulder-cape of green leather that I knew from the V-casts was the current fashion on the Old World. Somewhat fascinated, I sat cross-legged on the deck and watched him look at each boat in turn as he wandered along the quayside. My boat was fifth in line and he stopped at the bottom of the gangway.

'You are ready for an excursion?' he asked, staring up at me. He was proud and incongruous in his immaculate clothes, and I shifted uncomfortably, painfully aware of my own patched white trousers and ragged shirt. But then, the first ship of the season wasn't due for several more weeks yet, and I hadn't been expecting anyone to come up alone as this fellow had obviously done. It confirmed my previous suspicion that money had never been one of his problems.

'It depends,' I replied, 'on where you want to go.'

'To the Time-currents of course!' His speech was abrupt

and sharp, almost as if he were afraid of wasting breath. His stare was arrogant.

'Yes,' I nodded. 'But which phase?'

'Recent.'

'I looked at my hands. 'Six-hundred,' I said. 'It's usually seven-fifty, but the season hasn't begun yet.'

'I shall give you seven-fifty.' He turned back to the hoverzine.

'When will you want to leave?' I called.

In the cockpit he turned. 'In one hour,' he said tersely. 'I shall come back and expect you to be ready.' Then he was gone, the 'zine rising on the air and floating back the way it had come like a huge silent bird. I shrugged; now the polishing would have to wait.

As I turned to go below I was suddenly aware of David Ellington, a fellow boat-owner, watching me from the deck of the adjacent boat.

'Now you won't have to starve until the season opens, will you?' he said jealously.

'You should have been polishing your rails,' I said, smiling. 'He passed your boat before he got to mine.'

After changing into my uniform, I went round to Harry's and ordered some fuel. He said he'd bring it up later, but I told him I needed it right away. He was surprised, but he agreed. Then I went to the Coast Patrol office and logged the trip. I got back with twenty minutes to spare.

The hoverzine reappeared exactly one hour after it had left. The tall man got out and walked up the gangway. He still wore his dark suit.

'No luggage?' I asked.

'No.'

I turned, forcing myself not to shrug, and pointed to the hatchway. 'Your cabin is in there.'

He lowered his head and started down, his boots ringing on the metal steps.

'There are four bunks in here,' I said as I came down behind him. 'But of course you'll only need one. The bath is at the end, and there is plenty of ...'

'Here is the seven-fifty.'

I stared at the cash laid out on the table, my arm still raised to point at the bathroom-door. Then I frowned; people as rich as this man obviously was, usually paid by credit-note.

'Cash is better for you,' he said, as if reading my thoughts. His cold eyes sought mine and I licked my lips nervously. For all the expression it carried his face might just as well have been carved from stone.

'Of course.' I smiled. 'Is there anything else I can do for you?'

'No.'

He slid the cash across the table towards me and I leaned forward to pick it up, conscious of his disdainful gaze on the back of my neck. I decided I didn't like him much.

With the money in my pocket I went back out on to the deck to wait for Harry to arrive with the fuel. His barge was rounding the jetty when my passenger put his head up through the hatch.

'Why have we not started?'

'Fuel,' I said, succinctly. 'Here it comes now.'

He nodded and disappeared. Harry's barge came alongside, water spraying over my rails and sluicing my newly-polished decks. As his boys transferred the fuel Harry stepped on to my boat and leaned on the cabin roof.

'A bit early for the tourists, isn't it, Paul?'

'This one's special,' I told him.

Harry Wood smiled. He was a short, muscular man with impeccable manners and a grin that always made you feel as if he knew something you didn't but should.

'Which phase?' he asked.

'Recent.'

He frowned. 'Unusual.'

'Unusual,' I agreed. Most tourists wanted to go to the ancient phases, the older the better; few ever asked for the recent phase. I looked at Harry's face and suddenly I felt uneasy. More than once in the past Harry Wood had proved himself expert at sensing trouble. His expression told me he was sensing it now.

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'Paul, I . . . ' he began. I put a finger to my lips and he fell silent; I couldn't be sure that my passenger wasn't listening.

Harry's boys finished the transfer and he stepped back across to his barge.

'So long, Paul,' he said before ducking back into his cabin. 'And look after yourself.' He wasn't smiling.

After his barge had gone I went into the cabin and started the engine. David Ellington stood on the quayside, watching us curiously as we pulled out into the bay.

My passenger reappeared. 'We are on our way?'

'Not quite. We have to pick up some provisions, then we'll be heading out.'

'Good.' He nodded and went below again. For the first time I thought I had detected a faint trace of a smile at the corners of his mouth.

The harbour diminished behind us. From this far away it seemed a totally unprepossessing place, the few squat buildings resembling dull-brown boxes. The only brightness was provided by the scarlets, blues and yellows of the various Time-boats at their moorings. The gap of my own mooring in the middle of them was as conspicuous as a missing tooth in the smile of a film star. We negotiated the treacherous stretch of coast at McTallis's Cliff and presently we docked at Duncan Morgan's place. When I jumped ashore he emerged from his cottage looking surprised.

'I'm starting a trip,' I told him. He nodded and walked over to his storehouse. He was a bent stick of an old man, probably one of this world's earliest settlers. The ring of white hair around his ears looked like a rim of snow under his bald cranium. Saying nothing, he held the door of the storehouse open for me, watching expressionlessly as I made my selection.

When I got back to the boat my passenger was on deck.

'Are there no women here?' he asked. I was surprised at this; somehow he had struck me as the kind of man never interested in the opposite sex.

'Cirene is strictly a man's world,' I told him. 'They usually come here to forget women.'

'Did you?'

'We're loaded up,' I said quietly. 'We're ready to go now.'

He took the hint and said no more. I thought I glimpsed the beginnings of that ghostly smile on his lips, then he was gone below.

We cut out into the bay, our wake curving behind us like bubbling sherbet on the blue water. It was mid-afternoon.

Alice, I thought. I flipped the button to automatic and closed my eyes. It still hurt me, even now. But you couldn't bring back someone who was dead, no matter how much you wanted that person. You remembered standing on a cold bleak shore, the storm blowing icily around you, tearing and flapping, but your prayers could never make her come back to you. Once she was lost, nothing could. Later, feeling as if I were in a dream, I had come to Cirene to forget. I bought myself a Time-boat and took the tourists around, hoping, I suppose, for a storm to take me as well. But there were few storms on Cirene and fifteen years had insulated me, if only a little.

Presently the shore was just a dark line behind us on the horizon. In front of us the Ocean of Time spread invitingly, yet completely indifferent to our approach. The sun sparkled on the incredible calmness of the water, making beautiful carpets of glitter that moved to and fro on the tiny waves.

We were completely out of sight of land when my passenger appeared on deck. I was standing in the bows, but he made no attempt to approach me; instead he leaned on the starboard rail and introspectively watched the water sweeping past. I walked round to join him.

'You still haven't told me who you are,' I said.

He gave me his arrogant, superior look again. He said, 'If I wish to remain anonymous I shall do so.'

'Yes,' I said.

This one, I thought, needs cutting down to size.

'How soon will we reach the Time-currents?'

'Soon enough,' I snapped childishly, and instantly regretted it—after all, I was only an employee—but he continued to watch the water and didn't seem to have noticed my oafishness. I suddenly realised I was hungry:

'Would you like something to eat?'

He didn't turn around. 'If you are preparing something for yourself.'

Oh, I thought, all at once he's considerate.

'My name is Charles Bamfield-Taylor,' he announced suddenly. 'Have you heard of me?'

'No,' I admitted. I leaned on the rail and looked sideways at him.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Vernon,' he said without a trace of sincerity. 'I didn't really mean to be rude.'

I looked down at our bow-wave, and then at the trough, watching it widen as it sped past us to boil and seethe in our wake. I smiled. So he had taken the trouble to find out my name, at least.

'We'll reach the first currents within twenty-four hours,' I told him. 'But these won't interest us; they go back a hundred years or more. For some unknown reason the recent phase is strongest out in mid-ocean.'

'How soon will we reach there?'

'We'll hit the first pools on the day after tomorrow. How recent do you want?'

He looked directly at me for the first time and I saw that unborn smile tugging at his lips again. But his eyes were still icy, his face still carved from stone; it was almost like looking at a death-mask.

'Very recent,' he said. 'In fact I can give you an exact time and date: 7:43 p.m., 29th October, 2277.'

In spite of myself I was impressed. And the date was even more recent than I had bargained for: October 2277 was only the month before last.

'I'll fix us some food,' I said in a whisper, and went below.

In the galley I clattered noisily around and wondered what was so special about that particular time and date. I

can understand him being arrogant, I thought, but why is he so damned quiet and mysterious?

I looked up through the window. He was walking slowly round the deck, still wearing his suit and cape. He reminded me of the villain in a bad amateur play: taciturn and conspicuous, and vaguely amusing in a horrific sort of way. Give him a top hat and he could be a reincarnation of Jack the Ripper or Doctor Jekyll.

I smiled at my thoughts and began to prepare the food.

On the following afternoon we reached the first currents. My passenger was fascinated by the swirling water. He leaned on the rail, chin jutting out, and watched our bows hissing through in a ripple of white. He noticed that I made no adjustments to the controls and he looked at me in surprise.

'Won't the current push us off course?'

'The current doesn't affect us,' I told him. 'It's entirely temporal. The disturbed water is nothing but an illusion. If you look closely you'll see that the water apparently swirling in the current is in fact quite calm; the agitation is nothing more than a distortion of light.'

He gazed down at the bows again, eyes shining.

'How about a trial-run?' I suggested. 'Would you like to try a dive now?'

'I've told you the time I require,' he said, flatly, staring at the water as if hypnotised. 'There is no need for anything further.'

'But you should have a trial-dive,' I insisted. 'It'll prepare you for the proper time. Diving in the recent phases always gives a tremendous shock to the psyche. We always like to get our customers used to it in these milder currents, so if you don't mind...'

In fact that wasn't true. Usually they paid their money and we took them out and brought them back. But I had my own motive for wanting my passenger to have a trial-run: I wanted to test his reactions to a Time-dive. He was, I must admit, beginning to worry me quite considerably now. Tourists sometimes asked for specific dates, but no-

body had ever asked for it to be timed to a specific minute before. As far as I could see there wasn't really much point.

He turned his head slowly towards me. I thought for a moment he was going to protest; but presently he nodded.

'Good!' I made my way cheerfully down to the locker room and came back a moment later with the suits. I dropped them on to the deck and they gleamed in the sun like greased corpses. Charles Bamfield-Taylor looked down at them in disgust.

'Surely you don't expect me to wear those?' His nose wrinkled. 'They're covered in grease!'

I smiled. 'No, they're not. That's just the look of the material they're made from: Denebian oil-skin. You'd just as well try one now. You'll have to later, anyway.'

He gave me his arrogant glare again; but said nothing. He went down into his cabin, dragging one of the suits with him.

When he came out I was already wearing mine. I had the auto-winch bolted to the deck and I clipped a line on to his suit. I had already stopped the boat. We stood at the side-rail with our face-visors open, looking like a pair of green penguins.

'All right,' I said. 'When we hit the water remember to keep breathing. I've checked the oxygen-pockets; they're full, so we can stay down for three hours if you want. Hold on to my arm as we go down—the shock is quite severe, even though these are the milder currents.' I looked at him, but he didn't seem to be at all worried. 'Now, pull your visor down and press the little stud on the right-hand side of the head-piece to secure it.'

I stepped over the rail and indicated for him to do the same. I made sure he was gripping my arm, and then we went in.

You felt like screaming. There was no sensation of abrupt coldness or of the tug of a current, but your mind felt as if it were being dragged into the fiery dormitories of Hell itself. You tried to stop yourself, but your grasping hands could hold on to nothing. The bubbling water around

you was as intangible as an hallucinatory nothingness. With terrifying speed the past swept over you and suddenly, surprisingly, you glimpsed the kindly face of your mother, her smile widening to engulf you in its happy warmth. And then the flash of your childhood was gone and your mind screamed its despair once more as you dropped like a stone into the abyss of pre-life, the cold limbo of the unborn.

And there you were, far into the past. Only nothingness and silence around you, your mind squirming, trying in vain to twist away from the subliminal attacks of racial-memory on your virgin consciousness.

In my ear-phones I heard Bamfield-Taylor's half-scream and I felt him let go of me. I reached out and grabbed him, my contact with him the only life-line to his sanity. I was used to it and the effect on me was still shattering. God knows what it was like on him.

I closed my mind to its own unconscious assaults on itself and stared through my visor, my years of experience telling me which was reality and which was only half-hallucinatory memory.

Bamfield-Taylor's eyes were wide behind his visor, but he didn't see me. Even in the water I could tell that he was trembling violently. His fists clenched and unclenched, clenched and unclenched . . .

I gripped him under the armpits and pulled him up.

On deck he lay on his back, exhausted and still trembling. I leaned over him and loosened his visor. He immediately rolled over on to his side, panting noisily as if he had run a great distance.

I sat on my heels and stared at him. He didn't look so superior now.

After a while he sat up. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I didn't know it would be like that.'

The iciness in his gaze had melted slightly.

I smiled. 'It's all right. It hits everybody the same on their first time. But I did warn you.'

He nodded once then leaned back, eyes closed. His chest

and stomach heaved as if his body were trying to absorb all the air it could.

Sitting there on the deck and seeing this man all shaken up made me remember *my* first dive. That had been in this phase too. The glimpses of racial-memory that one felt rather than heard or saw, dragged out of the dormitories of one's unconscious by the temporal flow of the current, were frightening simply because they were so powerful. When you dropped into a Time-current, you actually *were* in the past, at whatever point of time the current was in phase with. For some unknown reason the human psyche stayed exactly in step with temporal movement, which meant that the psychological pressures on the person who was in the Time-dive were supplied by the memory cells applying to the time he was in. For instance, if a man dropped into a current with a phase of, say, a hundred years, he would probably receive impressions of the Great Exodus, that mass emigration of people from the heavily over-populated Earth to the beckoning paradise of the colonial worlds. He wouldn't see or feel anything apart from a terrifying numbness, but he would probably have dreams for months afterwards about incredibly vast vessels hanging apparently motionless between the great reefs of the stars. Only these *racial*-memories, however, were subliminal; if a man went back to a period during his own lifetime, his memories applying to that period would be of his own experiences. They would be vividly pictorial, and sometimes pungently nostalgic. The only unpleasant aspect was the fact that the psyche couldn't adjust instantly to these temporal changes: it had to be dragged back, which made a man feel that his sanity was being destroyed. A horrible sensation, especially if you were going beyond your own birthdate.

My dive took me back almost a hundred and fifty years, and after the first tearing sensation, I was aware of a deep and constant hum in my ears and bursting lights before my eyes like brief flashes of fire. My mind had rebelled against the abnormality of it and I was dragged, screaming, to the surface by my instructor.

Then, over the next few days, I found myself looking constantly over my shoulder. I avoided physical contact with anyone, I trembled with an odd fear whenever anyone tried to speak to me, and I washed eight or nine times a day. It wasn't until some time later that I discovered that the period I had visited in my dive had been the time of the deadly and highly contagious Venusian Plague epidemic which had ravaged the whole of the Old World for months, killing millions before it was checked.

From then on I was hooked. I was fascinated by the Time-currents of Cirene and all their different phases. And for fifteen years I had worked here, showing the tourists around and giving them a taste of what we had termed 'Time-terror'. They seemed to love it, and many of the same faces turned up again, season after season.

Cirene was, I often reflected, like a side-show at some immense galactic carnival.

Shortly before noon on the following morning we reached the currents of the recent phase. The sun failed to disperse the cloud-cover which had formed during the night and the atmosphere was heavy and depressing. The sea was flat and still: a dull, limpid grey. Our wake resembled a white scar on the face of the ocean.

During the hours since his dive my passenger seemed to have lost some of his arrogance and he had begun to talk almost cheerfully with me. But now he leaned on the rail like a tall, gaunt bird-of-prey. Silently, as if waiting for some terrible fear to be realised, he gazed in fascination at the dull water sliding past our bows.

I walked slowly round the deck, securing all covers. I gazed apprehensively at the sky. It looked as if we were in for one of Cirene's drizzly afternoons.

'When do you want to dive?'

At first I thought he hadn't heard me, but presently his head swung in my direction. His eyes were no longer hard and icy: now they were much bluer and almost moist.

'When will the best time be?'

'It depends on how soon we can locate the time you

want. I've never tried to time it to an exact minute before, but it shouldn't be too difficult. Are you sure you wouldn't rather wait for finer weather?'

He shook his head. 'I'll leave it entirely up to you, Mr. Vernon. It makes little difference to me.'

I decided to wait; bad weather always reminds me of Alice. But later he came to my cabin.

'Do you mind if we start as soon as possible?'

'No,' I lied. I stepped out of the cabin and went aft to fetch the suits. I was surprised at this sudden change of mind and once more I began to feel worry nagging at me. Why, I asked myself again, does he want that specific time, down to the last minute? I remembered my conversation with Harry Wood back at the harbour and his last words to me before we left. It had worried him too.

Drizzle was beginning to filter down from the clouds when I returned with the diving-suits. Bamfield-Taylor stood on the forward-deck, waiting for me. He was still wearing his dark-green suit, and his thin face resembled white parchment in the rainy light. The tiny touch of beard seemed somehow ridiculous on such a face.

'Here we are,' I said. 'Aren't you going to get out of that suit?'

'Not this time.'

'But it'll be ruined. Do you want it ruined?' He didn't answer and I began to set up the auto-winch as he picked up his diving-suit.

'Many tourists get their clothes ruined,' I said conversationally. 'Why didn't you come up in the tourist season?'

'I wanted to dive alone.'

'You're not alone; I'm with you.' He started to put the suit on. The drizzle was becoming heavier now and dark piles of cloud leaned across the sky like amorphous serpents.

'That's different. I needed your help.'

'Why do you want such a specific time and date?' I asked loudly, then mentally cursed myself for my clumsiness. Bamfield-Taylor looked at me suddenly as if I had slapped him across the face.

'I have my reasons,' he said warily.

'Please tell me. I'd like to know.'

Abruptly his face hardened again. 'Set up the equipment,' he snapped. 'And stop this stupid chattering! I don't want to talk to anyone!'

I secured the winch and went into the cabin. I began to plot the currents, phasing through the streams ahead to locate the Time-pool he wanted. I frowned. Mister Bamfield-Taylor was more than just a rich eccentric tourist: he was positively neurotic. *Something* was definitely going on, and I didn't like it one bit.

I located the correct stream and homed in on it. Then I went out on to the deck and got into my suit. Bamfield-Taylor was already in his and leaning on the rail, oblivious of the drizzle that was now draping itself in cold veils across our faces.

I had messed up my chances of persuading him to tell me himself what was going on. Now I would have to watch him like a hawk. For the first time in fifteen years I wished I carried a hand-gun on board.

I joined him at the rail, intending to engage him in friendly conversation. It was unthinkable not to be on speaking terms if we had to dive together.

'I've located your time,' I said. 'We should be there in just a few minutes.'

He nodded silently. I looked out across the flat waters of the ocean. The horizon was invisible in the rain.

'They say that Cirene's moon was once an extragalactic wanderer,' I said cheerfully. He didn't answer and I pressed on: 'That means it was once a single tiny planet that drifted in the empty reaches of space between galaxies. Experts believe that after many billions of years of wandering in deep space it gradually drifted into our own galaxy, and after many further millions of years it was finally captured by the gravitational-pull of Cirene.'

Bamfield-Taylor looked at me. 'Really?' he said, feigning interest, but his mind wasn't on it.

'Many of our contemporary scientists believe that there are curious pockets of "unreality" out between the gal-

axies,' I went on. 'Actually that word "unreality" is a misnomer. These pockets are in fact relatively small zones where the fabric of space has become somehow warped, and consequently the known laws of Space and Time don't apply inside them. It is believed that Cirene's moon originally came from one of these pockets and drifted into our own galaxy with a fair-sized portion of this peculiar "unreality" trapped in its field of gravity. They say that this moon now gives Cirene's oceans their tidal-movements and, in the same way, the aura of "unreality" which surrounds it, by clashing with what we consider to be the natural laws of physics, is responsible for creating these strange Time-currents. Fascinating, isn't it?'

My passenger nodded. 'Yes, Mr. Vernon,' he said without enthusiasm. 'It is fascinating.'

I went back into the cabin. The engine stopped automatically when we reached the required Time-pool, and I began to adjust the calibrator, the temporal degrees moving slowly across the transparent semi-circular screen in front of me. Then I punched the HOLD button and there it was: 7:43 p.m., 29th October, 2277. I set the boat for temporal drift so that we could stay with it and then I went back out on to the deck.

'All right,' I said. 'We're there.'

His eyes seemed to light up, and when I clipped the line on to his suit I could feel him trembling all over.

I swallowed. This was it then.

We went over to the side-rail. The horizon was visible now and the cloud-cover was beginning to break up in the distance. We both secured our visors.

Suddenly I gripped his arm.

'All right, Mister,' I demanded. 'Just what the hell is going on?'

His eyes flashed like spun coins. 'You've been paid and you've done your job. That's all I wanted. Now please let go of me.'

'Not until you tell me!' I snapped, increasing my grip. 'If I'm diving into some kind of danger I have a right to know, so tell me!'

With a strength that belied his fragile looks he wrenched himself suddenly away from me and stepped over the rail. I went quickly after him, trying to grab him before he jumped. But I was too late. He hit the water only a second before I did.

My mind recoiled at the psychic drag. Despite my efforts the adrenalin pumped through my system and fed a scream into my throat that my tightly clenched teeth wouldn't let out, and it changed into a growl. I was a frightened animal, a terrified dog straining at the leash that held him by the throat and pulled him mercilessly backwards.

Then, with an effort, I had it under control. Around me in the water I could see nothing but clouds of rising bubbles. Bamfield-Taylor's screams rang in my ears. Where the hell was he? I reached out blindly for his line and found it floating loosely beside me. Damn, I thought, the son of a bitch has disconnected himself!

I threshed down. The hum pounded against my ears and two-month-old memories threw their pictures up at my eyes. I tried to shake them away as I swam around in the water. I heard Bamfield-Taylor screaming out a name now: 'Julia! Julia!' And abruptly I knew what was so special about this specific time and date. I swam to and fro, trying to locate him in the swirling water. Harry Wood's face jumped up from my memory, some long forgotten leer taunting me through the water. I waved my hands before my eyes. I heard David Ellington's laugh and saw Duncan Morgan's sad face. And someone was singing. I wanted to scream at these spectres. All I wanted was the Here and Now. Where was the reality? Where was this thin and arrogant man who shrieked invisibly in my ears?

He screamed, 'Julia!' once more, and then his cry became a drowning gurgle and I felt my blood turn cold.

And suddenly I saw him, floating down, away from me, his arms and legs writhing, the life-giving bubbles of air surging out of his open visor and rising up like expanding jewels in the water.

Almost without thinking I disconnected myself from the

winchline, something you should never do in a Time-current. Trying to push all the half-hallucinatory memories to the back of my mind, I kicked down after him. He struggled against me when I grabbed him. His drowning face behind the hole where his visor should have been was a pale moon. His eyes dilated as we struggled together, pulling and kicking, and then they rolled up under his lids and he went limp.

We came up less than twelve feet from the boat. I stretched him out on deck and leaned over him, applying artificial respiration. When I was sure he was breathing again I lay down beside him, panting with exhaustion. After a while the sun came out.

‘Why didn’t you let me do it? Why didn’t you let me die?’

His whisper came to me as I piloted the boat on manual, back through the currents. His voice sounded pitiful now: it was almost a whine. Gone was the arrogance and the cold superiority. I didn’t speak to him until we were past the edge and out into normal waters again. Then I went to the cabin where I kept him locked.

‘You’ll get over it gradually,’ I told him. ‘I came here fifteen years ago for the same reason as you, only mine was more of a wish than an intention.’

‘Julia,’ he moaned. He sat on the edge of the bunk with his head in his hands. He looked different now, wretched in white tee-shirt and a pair of my old ragged pants. ‘She drowned on that day, back on Earth,’ he said. ‘I remember the exact time. It was 7:43 p.m. I wanted to go back to that time and die in exactly the same way and at exactly the same time.’ He looked up at me with pleading eyes. ‘Why didn’t you let me do it? All you had to do was wait and let me finish it, that was all. Why didn’t you let me do it?’

‘I don’t want any suicides from *my* boat,’ I told him firmly. Then I went back outside.

‘You don’t understand,’ he called after me. ‘It was love. I loved her!’

I shook my head. No, maybe I didn't understand. All the way back to the harbour, as he cried softly to himself in his cabin, I tried to shake away fifteen-year-old images of the face of a girl I had once known, a girl who now lived only in my dreams, a ghost from a lost and distant past.

NO CERTAIN ARMOUR

by

JOHN KIPPAX

Interest in tales of men and women venturing forth from Earth to the far stars will never die whatever the passing changes in attitudes may be. And if planets are to be explored then young people will have an adventurous apprenticeship and will certainly continue their unruly traditions even on worlds very far removed from Old Earth. Here is a story of Venturer Nine, a shorter companion piece to the successful series of Venturer Twelve novels.

NO CERTAIN ARMOUR

ONE

THEY were walking slowly through pleasant, fairly open woodland, of the type which could be found in the temperate zones of Sol III. There was the smell of damp earth and vegetation, because here every day was made up of bright sunshine and dancing, gusty showers. Where the sun showed through it was hot, but in the shade it was pleasantly cool.

There were Cadet Farrell, Cadet Lake and Petty Officer Johnson.

'Pretty decent kind of planet,' Farrell said.

Lake saw a butterfly land to sun itself on the trunk of a tree. 'Hey, look at this beauty.'

P.O. Johnson, a quiet man from New Orleans, gave an opinion. 'Gentlemen,' he said, acknowledging the status of cadets, 'let's keep our minds on what we're supposed to be doing.'

'Right,' Dave Lake said.

'Right again.' Paddy Farrell sighted his rifle at nothing in particular. 'Wonder if we shall have to use these?'

Lake said: 'One thing's for sure. Leading Crewman Schmitz is really going to get the book thrown at him when we get back to ship.'

'Must be right out of his mind,' Johnson said. 'On a planet about which next to nothing is known, he has to go butterfly hunting. A hobby. Lunacy. I wouldn't be in his shoes for a year's pay.'

'What'll he get?' Lake asked.

'Do you want a worthwhile opinion?' Johnson asked.

'Whose?'

'C.P.O. Panos. Now, his opinion is worth having. Twenty years plus in the Corps. He's done the lot; dislike him if you

wish, but respect him you must. He says that he reckons Schmitz will get a dishonourable discharge.'

'Wow,' Lake said, and scowled.

'If I may offer a piece of advice,' Johnson added, 'it is that you judge a man, privately, on how you think you'd make out with him as your leader in a very difficult situation. Right?'

'Right,' Farrell said. They were walking through clumps of fern, spotted and shaded by the sun. Lake was a little ahead. He stopped, and looked down. He said, without turning round, 'Here he is.'

Johnson and Farrell could tell by the voice that there was no need to hurry. They came and stood with Lake.

That Leading Crewman Schmitz had died in great pain, there was no doubt. His face, which normally inclined to be on the lean side, as was his whole frame, was swollen and convulsed to a bestial reshaping. Cheeks had ballooned out, nearly closing his eye sockets, and his neck was distended so that it spread out over his collar, and the colour of the face was a spotted purple.

'Good God,' Johnson said, whipping out his communicator. 'Party Five, Johnson. Leading Crewman Schmitz found. Dead. Cause of death unknown. Homing signal on—now.'

Lt. Maseba, the medic, and Sick-bay Attendant Caiola were on the scene within five minutes. Maseba, an intensely conscientious man, examined the body.

'Not sure,' he said. 'I've seen a face go like that before, but it was when I was an intern and they brought in a guy from a local factory who ...' He beckoned to Caiola. 'Al, let's turn him over.'

They turned him over, and the Surgeon-Lieutenant saw. The flesh of the unfortunate man was certainly discoloured everywhere; but the back of the neck was a livid contusion, with a deep brown-purple head, from which a supuration dribbled dirtily. 'Maybe an insect sting,' Maseba said.

'Some insect.'

Paddy Farrell was sick.

Juala Norris and her two guards were still far enough away from the enormous oblately spheroidal bulk of *Venturer Nine* for the ship to look fat and harmless on the three angled tripod legs, far enough away for the scars which pitted her not to be seen. She stood with her three feet dug into the rock on the broad plateau, overlooking the green-blue landscape of Kindros V, while purple mountains, capped with snow, formed an impressive backdrop. Above them towered grey clouds, threatening rain.

Cadet Farrell watched a flycar, busy as a bright orange bee, sail down from the sky, pause for a moment, then lower itself beside one of the temporary hangars which clustered around *Venturer Nine*. Farrell, who came from Dublin, was short and thickset, and had a liking for food in such quantities that he was heading for compulsory dieting, which, while not an unknown thing among older members of the Space Corps, would get a cadet an entry on the red-edged side of his dossier.

'Who's in that?' he asked Dave Lake.

'Panos,' said Lake. He was dark, of the same age as Paddy, thin and almost head and shoulders taller. 'Panos,' he said. 'You've got to admit, he's a skilful all rounder!'

'How'd you know it was Panos?'

'The way he puts a flycar down.'

Farrell fingered the slim electronic rifle slung over his shoulder. 'Pity. You should have told me. I could have got him with one shot.'

'Chief Petty Officer Panos,' said Lake, 'is going to trip up over his own ego, before he's much older. Just let's give him enough rope.'

'Sure, he always takes enough,' Farrell said. 'Look at the way he went for me, last week, over those exercises in spinor calculus.'

'Serve you right,' said Lake, 'you'd have made as much sense of a laundry list in Chinese.'

'All right, so I made a couple of errors,' protested Farrell, 'but we *are* supposed to be officer grade, aren't we? Entitled to a bit of respect? The way he goes on at us, you'd think

that he hated all officers and just takes it out on us because we haven't got our first bar up!

'Officers in *training*,' Lake reminded him. He hitched his packstraps over his shoulders to a more comfortable position, and he rattled with all the gear that was hung about him—electronic rifle, radio, counter, scintillograph, drill and various other bits and pieces. Farrell, similarly accoutred, had a phone plug in his left ear.

A contralto voice spoke in Farrell's ear. 'Now, you young uns, are you supposed to be with me or not?'

Farrell started, and looked upslope, to where the shrubs thinned and met the brown rock of the plateau. The figure of a woman stood looking backwards, and beckoning. 'Hey look, we're wanted. You'd stand blethering the whole morning, if I let you, Dave. Come on.'

The two cadets, Christmas trees in space corps coveralls, picked their way up the slope, hurrying to catch the ship's biologist, Juala Norris. Negro, Chinese and European were in the ancestry of the biologist who was rapidly ascending the slope, only lightly laden compared to the two cadets whose job it was to accompany her. It would have been difficult to tell how old Juala was, and Farrell and Lake were much too gentlemanly to ask.

'Sure,' panted Farrell, as chips of loose rock settled under his feet, 'this weight of junk'll kill me before we get back to ship. Biologist she may be, but she's an athlete too; no consideration for a mere man!'

The biologist was staring out over the lush valley, using a pair of slim, powerful binoculars. She remained searching a section of sky as the two cadets came up to her.

'What have you seen, Miss Norris?' said Farrell.

She continued to keep the binoculars to her eyes. 'How many flycars do we have out?'

'Why none,' Farrell answered, 'as far as I know. One landed upslope about five minutes ago. Why?'

She lowered the glasses and slipped them back into their case, staring thoughtfully ahead, a puzzled expression on her brown, handsome face. 'I thought something flew over there, down in the valley. There was a sort of flash, as

though from the plex of a cabin. I must have been mistaken.'

'I think you must,' Lake said, 'our flycars are white, orange and bright blue. The big ones, rescue and flame-throwers, are bright blue.'

She smiled, showing a handsome set of slightly over-size white teeth. 'I must have been mistaken. All right, don't bother to check back with the ship.' She took a heavy-looking, broad-muzzled pistol from a holster at her hip. 'I'm looking forward to——'

Then she gave a small yelp and fired the stun gun at a lithe furry shape which bolted across between two bushes like Earth-type spinifex. The creature somersaulted and lay still. Juala ran forward and knelt beside it. She picked it up, tenderly.

'Squirrel or rabbit?' asked Farrell.

'I don't know; but I'll find out when I get back to the ship. Here, take him and put him in one of my cages.' She handed the warm body to Lake, and turned around to allow Farrell to open one of the little compartments in the light metal pack she carried on her back. 'Thanks. Well, that's just about the last specimen. If they were all as pretty as that one——'

'And as harmless,' put in Farrell. 'Remember Schmitz.'

'Then we should be darned lucky,' finished Lake. 'I'm sure not going to forget those lizard things on Sordis IV for a long time. Scared me out of two years' growth.'

'And made you trigger-happy for weeks,' said Farrell. 'I confess to being a wee bit alarmed meself.' He kept his eyes roving as they advanced, one each side of Juala Norris.

'A bit alarmed! Man, you went green and didn't eat for at least four hours. You were really spooked by those babies!'

'Stop,' said Juala Norris quietly, and they obeyed.

'What is it?' Farrell's eyes searched the blue-green foliage, the spindly trees with their broad leaves, and followed the line of a river, half a mile away. Then he saw the spur of rock to the left, sticking up from the undergrowth like the prow of a ship.

'Don't they say we are the first men on this planet?' she asked.

'No record of anyone being as far out as this,' Lake reassured her. 'Why?'

'Do you think that the shape of that rock is entirely natural?'

Lake stared at it. It certainly was a regular shape. 'Could be,' he said. For a moment his attention was distracted by a little extra sputter from his radiation counter; then he decided it was really no more than the normal amount of radiation to be expected from the planet's sun, and turned his attention to the rock again.

'Let's have a look around there,' suggested Miss Norris. They walked slowly to the left, where the bushes thinned again; Farrell and Lake kept their eyes skinned, searching every fold and shadow. At the moment when the rock face began to show itself, not one of the trio was looking upwards ...

Everything happened with a violent suddenness; Lake's radiation counter fizzed into sudden activity for three seconds; at the height of its chatter something flashed past them catching Farrell a blow on the shoulder which tore one of his straps. Some drops of liquid smeared his face.

Lake gave a shout, and stared up into the sky; Norris grabbed Farrell. 'You all right?'

The Irish cadet was shaken. 'What was that?' He touched his face, and looked at the wetness on his fingers. 'My shoulder strap's ripped. What was it?'

The biologist wiped his face carefully with a piece of cotton wool and then slipped the wad into a small airtight container.

'I don't know what it is. But I'll find out when I get to the ship. It smells like—like formic acid. Don't ask me how or why.'

Lake was examining the slit strap on Paddy's kit. 'Just as though it'd been slashed with a knife; a gash five centimetres long, down the length of it. And the counter—did you hear it go mad for about three seconds?'

'Would you be trying to tell me the two things are con-

nected?" asked Farrell. His round face showed interest and wonder; he didn't seem particularly scared.

A reedy voice, that of the duty operator on board *Venturer Nine*, rasped in his ear. 'Hello, party four, hello party four, report your position please.' His two companions could just hear the voice.

Farrell consulted his photostat copy of the survey team's map of the area immediately surrounding the ship's resting place. 'We're at three five two, seven seven oh.'

'Anything to report?'

Farrell was about to say something about being hit with a radio active something or other that slashed at harmless, well-intentioned Earthmen, when he saw Juala Norris knitting her brows and shaking her head. He caught on. 'No, er—no,' he said, hastily. 'Nothing to report.' He switched off his tiny mike and stared at the biologist. 'What's the idea, Miss Norris?'

Her black eyes twinkled. 'You know how jumpy they get. We'd be called back to the ship if we reported that—whatever it was. We can take care of ourselves, eh?'

'Sure,' said Dave, 'if you say so.'

'Keeping one eye cocked upwards,' added Farrell.

Now the slope became less steep, and the bluff of grey rock towered above them, gaunt and angular. They made one more stop, to collect a twelve-centimetre brown lizard creature with rudimentary feet which Juala Norris put down with her stun pistol, and then they stood in a clearing, twenty yards from the rockface. One glance was enough.

'Those caves!' breathed Farrell.

'All trimmed up neatly,' said Lake. 'Humans?'

'Something like humans, anyway.'

They stared at the rock. There seemed little doubt about it; some intelligent creature had taken natural holes and enlarged and shaped them, perhaps to make temporary habitations. The rock was soft and it was not easy to tell how long ago it had been done. And in the silence, the stutter of Lake's counter became more regular, though still well below radiation danger level.

The biologist walked forward; she made a move to one of the holes, a cave about five feet in diameter.

Farrell's voice became very gentle and diplomatic. 'Hold it, Miss Norris. Don't go in, please.'

She looked indignant; but Farrell was already reporting back to the ship. Lake came and stood by him, rifle ready, eyes roving. Farrell told ship: 'They may have been human or humanoid-made in their entirety, or some intelligent creature adapted what nature made to its own use. This is a job for geology and mining.' Lake nudged him, and pointed to the counter. 'And the radiation count's up four points.'

'O.K. party four,' came the voice of the duty operator. 'Listen out, please.'

Miss Norris started to protest. 'I wanted to *see* in there. It would have been quite all right——'

'You couldn't be sure,' Farrell said. 'Anyway, our orders are quite clear about what we should or should not do. We bent 'em for you once, Miss Norris, but not again. Dave and I want good reports from the Commander at the end of the trip. If we get in his hair, sure we'll end up as general duty crewmen, not sub-lieutenants!' He looked for Lake, and found his companion missing. 'Dave?'

Lake's voice sounded about fifty metres off; excited. 'Hey! Come here!'

They moved by the side of the rockface in his direction. Bits of rock rattled and spun, and a crowd of tiny brown ratlike creatures rushed by with shrill, chattering cries. The biologist tried a shot and missed.

'Come on!' shouted Lake. He didn't sound alarmed, only excited.

With a last whisper and crackle from the brushing undergrowth they came out into a clearing about seventy metres from the rock. The clearing was almost exactly circular, about eighty metres across. From cracks in the flaking and calcined rock, new vegetation was sprouting. At evenly spaced areas within the circle lay three shallow depressions, about nine centimetres below the general level. Within these the rock seemed shrivelled; the whole circular area

had been subject to great heat, these three places being the recipients of especially concentrated blasts.

Lake looked querulously at the slightly puffing Farrell. 'Any doubt about it, Paddy?'

Farrell didn't need to investigate; the evidence was there, beyond all shadow of doubt. The cleared circle, and the three depressions. 'A Mark seven or eight,' was his opinion, 'with three Eaker interstellar engines, at a guess. Real old-fashioned. No Antigrav lift-off for these boys.'

'How long ago, do you think?'

'Don't know.' Farrell turned to the somewhat mystified Miss Norris. 'How long would it take for the vegetation to grow here again, after it had all been burned off?'

She knelt down to examine the shoots struggling through. 'It would depend how deep the heat went ...' Her voice trailed off. 'Perhaps six months of this planet, unless——? What sort of heat?'

'The blast of an ancient space ship taking off,' Lake said, solemnly. 'We're not the first men to visit Kindros V!'

The ship's duty officer spoke in Farrell's ear.

'Party four. Commander Luboff taking off in flycar to find you. Give him a guide.'

'Okay,' Farrell said. 'Waiting.' He pressed the red button on the top of his communicator, putting out a continuous radio signal on which the flycar would home.

Farrell was young enough still to be fascinated how he, as a member of the *Venturer Nine* crew, could press a button and call for expert help. A biologist—and they had Miss Norris. A cartographer and surveyor—there was Mr. Sato. If you wanted the very latest information on radar, there was long-headed, grouchy Lieutenant Sykes; a language expert—and you called for Professor Czibulka ...

Thirty seconds later the bright-orange craft spun overhead, and they scattered to the edge of the clearing. The Commander put the machine down with the grace of a butterfly alighting, and then stepped out of the cabin. He was tall, over six feet. He came from Khabarovsk, and his crew called him, largely with affection, 'Ivan the Terrible'. He had long features and Asiatic eyes.

The two cadets came to attention. He ran an eye over them, as though to check that they were properly accoutred for their mission, then he spoke. 'You didn't say anything about a blast patch?' His voice was even to the point of monotony, the voice of a man who, for the greater part of his life, had let his heart be firmly ruled by his head.

'No sir,' said Lake, at attention, as was Farrell.

'At ease, easy,' said the Commander. He nodded to Juala. 'These boys looking after you all right?' Without waiting for a reply he went on. 'You said caves, evidence of humans. This patch here is evidence too. Evidence of an unauthorised landing; how long ago, I wonder?'

Miss Norris suggested, 'Judging by the way the vegetation is growing back, I'd say it was at the beginning of this planet's spring period.'

'H'm.' Ivan the Terrible took a slow walk around the area, walking loosely, easily. He scuffed a high, zipped boot at the ground. 'A mark seven or eight—maybe a six. There are still some in use.'

Farrell found himself talking, and, a fraction of a second later, wished that he hadn't. 'Three Eaker interstellar engines, sir.'

Luboff gave him a glance. 'Thank you, cadet. Thank you,' he replied, with heavy irony. 'It's good to have an opinion confirmed. Come here, young Farrell.'

'Sir?'

'What else can you tell me about this ship that left here four or five months ago?' Farrell gaped at him. A little distance away, Norris and Lake strove to keep their faces straight. The Commander of *Venturer Nine* stuck his hands on his hips and looked hard at the quailing Irishman. 'I might have guessed. You *half* looked! If you care to glance at the places that met the direct force of the blast you will see, from the scars, that all the old tubes needed relining, and that the pilot probably had to do a heavy compensation for uneven thrust; engine one, over here, is much weaker than the other two; makes a much shallower hole. And on the rock over there, you can just see where a side jet was used to shove the crate straight as she went up. Also, the

ship was probably undermanned—or badly manned—when she first came down on this planet.' His gaze didn't waver. 'How do I know that, Cadet Farrell?'

Farrell managed to stop looking like a stranded goldfish. 'Er—because if the ship had been properly handled, sir, they would have put down on the plateau, where we are, and not in this hole and corner.'

'Exactly.' Luboff strode over to his flycar, opened the door and unclipped the microphone. 'Tomokatsu? Luboff here. Get this message. "Suspected pirate ship landed Kindros V approximately five earth months ago. Engines probably in bad shape, needs maintenance. Crew may be wild-cat miners, trying to be spacemen in their spare time. Mark six, seven or eight ship, three Eaker engines, all in bad shape. Maybe they're adapted to cargo carrying. Got it? ... Right. Send to Galactic One and Two, repeat Earth Space Command. And tell them further message follows when we've examined the bodies left behind.' He clipped back the microphone.

Meanwhile Lake, Farrell and the biologist exchanged astonished glances on hearing the last sentence.

'Bodies?' Juala's handsome face bore a frown.

'What bodies?' asked Lake.

'Up there,' Luboff said. 'Noticed the shapes as I came over. Look like graves to me. Right shape, at least. And carry that rifle *at the port*, Cadet Lake.'

They rustled through the short bushes; clouds cast themselves across the hot sun and a scatter of rain fell as they came to the patch of soft earth.

They gathered round. Two rough mounds, six feet by three, lay side by side. On one was a rough cross, made in pebbles; upon the other, a six-pointed star of David.

'Graves, right enough,' said the Commander. 'We'll soon find out who they were.' He caught a hard look from Juala, and answered her unspoken protest. 'They've got to be dug up, Doctor Norris. We want to know who they were, if they're still identifiable, and, just as important, what they died of. I'd like you to work with Surgeon-Lieutenant Maseba on this, if you would. And after we've got

all the answers, our wandering priestman—Kibbee—can supervise a nice little reburial.' He nodded curtly. 'I'd like you to come back to the ship in the car with me, Doctor. I'll remember about the caves.' His cold gaze swept Farrell and Lake. 'The two cadets can give C.P.O. Panos a hand, after they've *walked* back to the ship.' He twitched an eyebrow at Farrell. 'One of them at least, could do with the exercise.'

The two came to attention as the Commander left. They watched him go through the bushes, and a few seconds later the bright-orange flycar swung up and away with almost insolent grace. Lake relaxed; but Farrell stayed staring up at the cloud-tumbled sky. The sun was out again.

Lake nudged him. 'What's eating you?'

'Funny,' Farrell said, 'something *flashed* up there.'

'Bird on the wing,' suggested Lake.

'Only birds we've ever seen so far are the little red cardinals, and the brown woodcock-snipe things. They wouldn't flash, would they?'

Lake gave him a gentle shove, and they started walking. 'Come on, junior. We've got bigger problems.'

Farrell jerked a thumb over his shoulder. 'Like those two corpses back there?'

Lake nodded, looking ahead. 'Yep. And a whole planet to survey in outline.'

They crossed the blast patches made by the mysterious visitor and were soon at the places where they had first seen the holes in the rock, trimmed and apparently adzed by an unknown hand. Paddy hesitated; he glanced up the long slope where the shape of *Venturer Nine* loomed like a giant egg on stilts. Distantly, came the sounds of hammering and riveting; somewhere, in one of the hangars, a machinist was cutting metal with a penetrating whine.

'Half a cent for your thoughts,' said Lake.

Farrell wagged his head at the nearest cave. 'Shall we take a look?'

'You just love trouble, don't you.'

Farrell's face assumed a guileless expression. 'Sure,' he

smiled blandly. 'It's coming on to rain again, and me so prone to catching colds. Let's shelter, shall we?'

Lake smiled. 'Okay. So you talked me into it. Come on. I'll use the torch, you cover.' He checked to see that his counter was working. 'If they call us back from the ship, we shall have to run.'

Farrell held the rifle across his body, and they entered the cave. They had to stoop, as it was only a fraction over five feet high. The walls were dry, and the marks of the tool used to shape them were everywhere. The shape of the cave was as round as a pipe, with no flat floor as they might reasonably have expected to find; in places there were pools of water. It ended abruptly. For three-quarters of the wall space, there were sets of holes carved into the soft rock, row upon row, from floor to ceiling, reminding Farrell of the wine cellar of his Uncle McGinty's hotel in Dublin.

Each hole was about ten centimetres in diameter, and, as Farrell found out by practical demonstration, nearly the depth of his forearm. Some were wet inside. He told Lake so.

Lake grunted. 'What do you suppose they stored there?'

Farrell kicked something which rattled. He picked it up. 'Shine your light. Let's see what this is.'

Lake obliged; the powerful torch revealed a dark brown shiny piece of material, curved and hollowed, three millimetres thick. Though the piece was six centimetres across at its widest point, it did not weigh heavily in Farrell's hand. The clicks from the counter speeded up and became an intermittent rattle.

'It's all right,' Lake said, 'it's on low count. Nothing dangerous. But what is the stuff?'

Farrell rattled his knuckles on it. 'Don't know.' With an effort, he broke a small piece off, and slipped it into a screwed container, pitching the larger piece down. Then he shivered.

'Cold?' Lake asked.

'No. Place gives me the creeps. And I'm still wondering what it was that slashed my shoulder strap. I keep remem-

bering Leading Crewman Schmitz. I think we ought to be getting back——'

A radio voice in his ear spoke sharply. 'What goes on with you cadets?'

'The old man! He doesn't miss a thing!' and Cadet Farrell bolted for the daylight, switching to 'send' and assuring his commanding officer that he and Cadet Lake were returning to the ship at not much less than the speed of light.

Two

SURGEON-LIEUTENANT MASEBA, the black skin of his strong face contrasting in startling fashion with his white overalls, nodded to the medical orderlies who stood by. They wheeled the two sheeted trolleys out of the steel-framed, plastic-walled hangar which served as laboratory, operating theatre and, until a few moments ago, post-mortem room. Juala Norris, sitting by the cluttered bench with a cup of coffee and a thin black cigar, frowned at her sheets of notes.

Maseba was washing his hands. 'I'm glad that's over. Now the Reverend Kibbee can rebury them. What do you make of it?'

'I'm not a detective, George.'

'But you are a good biologist.'

She smiled. 'So, between us, we are expected to wrap up the whole thing in a neat report which will tell Ivan everything he wants to know.'

'Let's be fair. He doesn't pretend to be anything but a good spaceship commander. But anything that touches his ship, his men, the corps, he has to know about.'

Juala sorted the papers, and winced at the tortured sound of metal being cut. 'I hope that crewman has his ears correctly plugged ... Now, what have we got to tell him? Both bodies were male, earth ancestry. Well nourished and developed, probably used to a fair amount of physical work. No operation scars, no signs of violence, as far as we could tell.'

'But we couldn't tell very much. The bodies had been there six months, the graves were shallow, and this planet gets a lot of rain along with the heat. Everything was against us. Apart from the formic acid puzzle, nothing.'

'Which might tie up with the death of Leading Crewman Schmitz.' Juala finished her coffee and pulled luxuriously at the cigar. 'But there simply was not enough material by which to judge.'

'Speaking as a doctor,' said Maseba, 'I'd say those cigars are bad for you.'

'So is being biologist on an exploration team.'

She shuffled the post-mortem notes together in order. 'Oh well, what it boils down to is that the chief can tell all known worlds that there was an unofficial landing on Kindros V about six months ago, two men died, and will anyone who finds a battered spaceship in need of maintenance and repair kindly slap the whole crew in custody and call the police.'

Maseba fed chips of biscuit to the restless, furry little creature Juala had brought back with her that morning. The squirrel/rabbit nibbled appreciatively, with its tail looped round a bar of its cage. 'This one's nice,' said Maseba. 'Friendly. I'll call him Jomo.'

'Why Jomo?'

'First Prime Minister of Kenya—as it used to be.' Maseba moved to another cage, where the lizard sat, regarding him balefully. 'And this one, what shall we call him?' He chuckled. 'Well, with a fixed, icy stare like that, I guess we'd better call him Ivan!' And Maseba roared with laughter.

In the commander's office, the fixed icy stare was in evidence, and Farrell and Lake, now bereft of their exploration gear, stood rigidly to attention while Commander Luboff put a fine cutting edge on his voice.

'Sometimes,' said Luboff, 'I do believe that cadets are the lowest form of humanoid existence found in the space corps. With regular officers, petty officers and crewmen, I know where I am. I can fine, reprimand, demote and if

necessary imprison, when there's clearly a crime of any sort.'

Three short buzzes interrupted him, and a light showed on a panel set in the desk. He pressed a switch. 'Commander.'

'Survey flycars going out now, sir,' rasped a distorted voice. 'Six, as ordered, recording from five thousand feet, net between five and six hundred miles approximately. Three flycars on standby.'

'Three? There should be four.'

'Yes sir. One out of action.'

'Right, keep in touch.' Luboff switched off, and pressed a button. 'Put Mr. Panos on.'

Farrell and Lake exchanged glances; they feared and respected Commander Luboff, but their feelings towards C.P.O. Panos were vastly different. It was generally considered throughout the whole crew of *Venturer Nine* that one fine day someone would push the Chief Petty Officer through an airlock, forgetting to give him a space suit. And yet, when it came to the real truth, Panos was respected. He wore the black and gold ribbon of the Space Cross on his uniform. They didn't award that one unless it was richly deserved.

Panos' rough voice, sounding rougher than ever on the intercom, came over clearly. 'Chief Petty Officer.'

'Mr. Panos,' said Commander Luboff, 'what is wrong with that flycar? I thought you told me that it was okay? Overfed reactor, you said. Your maintenance men asleep?'

'No, sir. They're not. And they're busy. I'm sorry, but——'

'It is not your business to be sorry,' snapped Luboff. 'Just give me results! Who's responsible?'

'The two cadets were given the job of checking the engine sir,' replied Panos. 'They reported it as working correctly. A subsequent extensive testing showed otherwise. As this was part of their routine training, sir, may I suggest that when they can be located, they do the whole job over again.'

Panos might never be commissioned; but everyone knew

who the two men were who really ran the ship. For both the senior C.P.O. and Luboff, ninety-nine per cent was not good enough, so let no man or woman fail in the total execution of their duties.

'Don't worry,' said Luboff, fixing the two cadets with a look, 'they'll be located. I will see to it, personally.' He broke contact, slapped his hands on the desk and inquired, gently, 'Well, gentlemen?'

'Sir,' said Lake, looking his commander straight in the eye, 'I assure you that we went over that motor strictly according to the book. We logged and signed the repair sheet as per standing orders, and we told the truth.'

The Commander breathed deeply. 'All right. Let's assume I believe you. The fact remains I am burdened with a couple of cadets who don't jump to orders, who go exploring on their own when they're told to come back to base and who manage to needle just about everyone they come into contact with. Think of Schmitz. So, remembering that there is a little matter of a report on each of you in the offing when we return to Earth, I suggest, *gentlemen*, that you get down to workshops, report to Mr. Panos, and take that motor apart *again*. I furthermore suggest that, in your own interests, you complete the job in one go, no matter how long it takes you. After which, you may report "job completed" to me, and I, personally, will take that flycar up and test.' His eyes now held no spark of compassion whatsoever. 'So, no matter if you did a good job before or not, you'd better do a good one *now*.' His face seemed sterner and thinner than ever. 'Any questions?'

Farrell gulped. 'No questions, sir.'

'Lake?'

'No questions, sir.'

'Dismiss!'

They saluted, turned about, and left the office. They walked smartly across the rocky plateau, hangars and workshops all around them, turned a corner, then relaxed.

'Phew!' Farrell sat down on a crate and mopped his brow. 'And to think that at this moment, if I'd chosen the

right career, I could have been assistant manager to me Uncle McGinty in Dublin !'

'You going to sit around for the rest of the day?'

'I would if I could.'

Lake aimed a kick. 'Get your fat butt off there, and let's go and make with the tools. No flycar motor working, no eats. Does that register?'

Farrell groaned. 'And already my stomach thinks my throat's cut.' He slapped his thighs and got up. Then he slapped a pocket, put his hand in and withdrew the container of the piece of brown substance which he had broken off the larger piece in the cave earlier that day. 'Hey, look at that.' He scrutinised the fragment closely, but could make nothing of it. 'I should have given that to Miss Norris. Or should I? Is this for the biologist?'

Lake spoke with exaggerated politeness. 'I hate to disturb your meditations, cadet, but I'd like to remind you that we are being awaited by a character named C.P.O. Panos, who loves us less than somewhat. Move, my fat friend, will you?'

Farrell moved. They strode down the short avenue of plastic sheds and hangars to the double-sized one at the end which served as the main repair workshop. Then Paddy stopped again.

'Now what?'

'Look, this is the lab. She's always in and out of here. Let's leave it with somebody, eh?'

Lake nodded. They looked inside, to find Maseba sitting writing at a desk amid a clutter of medical apparatus, which included an oxygen tent and a dentist's chair. He looked up and smiled as the two cadets saluted.

Farrell told him that they had something for Miss Norris. Maseba took it, and shook his head. 'She's not around. It's that book she's writing, I guess. She spends a lot of time on it. I'll leave it here with a note. She'll see it.'

'Did she make a report about what happened this morning?' Farrell asked. He was thinking of the curious event when his strap was slashed and his face sprayed with liquid. He told the doctor about it.

Maseba couldn't help. 'She's not all that quick with her reports. But no doubt she has a note about it. I'll remind her.'

Lake was hopping on one foot and then on another. He was furious with impatience. When at last they got outside, he grabbed Farrell by the scruff of the neck and almost hurled him into the workshops, where, surrounded by drills, lathes, welders and the highly technical equipment of maintenance, C.P.O. Panos stood, in grubby green coveralls, giving them a stare which matched that of Commander Luboff for sheer ferocity.

If Panos had a weakness, no one had yet found it. He had been everywhere, done everything and was a ruthlessly efficient engineer. Also, he was a martinet of the first rank when it came to giving cadets the runaround. And this he could do almost with impunity, being careful to interlard his speech with an ironically respectful 'Sir' now and then. He was forty-three, dark skinned, with black hair going thin and fuzzy. His face was grim and jowly, and his body resembled a generously designed barrel.

'So, gentlemen. Mr. Farrell. Mr. Lake. So nice of you to call. I've been expecting you for some time. I had thought that you would be earlier. But no doubt you find so much to do, huh?' He raised his voice, and shouted, without turning round, 'Hooker!'

A thin crewman appeared at the double. 'Yes, chief?'

'Rig lights over number seven. Then help these two cadets with the engine housing. Once that's off, leave them to get on with it.' His eyes flickered over the glum faces of Farrell and Lake. 'On their own. *Strictly* on their own. They will be working over, until the job is completed. Clear?'

'Yes, chief.' Hooker went to do as he was told.

'And don't forget, gentlemen,' added Panos with relish, 'that you report "job completed" to the commander——'

At that moment a sound erupted which dominated all others and bludgeoned them into silence with the sheer anger of it. A gigantic klaxon started to yell three short blasts, and then two long ones. It kept doing it. There was no shouting; just the sound of men running to take up posi-

tions and do jobs for which they had trained until it became second nature.

'Atmosphere raiders sighted!' gasped Farrell. 'What raiders, for heaven's sake?'

But Lake wasn't there; he had flung himself out at the second toot of the klaxon, speeding towards the gun he commanded. Farrell followed and got to his own gun on the perimeter of the encampment just as the klaxon ceased its horrid noise. Crewman Briggs was traversing the gun with the barrel at about forty-five degrees; Crewman Lee Hoon Hock stood beside the racks of spare charges, ready to feed ammunition. Both wore dull-grey helmets and flash cloaks. Farrell jammed his own helmet on, took it off because he'd forgotten his cloak, put the cloak on and then fitted his helmet. Then, with his crew of two, he scanned the tumbled sky. All round the perimeter, gun crews scanned the sky. Up at the bridge of *Venturer Nine*, four banks of two guns each lifted out of the smooth shell, and their crews scanned the sky too. In the sick bay, orderlies stood ready; other crewmen were prepared to run out more ammunition; damage control squads stood by their equipment, while Lieutenant-Commander Anderson, the archivist, watched his sound and vision recorders running and taped it all.

'Why don't somebody say something?' grumbled Crewman Briggs, after five minutes of absolutely nothing.

'Shut up, crewman,' ordered Farrell briefly, 'and watch your front.'

Briggs did as he was told. Farrell knew that it was Briggs' watch below. Just their luck, to be stuck with a practice alert. They could be kept at a practice for easily an hour, if the commander felt like it. And after stand down, he and Dave had that damned motor to overhaul. What *had* made the thing go overfed? What had Panos—or something—done to it?

'There, sir!' cried Briggs, suddenly. 'Coming in low, about four miles, less than a thousand feet up, I'd say!' He had the gun trained and his thumb on the firing button before Farrell saw what he meant.

The gun commander lowered the glasses. 'That,' he said acidly, 'is one of our own flycars. Practice this may be, but just don't you practise on *that*!'

Briggs looked glum. 'Sorry, sir.'

The machines came in, low, one after the other. They touched down close to Farrell's gun, and their pilots made straight for the ship.

'All the cars are in,' complained Crewman Lee, 'and still we don't get stand-down.'

The big loudspeaker mounted by one of the ship's main ports crackled into life. It was Commander Luboff's voice. 'The alert will continue. Repeat, the alert will continue.'

Farrell groaned inwardly. The alert could carry on for hours, then, and after that, he and Lake would have to start work on that engine. There was no respite for cadets; if they couldn't learn to take it, how could they ever honestly dish it out? He would have liked to cross the two hundred metres which separated his gun from Lake's, and have a chat about it; but he knew that it was more than his chances of a space corps commission were worth. So he stayed where he was, and frowned at the tangled sky, stoically endured the sporadic dashes of rain and did what every other gun crew was doing, namely, he alternated between staring at the blue-green woodlands of Kindros V and searching overhead for the atmosphere raiders which never came. He knew, too, however much he grumbled, that he was committed heart and soul to life in the space corps; anything else would have been unthinkable.

An hour before stand down was given, Paddy was visited by the Duty Officer, Lieutenant Anna Stein. Official-type greetings over, things became slightly less formal.

'Did you punch the alarm button, ma'am?'

'I did.'

'You must have had good reason.'

'And that is a polite way of asking why did I rouse the whole ship.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'I saw something flying that wasn't a flycar and wasn't a

bird. And I used my old artillery binoculars to spot it. As it flew, it flashed, as though it might have been some kind of old-type helicopter.'

'Sounds a good enough reason,' Farrell said.

'There was another odd thing about them.' She was much concerned. Paddy guessed that maybe she was being over-conscientious. 'It was a question of *scale*.'

'Like an elephant is big until you put a space ship beside it.'

'Exactly. The way I spotted them, there was just nothing with which to compare them.'

'How many did you see?'

'Six. I had to call our machines in.'

'Well, no one could have done more,' Paddy said. 'Why don't you just go and see the Commander, ma'am, and tell him there are a couple of cadets who are slowly freezing to death? I'm sure he'd take notice of you; and then we can all stand down.'

'Especially the two cadets.'

'Everybody *but* the two cadets.' He told her of his and Dave's job.

'I'll go down on bended knee for you,' she said, and turned and was gone before Paddy could get halfway to a smart salute.

THREE

IT WAS three in the morning of the planet's twenty-eight Earth-hours day, when Lake and Farrell slammed back the housing of the flycar motor, and ran the sealing around the join. Theirs were the only lights in the double workshop hangar; everyone else was asleep, except for the duty personnel and the extra watch which had been detailed for guns after general stand-down had been given that previous evening.

Lake cut a row of switches on the testing gear and watched a three inch fluoroscope screen flicker out to nothing. Then he came and sat wearily. He poured the last of the coffo from the big flask on the bench and drank luxuri-

ously. 'If there's anything wrong with that engine now, the boss can call me an Intergalactic Bug-Eyed Monster.'

'I might just do that,' said a quiet voice behind them. They jumped to their feet to see Commander Luboff walk quietly from the shadows.

What was he doing, thought Farrell, keeping alive the legend that he never slept? Here he was, at this hour of the morning, walking through his encampment like Henry the Fifth before Agincourt . . .

'At ease, easy, cadets,' said the Commander. 'Let's all sit down, shall we?'

They sat, wondering. Two cadets sitting talking to a senior, a very senior officer like Commander Luboff, in a workshop hangar on an almost unknown planet . . .

'What was it?' he asked.

'The——? Oh, the engine, sir. Reactor slightly overfed. She's balanced now, and damped right down. Everything checked.'

'Fine.' The lighting within the hangar was harsh and dramatic; it showed the deep lines in their chief's face, lines drawn by the years of command, by the loneliness of power, making decisions upon which the lives of so many people might depend. 'Responsibility discharged, eh, cadet?'

'Yes, sir.'

'To be followed with more responsibility the next day, and the next. And so it goes on, for all of us.' He remained silent for a moment, then changed to a direct question. 'What was the cause of the over-feeding?'

'Nothing that we could discover, sir.'

The Commander nodded, and sat silent. Farrell, daring, hazarded a question. 'Did—did anything come of the alert, sir?'

Perhaps it was the lateness of the hour, and a certain intimacy brought about by the lighting in the hangar, but Farrell didn't get his head bitten off, as he had half-feared.

Two pilots on survey agreed with the Duty Officer on having seen what looked like a group of atmosphere planes. Visibility was difficult, because of the unbroken cloud. Their

orders are clear enough; they gave the alarm and they came home, fast. In fact, our Duty Officer beat them to it.'

'And were there planes, sir?'

'It's an uninhabited planet!' said Farrell.

'As far as we know,' returned the commander.

'Radar pick up anything, sir?' asked Lake.

Luboff smiled wryly. 'Radar has been unhappy ever since we landed here. Keeps blotting, and then registering things that aren't there.'

'Solar bumps,' suggested Farrell.

'And other things besides,' said the commander, 'but who'd confuse plane blips with anything else?'

'No one, sir. Not one of our operators, anyhow.'

'That's right.' A tiny buzzer sounded; the commander took the little com from his pocket and held it close to his face. 'Commander speaking.'

'Sir,' squawked a tinny voice, 'we'd like you to come and look at these screens, if you could.'

The commander stood, and the cadets did the same.

'I'm coming,' Luboff said. He glanced at the cadets. 'Get to bed, you two.' And he strode off.

Lake stared hard after the departing figure. 'Well . . . He's human, after all!'

It rained heavily for an hour past dawn, and then the skies cleared somewhat. Commander Luboff wanted to carry on with the survey; his subordinates found him in a comparatively good mood. The mood changed when the chief saw the parade state of *Venturer Nine*.

'Mr. Rudkus,' he snapped to his executive officer, as they stood near the flycar park, where crewmen were unroping the machines, 'get me that medic of ours!'

'I'm here, sir,' said Maseba, throwing up a smart salute.

Luboff glowered at him. 'What do you think this is, a rest camp? Yesterday, there were three men in sick bay, now there are eight, including three pilots. Are they tired of life, or something?'

'Crewman Astoyan tore his hand while machining some metal; Storeman Cazique broke his arm last——'

'Just tell me,' snapped Luboff, 'about these three fliers!' 'Dysentery, sir.'

'What? How did they get it? Ford? If there's anybody in that galley who's been the slightest bit out of line——'

'I've checked, sir. The galley is quite in order, I'm sure of that. Dr. Norris is helping me with tests to determine the cause of the outbreak, and as soon as——'

'All right, all right! I'm short of fliers, Doctor Maseba. How soon will they be fit?'

Maseba said, diplomatically, 'If all goes well, three days, sir, maybe four.'

The commander made a decision. 'Get out that flycar the cadets repaired. I'll fly that, as one of the team. If we don't have a full complement for the survey net, we're wasting time. Mr. Panos and the two cadets on rescue standby. Use one of the blues for that today; we're going farther out, they're bigger and they have a longer range. Anything on that notepad of yours to bother me, Mr. Rudkus?'

'Nothing that can't wait, sir.'

The commander stuck his hands on his hips, a favourite pose with him, and surveyed the busy scene. It was said of Luboff that, wherever he stood, right there was his command post. It was like that now; the pilots collected around him. The survey officer, a small brown man from Tokyo whose large horn-rimmed spectacles seemed glued to his face, appeared in a hurry, summoned by the personal radio of the executive officer. In his wake came C.P.O. Panos, his face, in the morning light, telling a silent but eloquent tale of long service in bad stations.

They all gathered round Luboff; he turned to the little civilian. 'Mr. Sato, give us our orders for the survey.'

Surgeon-Lieutenant Maseba had finished his sick-call, visited his patients and came back to the laboratory to find Juala Norris dictating into a recorder. He liked Juala; she was a personable woman, and a good scientist; but he knew there were certain aspects of her personality which made her not quite suitable for the appointment she held.

He listened to her for a moment as she dictated from

scribbled notes. When she paused for breath, he pressed the stop button of the recorder. She looked up sharply, almost angrily. 'George, what was that for?'

'Look.' He spoke gently, leaning against a bench. 'I'm well aware that you're writing a book, in your spare time, but don't overdo it, will you?'

She frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean, Doctor Norris, that this is the *firm's* time. You are supposed to be working with *me*, and right now you are doing your own notes for your own private gain.'

She was angry. 'Doctor Maseba, you don't rate any higher than I do, even though I *am* a civilian!'

He spread his hands. 'Who's talking about ratings, rank and what have you? You let Luboff catch you doing a thing like that, and he'll get you barred for ever. You won't ride the spaceways again, Doctor Norris!'

She knew he was right. She collected her notes and stuffed them in the pocket of her overall. With head lowered, she said, 'You wouldn't tell him, would you?'

'I would *not*.' Maseba was emphatic. He made tweeting noises at the furry creature which she had found the previous day. 'Did you locate the tummy bug those three men have?'

'Oh!' She was dismayed. 'Oh, I must start on that right away!' Hurriedly, she began to clear a section of bench.

Cadet Farrell was studying physics. He was halfway through Grimshaw's delightful piece on refraction indices. His eyes were closed as he sat in the front seat of the big standby flycar, his hands were clasped about his middle, while, on his knee, a small tape player poured knowledge into his brain by way of a slim lead and a tiny pair of plug earphones. He breathed regularly, clearly absorbed in his work, the very picture of an earnest cadet who did not want to waste a moment, but studied even when on standby, and after being up half the night working on a flycar engine. He was so absorbed in his work that he did not hear the door of the flycar cabin open, did not hear Dave Lake get in beside him, carrying a flask of coffo.

Lake sat studying his friend for a moment or two, his long face impassive. Then a corner of his mouth twitched. Very carefully, he stopped the tape player, turned it to double speed, put the volume on 'full' and started the spools again. The effect was electric; a high pitched gabble of talk hit Farrell in both eardrums. He shot out of his seat, banged his head against the roof and rebounded.

Farrell clawed the earphones from his head and switched off, glared at Lake. 'You North American poop!' he snapped. 'What did you have to go and do that for?'

Lake just smirked all over his lean face and poured coffo. Farrell took it with a scowl; the scowl faded as he drank. He watched Lake pack up his tutorial tape player and stow it on a rack. He let Dave zip up his coveralls, ready his radio helmet. He was vastly interested when Dave checked over his maps, slide rule and zeroed the tiny radar screen in front of him.

'Well,' said Farrell, at length, 'it's a darlin' man y'are. And what's all this in aid of?'

'The notion, my friend,' said Lake, 'is that guys on stand-by should *really* be standing by, especially when it is known that a character with a face like an abandoned spaceport, to wit, one Chief Petty Officer Nikolas Panos, late of Heraklion, Crete, Mediterranean Sea, Europe, Planet Sol Three, is out of the P.O.'s mess and is on the prowl, seeking whom he may devour, apprehend, throw into the brig or bring before the Commander. And for me personally, Patrick Riordan O'Farrell, there is a mat in the chief's office upon which I do *not* wish to plant my feet——'

Lake never finished his sentence; a klaxon began to below, long short long, long short long.

FOUR

'SOMEBODY lost contact!' exclaimed Farrell. He pressed the starter button. 'Get in, Dave!' Farrell scrambled to the rear, taking a seat at the floor observation window, just as Panos flung open the door and heaved up his bulk. He flashed a basilisk glance at the others, then settled himself in the

pilot's seat. A moment later they were airborne, fifty, a hundred, two hundred metres above *Venturer Nine*, looking down on midget figures and matchbox hangars and toy gun emplacements sitting on the brown plateau.

'Check maps *please*, Cadet Farrell, and radar beam!'

'Yes, chief.'

Along with two big blue flycars like their own and one white, they circled, waiting for orders.

'Ready radiation suits, Cadet Lake?'

'Ready, chief.'

'Check searchlights?'

'Working, chief.'

The motor hummed, they circled again. Radio orders to the pilot were on net through to the helmets of the cadets. They waited, while static crackled faintly in their ears.

'Get on with it!' muttered Farrell.

Control spoke. 'Flycar number seven is not answering. Repeat, flycar seven, piloted by Commander Luboff, alone.'

Farrell gulped, and shot a glance back at Lake, who stared glassily. Seven. *Seven!* That was the one they had repaired once, which Panos had tested 'extensively' and found faulty. So they'd done it again—and were now wrong again! More than wrong—it could have killed Luboff!

'Seven!' said Panos, looking straight ahead.

'Chief,' began Farrell, 'I'll swear to it that seven's engine was one hundred per cent when we finished with it!'

'You feed that into the computer, *Mister* Farrell?'

'Yes, chief.'

'Then we'll find out, won't we?'

Control cut in. 'Attention all flycars. The commander's craft lost contact somewhere in area D north.'

Farrell glanced at his map, and Lake came and looked over his shoulder. 'Somewhere!' exclaimed Farrell, 'that's about three thousand square miles, mate!'

Control said: 'Radar interference continues. Listen out to search plan from Mr. Sato.'

Sato's precise little voice came over the air, giving the search plan for the eight flycars out. As each pilot got his orders, a machine detached itself from the spiral over

the spaceship and, with revs increasing every second, it span away under the humid, rain-dashed sky to take up its position and fly, hour after hour, like an owl quartering for a mouse, looking for the bright-orange machine that contained Commander Luboff.

Panos, intent on his job, did not speak; the blue-green forest swept steadily underneath them. Here and there they could make out the white gleam of a river, and here and there angular bluffs of bare brown rock reared from the jungle like brutish, questing heads. They flew at one-eighty metres, the regulation height, up, down, up, down, moving steadily across the area. They said nothing; when Farrell passed some 'E' ration food over to Panos, he pushed it away, and said sharply that he hoped someone was keeping constant watch through the floor port.

Over the radio net they could hear the reports coming in from the survey machines, as well as from those on standby sent out when the alarm was raised. Each machine gave its reference, the ground it had covered and reported negative. Time plodded by; sometimes visibility was obscured by lashing rain, sometimes the white sun beat down and made the air-conditioning work overtime.

Farrell was in the rear with Lake, both watching through the floor port. He cut his mike, but still spoke very quietly. 'I say—do you think that there's anything funny about Panos?'

'Huh!' Lake registered surprise. 'Man, I always *knew* it!'

Farrell was serious. 'No, I mean—he sits there, staring, absolutely sweating with anxiety.'

'He's served with Luboff a long time. Guess he's scared something serious has happened to the old man. I wouldn't like anything to happen to him either; better the devil you know than the devil you don't—'

Control cut in. 'Attention, all personnel. There is a possible explanation for the reports of the survey flycars about atmosphere fighter planes. All personnel, be on the lookout ...'

There was a pause; during that pause, Farrell and Lake continued to look out of the floor port; the engine gave a

spit, which alarmed them for a second, and then they flew on steadily.

A woman's voice came on the air. 'This is Juala Norris. I have been given a piece of material, found in one of the caves not far from base. This material is chitin. Repeat—CHITIN.' She spelled it out. 'This is normally the protective outer covering of such earth creatures as beetles, bees, scorpions and ants——'

The machine lurched; Lake looked up at Panos, and was astonished to see that the C.P.O. had gone suddenly pale.

The voice went on. 'However, tests made on a liquid show that it is close to formic acid——'

'That stuff on my face!' exclaimed Farrell.

'Now she finds out!' growled Lake.

'—and formic acid is a body constituent of ants, and of other insects not from Sol Three. Therefore, there is a possibility that what two pilots took to be fighter planes were, in fact, large insects.'

'Large?' muttered Farrell. 'Eh? How large is large? Chief—what do you think?' He peered at Panos, who was really white, now, and sweating. He shook his head, and said nothing.

Juala's voice went on. 'It is possible that these creatures, maybe of insect type as we know it, have a body length of about a metre, and a wingspan of between one-fifty and two metres.'

'Holy jumping cuttlefish!' breathed Lake, 'why did we join the space corps?'

'Attack from these creatures is possible,' continued Juala.

'Further message,' said a voice in their ears; it sounded like Rudkus, the executive officer.

The engine spat again, and the machine gave a slight lurch. Panos hunched over the controls, slitting his eyes against the glare of a sun which was setting in blinding shafts of fire.

'It is recommended that all search personnel should put on radiation suits now, together with face masks adjusted ready; it is barely possible that these creatures are radio active.'

'God!' said Farrell. "There's a nightmare for you! Pass me suit, Dave boy. Oh, hang on—let's help the chief into his first. All right, chief?"

Panos did not speak. He just nodded. He set the flycar on automatic and shrugged on the radiation suit. Farrell adjusted his face mask for him. Then the two cadets put their own suits and masks on.

Lake whispered to his companion. 'You think he's all right?'

'Tough as old boots.'

'There's something biting him.'

'Bout time something did. Hey, Miss Norris was a bit late, wasn't she, about finding out that info on the insects? If she'd been a bit quicker——'

'Searchlights on,' snapped Panos.

Farrell thumbed a switch, and the jungle, flowing away below them, was bathed in a brilliant light. It seemed that nothing could hide from that glare; but both Farrell and Lake knew that only the tops of the trees and dense undergrowth were illuminated. Whatever was hidden down there stood a good chance of remaining hidden. The commander's flycar was fluorescent, and would show if the lights touched it, provided it hadn't fallen too deeply into the thick forest, provided it was all in one piece, provided it hadn't come down in water, provided . . .

Farrell said: 'Hey—you know what they said about the measurements of these horrors? Lieutenant Stein said that when she spotted them, at the alarm warning, she couldn't be sure of their size? So what they said about wingspan being from one-fifty to two metres could be all wrong.'

'What were you thinking?'

'Well—there's a theoretical limit to the size an insect can be. Millions of years ago Sol Three had a kind of dragon-fly, but they weren't that size. And wouldn't it be possible for there to be a large insect which wasn't an ant?'

'I'd prefer,' Lake said drily, 'a two-millimetre insect which was an ant. And while we're on the subject, doesn't this scale business apply both ways? They could be smaller, whatever they are, but they could be bigger!'

'Mother Nature wouldn't allow it.'

'Mother Nature, from what I've seen of some of her children, is a blowzy old hag who wouldn't give a——'

'Shut up, the pair of you!' Panos' voice was harsh and quivering as he spoke.

The engine spat, spat again; the machine lost a few metres in height. Then the even note resumed.

But not for long; the spits and sputters became more frequent, and the line of flight was no longer constant.

Farrell, in the front seat, gave a gasp, and nudged Panos. 'Chief!' he shouted. 'Look at the radiation count!'

The needle on the counter was surging, going back a little, then surging forward again, and always advancing. The motor, its steady note completely gone, huffed and sputtered. C.P.O. Panos gripped a red handle on the dash labelled 'EMERGENCY DAMPING' and turned it.

The sudden cessation of the motor noise was eerie; there was only the sighing of wind past the cabin.

They knew it was crash landing. Panos sent the message. 'Out of control; motor gone. Attempting crash landing reference——' his voice was hardly intelligible. Farrell and Lake didn't feel very happy, but clearly the C.P.O. was suffering more than they.

The ground swung up to meet them; now the lights picked out the surface below. Forest, and more forest, spinning steadily. But, in the second before he swung himself clear of the floor and up on the crash handles, Lake saw something below.

'There's a clear space! There's something orange down there——'

They hit the top of a tree; twigs and branches crunched and crackled; for a moment they hung, so it seemed, like an unwieldy birds-nest, and then, with a series of sickening jerks, they slipped and crashed through the trees, slammed and bucked from side to side until at last, with a screeching rending of metal and plastic and fibreglass, they touched bottom.

For a moment, no one said anything. From above sifted the light of the first moon of Kindros V, fitful between the

leaves and branches above them. The wind moaned; the flycar gave another crunch as it settled in the stiff undergrowth.

Farrell grunted, and rubbed his back. 'You all right, Dave?'

'Uh. Huh.' Lake didn't sound too sure. He clawed his way forward, and leaned over the front seat. 'Chief?'

Through the visor, Panos' face showed grey and sweaty. 'I'm okay. Just a minute.'

'Shall I get the flasher going, chief?'

Panos nodded. Farrell turned a switch, and at once a whirling orange light on the roof began to bite into the night. Panos fumbled with the radio. He seemed to be having difficulty with his own voice.

Farrell said: 'I'm sure there was a crashed car straight ahead, sure of it. I'll try the roof searchlight.' He fumbled for the control handles, set above his head.

Panos muttered, 'The radio's sunk. There's just static ...'

Lake was watching the radiation counter with concern. Then his attention was distracted by the sudden white glare which leaped from the roof searchlight. Straight ahead were only thick trees; Farrell turned the light, and, to their right front, they saw the beam pick out a gap, and beyond that a small clearing. In that clearing, backed by brown rock riddled with holes and tunnels, an orange flycar, crumpled but intact, lay skewed crazily.

And upon the roof of the flycar, unmoving, its multi-lensed eyes aglow with reflected light, sat an insect.

'Holy Saints!' whispered Farrell.

'Juala Norris was a bit late,' said Lake, grimly, 'but she was partly right. It's a bee!'

Panos sat rigidly.

'What brought us down brought the commander down,' Farrell said, pointing to the radiation counter. 'Radiation from the ground overfed the reactor. As for those insects——'

'They're like ants, they're like bees and they're like dragonflies,' Dave Lake said, 'but there's one thing I'm betting on. Those aren't ovipositors on the end of the

bodies. They're stings, and they can sting creatures ten times their size to certain death. Remember Schmitz.'

The C.P.O. just sat, did not move.

'There was a case on earth, centuries ago, when some damn fool mucked about with cross-breeding wild strains of bees, and he produced killers half that size. Caused a hell of a problem ...'

'The Commander's in that cabin,' Paddy said, 'and we've got to go and get him. I ask you,' he growled, 'killer bees; what next?'

'Can they sting through these suits?'

'Oh brother,' Farrell said, 'we're about to find out.'

Panos gasped. 'Look.'

It was something to unnerve the bravest. The insects slipped out from the holes in the soft brown rocks. Their shiny brown bodies terminated in a spike, their wings were like heavy gauze and their eyes glowed balefully green in the light. Their bodies were ten centimetres long.

'We can manage,' Paddy said. 'Two of us with Meissners, and one back here to turn the flame hose on if they get awkward. Chief, should we——'

Lake believed that there was something very wrong with the C.P.O. He sat, rigid, mouthing words.

'Chief——' said Lake.

The voice was barely audible. 'Just like the scorpion! They have scorpion faces—just like the one that killed Spiro! Spiro—I saw you die——'

Panos rose, trembling. Farrell said, 'Shall we go forward with rifles, while you cover us with the flame hose, chief?'

Panos gave a cry, a frenzied screech; muffled as it was by his face mask it nevertheless added a further touch of horror to the ghoulish scene. He grabbed an electronic rifle, cocked it, and leaped out of the cabin. He staggered amid the rough undergrowth, recovered his balance and began to run to where the creatures crouched. He mouthed unintelligible cries.

'Get the flame hose on!' yelled Farrell. He set his rifle to stun, braced himself against the open door, and aimed at the C.P.O.'s broad back. The stun charge hit him in

the back of the neck, and Panos fell forward, his rifle spinning from his hand.

From the rest of the creatures came a harsh rustling of wings; as he stepped down to go to the fallen man, Farrell dodged as they took off. The last one almost brushed his face. He felt a momentary elation, which vanished when he was five yards from the still form of Panos; something made him look up into the night sky, where the light of the orange flasher touched an object which was diving upon him. Between his own machine and that of Commander Luboff, straddling Panos, Farrell remembered what had happened to him when something had hit him and sprayed him with acid; *that* was one way they attacked! He snapped the rifle from stun to full charge, but was too late to fire. He had a glimpse of whirring wings, and then he dropped over the C.P.O.'s body. Something hummed past him and a liquid splashed across his face mask. Farrell felt utter terror, and fought against it.

Terror existed as part of the life-style of men who wanted to go out to the stars. Fear was a mere part of the job. These bees, now; they were intelligent for they constructed caves; but their intelligence was really only a conditioned reflex. They were the dominant species on Kindros V, that was clear, and they would know little of fear. Their intelligence was suspect, too, for they must have dominated the planet by instant attack on anything opposed to them, and how intelligent could a species be who would attack without thought of the consequences?

The hostility of the bees, what they had done to Schmitz and the poor devils from that pirate spaceship, all pointed to an implacable and vicious drive to dominate by killing.

He half-turned his head to look up, and saw that Lake, with great presence of mind, had swung the beam of the roof searchlight into the night sky. It picked out the circling creatures, caught the gaudy vibration of their wings, and, as they veered at the light, it gave Farrell a couple of seconds. He raised the rifle, got one of them in the ring sight, and fired. The shot took the wings off the first, and sent it spinning over and over, to fall somewhere outside

the circle of light, and the same charge seared the body of the creature behind; it hit the ground near the orange flycar with a crackle and a squelch. Like a man in a strictly solo nightmare, Farrell glared up into the sky, rifle at the ready, waiting for the next attack.

What he saw made him quail; five or six of them, in line abreast, were swooping down. He might get one of them—but what about the others? For all he knew, those stings might cut him in half.

Like a gigantic firework, a spout of flame erupted from the direction of the blue flycar. It seared away a third of the screening branches of a tree as though they had been tissue paper, and caught the next wave of insects when they were about ten metres from the ground. Almost simultaneously six double pairs of wings shrivelled to ash, and the creatures crashed all over the clearing. Lake had got a flamehose working in time. Farrell yelled: 'Keep it going!' Then he slung his rifle, dug his hands under Panos' arm-pits, and began to drag the senseless man clear, while Lake sprayed the night sky with angry fire.

'Hold it!' Farrell had now dragged Panos close to Lake. 'Hold it!' Lake turned the fire off. 'Save your juice, Dave. Keep watching for more of 'em; I'm going across to see if the commander's still in one piece!'

Lake nodded, without looking at Farrell. The Irishman put his head down, and ran across. He nearly lost his balance when he stepped in the squelching remains of one of the creatures. Another, minus wings, tried to lash him with its sting; Paddy kicked its jaws, and felt the hard substance under his boot.

He got to the orange machine and grabbed the door handle. It wouldn't budge. He put his rifle at stun again and used it on the door; a dent appeared beside the handle and it jerked open. Commander Luboff was lying against the door; his limp form slid into Farrell's arms. Gently, the cadet lowered the officer to the ground, winced at sight of the gash across the lean cheek. He felt the injured man's pulse and found it fairly steady.

'Look out!' Lake's voice cracked in his ears.

Farrell ducked against the side of the machine, shielding the commander as best he could, while Lake directed the sizzling flame upwards as another half dozen of the vicious fliers came swooping towards them, their wings thrumming and beating. Not one came out of its dive; they all suffered burned wings, and they crashed and scattered over the surrounding forest. Then Lake turned off the flame, put the searchlights down over the crashed orange flycar, and came to help Farrell.

FIVE

IT WAS nearly dawn when Panos awoke. He found himself sitting next to Commander Luboff. The latter looked pale, there was a patch on his cut cheek, and his breathing was regular. In the front seat the two cadets were fast asleep. Panos grunted and heaved himself forward. He shook Farrell by the shoulder. 'Cadet!'

Farrell sighed, turned and sat up. 'Hello, chief, how do you feel?'

'Wake the other cadet will you—sir?' Panos spoke thickly.

Farrell shook Lake. He yawned hugely, reached up and switched off the searchlight. 'Leave the flasher on for a bit——'

'Cadet Lake—sir!' Panos was sitting up, looking haggard and anxious.

'Yes, chief?'

'Last night,' muttered Panos. 'Last night—what I did—and what you did. I—I couldn't help it. I've—not told anyone before. Not anyone. It was—it was buried in my mind ...'

'Just a minute.' Farrell heaved around and stood over Commander Luboff. 'Gave him an emergency shot. He's doing fine.' He turned to the C.P.O. 'Used a stun on you, chief,' he said, wryly. 'Sorry.'

In the growing light, Panos looked haggard and distraught. When he spoke, he was not completely coherent. 'Last night. I—I went crazy. You know why? I must tell

you why. When I was a little boy, my brother, my twin brother Spiro—he was stung by a scorpion. I loved Spiro, but—I saw him die. Since then I have hated, *hated* all insects, beetles, ants—all of them. And I have been afraid of them. Every time I see one, I see Spiro dying!’

‘Take it easy, chief.’ Lake spoke flatly. ‘You had a rough time——’

‘But—don’t you see?’ Panos’ expression was tragic. ‘I’m a C.P.O., I was faced with danger—and I lost my head! I’m finished, done for. The corps has been my life—but no more, no more!’ He shook his head, and stared out at the forest, at the wreck of the orange flycar, the burned trees, the messes and remains of the creatures. ‘It’s finished.’

Farrell spoke very gently. ‘What makes you think we’d say anything?’ he asked. ‘A man can have any kind of fear; he doesn’t have to explain it. And what’s it matter, as long as he’s got friends to help him fight it? What do you expect, chief? *Perfection?*’

From overhead came the sound of an engine rapidly closing. A white machine circled low above them. Someone inside stuck his head out, and waved.

‘So,’ said Commander Luboff. ‘You believe that these bee creatures actually thrive on radiation from certain ores, Doctor Norris?’

‘“Thrive” is hardly the word,’ she answered, ‘but the possibility of a degree of radiation being necessary to the metabolism of a form of alien life is not an unreasonable—was not unreasonable—before we landed here. Now we seem to have what appears to be something like proof.’

‘That place at the bottom of the slope—the caves?’

‘A breeding place, flooded out. The main diet of these winged creatures seems to be small fauna and lizard-type creatures. Their behaviour pattern in breeding is something like the solitary wasp on Sol Three, except that they do it collectively, by paralysing a small mammal and then laying an egg in its body, so that the emerging grub has food until it pupates.’

‘Dog eat dog.’ Luboff drummed on the desk. ‘You could

say, then, that they prospect for radiation, and where there's radiation, there's ore.'

'Yes.' She tensed momentarily; Luboff was chatting, but he did not look pleased. She wondered——

'Suitably clothed prospecting parties could get at the ores, then.'

'Yes. But we should have to take it step by step, very carefully. Radiation from surface which can overload a flycar motor is not to be taken lightly, sir. We must remember, too, that each of these creatures carries sufficient radiation for there to be a possible health hazard for us.'

She thought *I'm coming well out of this. Maybe he'll be satisfied if——*

'So, we can handle them. We shall at least have to investigate sufficiently to judge how much more we should do, and to let base know. This will mean a heads-of-department conference, and a plan which at the very least keeps us from danger.' His piercing eyes were steady. 'Protection of crew is vital, when replacements cannot be obtained. Don't you agree, Miss Norris?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Yes.' Still he looked at her, very straightly. 'Knowledge of a problem can mean it's halved, eh?'

'Yes, sir.'

Oh God, he's cat-and-mousing, now. Get it over, damn you!

'I still have a problem, Doctor Norris. I mean you.'

She was trembling within, hoped that it didn't show, and knew that it did.

Luboff said: 'Why were you so long in analysing the piece of chitin the cadet gave you, and in writing up your report about what occurred two days ago when the flying creatures first showed?'

She did not answer.

'Miss Norris. You may be a civilian, but you are still under my command. Lives could have been lost through your not putting first things first. What were you putting first, Miss Norris?'

She told him about the book. He listened impassively.

'Put it in writing. The space commission will have to hear of this when we return to Earth. Good morning, Miss Norris.'

She went, biting her lip. A moment later, Farrell and Lake stepped into the office and snapped up a couple of smart salutes. He eyed them without expression for a moment.

'Well. At ease, gentlemen.' He surveyed them. Whoever could tell what Ivan the Terrible was thinking? 'It seems I have to thank you for saving my life. All right, then. Thank you.'

Farrell opened his mouth, decided not to say anything, and shut it again.

'This will go on your reports, of course. Write me your version of what happened; and make it short. I've no time to read more than five hundred words apiece from you. Got that?'

'Yes, sir.' They spoke together.

'And I shall make it clear that it was the radiation from surface ore deposits which overfed the lightly shielded motor, on both occasions. You will not be held responsible. Clear?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Just one thing.' Commander Luboff lowered his voice, leaned over his desk, and his eyes became mere slits. 'If either of you ever say a word about Mr. Panos' phobia concerning ants and scorpions, I will shop you for good at space college!'

Farrell stared. 'You—you were conscious then, sir? I thought that when he was telling us——'

'Exactly, cadet. And C.P.O. Panos thinks that I was spark out when he told you about his brother. Listen, I want Mr. Panos; the corps needs men like him, and if he has a weakness, then, for all the other good things that man is, we've got to hide from him that we know! That way, he'll keep his self-respect. Understood?'

They understood.

'Good. The next time you two do something right against the book, I'll try to remember this. Dismiss!'

Outside, on the brown plateau, work was going on. A crew was taking a missile launcher to pieces; a welder was biting his way through plating with a single icy blue tooth, and, superintending three men who were using an antigrav hoist to fit a new and thicker set of radiation shields into position on a flycar, stood C.P.O. Panos.

'Hooker!' barked the Chief Petty Officer. 'Will you, for Pete's sake, *centre* that thing before you lift it? *Hooker!*'

'Yes, chief,' said the long-suffering Hooker.

But, as Paddy and Dave passed, Panos half-turned to face them. Something moved on that craggy face. It must have been an oddly-shaped shadow flung by the icy blue arc of the cutting torch; but it looked remarkably like the beginning of an instantly quelled smile.

NOW HEAR THE WORD

by

DAVID S. GARNETT

We have been told by those in a position to know that some news reporters very often slant, doctor, shuffle and juxtapose the facts in order to fashion an exciting and headline-winning story for their editors. Howard Felix tampered with the news out of boredom. That worried the authorities of Sunville, for Felix did not really have any special gifts, did he? Or—did he?

NOW HEAR THE WORD

ONE

HE had nothing to do and was staring through one of the studio windows. For some reason it came to him that it was almost a year since he had been out of Sunville. He had not left the dome since he arrived. There was nothing to go out for; but equally he had no reason for staying in. The news was not on for another six hours, and it needed no preparation.

He closed the door behind him and went downstairs. The administrative blocks and staff accommodation were located close to the main exit, so he did not have to go anywhere near the residential cottages. He was glad of that. Even so, one couple going past in their electric buggy recognised him and waved. He forced a smile but kept his hands dug into his pockets.

The guard by the exit was sitting down outside the gatehouse. His uniform was dark-green, his helmet steel and he had an automatic rifle across his knees. Inside the gatehouse there were at least three more of them. The security man watched him as he passed through the inside perimeter fence and came forward.

'Hello.'

The guard did not reply.

'I'd like to go outside.'

The man held out his hand, snapping his fingers. 'Let's see your pass.'

'Pass?'

'Yeah, pass. You can't go out without one.'

'But I'm not one of the villagers. I work here.'

'I know that, Mr. Felix,' said the guard. 'I know who you are. But I don't make the rules. It ain't safe to go out.'

'That's crazy. I was only going out for a walk. I'd be back soon.'

'A walk?' said the guard. 'On foot?'

'Yes, why not?'

'But there's nothing out there, Mr. Felix. You're much better off inside Sunville.'

Felix almost smiled. It seemed that his propaganda had worked even on the security men.

'I mean it,' continued the man. 'Things are really bad. I hate having to go outside the dome, but it's part of my job and I have to. Only the other week one of the patrol vehicles was ambushed and two guys killed.'

'I didn't know that.'

'It isn't the sort of thing we boast about.' He hesitated, then added: 'You won't repeat that, will you? I mean when you give the news. They'd find out how you knew and ... and I'd lose my job.'

Felix nodded. 'Don't worry,' he said. This was the first time he had heard how bad things outside had become. Perhaps the news reports were not so selective and exaggerated as he had assumed. Maybe it was unwise to venture beyond Sunville. But if he wanted to, he ought to be able to leave any time. Without a pass. Did they think he was going to run away or something? And what difference would it make even if he did? Felix knew when he was well off. He was here, and here he intended to stay.

'I'll get a pass,' he said, more to himself than the guard. 'I'll go see Peel.' Felix did not like the new mayor any more than Chris White, his predecessor. He was well aware that the feeling was mutual. All Peel needed was an excuse to get rid of Felix. And Felix knew he could lose his job as easily as he had gained it. But losing it meant more than demotion, it would mean having to leave Sunville and the protection it offered.

'You might have to have an escort,' said the guard. 'To protect you.'

'Perhaps I could go on patrol some night.'

'You'd have to fix that with Captain Jones.'

Jones, the new security chief. He had been in the village

only four or five days. Mayor Peel had brought him in to replace Hendricks as soon as the former had been promoted. Felix had only seen him a couple of times, but their respective positions did not bring them into contact.

'I may see you later.'

'Okay,' said the guard. 'But even if you don't, I'll see you.'

Yeah, thought Felix, they can all see me by switching on their screens. The only trouble is sometimes I have to see them.

'Hello, Howard,' said Gordon Peel. 'What can I do for you?' He closed a white cardboard file and reached into one of his desk drawers. He pulled out a stamp, inked it and banged it down across the file. DECEASED.

'Another funeral?' said Felix.

Peel nodded and stood up. He walked to the window and looked out over the gaily painted flat roofs, the bright concrete paths, the open stretches of green that was not grass.

'And another empty cottage, Mr. Mayor?'

'Another empty cottage, Mr. Felix,' agreed Peel.

'And it'll probably remain empty.'

'Maybe so, maybe not. It's no concern of yours.' Still with his back turned, he said for the second time: 'What can I do for you?'

'I tried to go for a walk a few minutes ago,' said Felix. 'Outside.'

The mayor turned. 'Outside?'

What's the matter with him? wondered Felix. He looks scared. Is he frightened of the prospect of having to go outside? Is he worried he'll lose his job the same as White? Peel had never told him the full story of what had happened to White, but it was not hard to guess that for some reason he had displeased Sunville's owners. One day he was there, the next he was gone.

'Yes,' said Felix, 'outside. Is there anything wrong with that?'

The mayor turned and looked out of the window again.

He never looks at me, thought Felix, finally becoming aware of what was so unusual about Peel's behaviour. Why not?

'It's dangerous outside,' said Peel.

'And that's why I've got to have a pass?'

Peel did not reply.

'Did you hear me? I want a pass to go out.'

Still nothing. He doesn't know, realised Felix; this is the first he's heard about it.

'You don't know about passes, do you?' he said. 'Jones hasn't told you. He's your man and he hasn't told you.'

Despite his resolution not to give Peel a reason to fire him, Felix knew he was needling the man. But he could sense that the mayor was for some reason powerless to strike back. That was the way White had become before he left, and now Peel was acting the same. It was as if he was on the defensive all the time, almost to the point of paranoia.

'Of course he's told me,' said Peel, quickly. 'It's only that no one's wanted to go out. If you want to, you'll have to get a pass from the captain.'

'I want you to give me one. You've got the authority. You're running the village, not him. Aren't you?'

'Howard,' said Peel, 'you're trying to annoy me. Don't. I've got enough to worry about. I'll call Jones and get him to fix you a pass. It was his idea and a good one.'

'You're more worried about the inmates escaping than you are about renegades getting in,' said Felix.

'Don't be stupid.'

'What will happen first, Mr. Mayor? Will the villagers die of old age? Will they all die before Sunville is invaded and destroyed or only when they have to face the real world and try to live in it?'

'If Sunville goes, Howard, then so do you. So do we all. You can go now. We don't need you. Perhaps we don't even need a replacement.'

Felix walked around the back of the mayor's desk and sat down. 'I'll make up a pass and you sign it.'

He ripped a triangle of card from the file Peel had pushed aside, picked up a ballpoint and wrote: *This is to certify*

that the holder of this card, Howard Felix, is authorised to leave Sunville. He stamped the date at the top. 'All you have to do is sign here.'

Peel walked over from the window, read it, signed, walked back. 'Is that all?'

'Anxious for me to go?' Felix glanced at the card. 'I wrote I was authorised to leave. I didn't mention coming back. There's your chance; you can lock me out.' He stood up, stuffing the piece of cardboard in his back pocket. 'Thanks. I'll be back for the news. Everything else is already programmed.'

'Are you taking a camera?'

'Could do.'

Filming was what Felix hated most. Having to visit the recreation areas and make recordings of octogenarian domino tournaments, and all the rest of it. He could do with someone to do it for him. An assistant, that was what he needed.

'An assistant,' he said, 'that's what I need.' Why had he never thought of it before?

'An assistant?' said Peel from the window. 'What for?'

'To assist.'

'No.'

'No?' Felix had his back to the other man and he sensed that Peel had turned to face him. 'A girl,' he said. 'About twenty-five. Long black hair. Good equipment. So high.' He held up his hand, fingers together, palm down, at chin level. 'See what you can do.'

'We don't need you, never mind two of you.'

'I want an assistant.' He was warming to the idea now. 'She'll have the room next to mine by the studio. I'm going to mention it tonight, so you'll have to get one. You wouldn't want to disappoint all those thousands of viewers, would you?'

'Don't push your luck,' warned Peel.

Felix spun around swiftly. The two men looked at each other.

'You're not threatening me? That's what White did and he isn't around any more.'

Peel's Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed.

'I'll leave it up to you. I'm sure you'll find someone suitable. Tune in tonight.'

Then he was gone and Peel remembered to breathe again.

After a few seconds he picked up the phone and dialled. There was no reply. He broke the connection and started again. He stopped as the door opened.

'Felix was here,' he said. 'I was calling you.'

'That's why I've come.'

'You know?'

'It's my job,' said the man who was acting as the security captain. 'That's why I'm here.'

'Why does he want to leave?'

'I don't know. He's never left before or shown any sign of wanting to.'

'He doesn't suspect?'

'Suspect what?' said Jones. 'Himself? Us? I don't think so. He only wants to go for a walk. He'll be back. We'll persuade him it isn't safe out there.'

'What will you do?'

'Something's been arranged. I've contacted the guards.'

Peel said: 'I suggested he went back for his camera, to give you more time.'

'I heard. You didn't warn him about making up news items.'

Peel shook his head. 'No thanks. Not after what happened to Chris.'

'That was coincidence,' said Jones. 'We've been through all that.'

'You didn't tell me about the new pass system.'

'That's because there isn't one.'

'I don't understand.'

Work it out for yourself, thought Jones. If Peel or White had contacted his department before, then the latter might still have been alive. Like all the other guards, the one at the dome exit was one of Jones's men. No one expected Felix would attempt to leave, but everyone had instruc-

tions that he was not to be allowed out. The guard had done a good job outlining how bad it was outside. Jones liked the touch about the ambushed patrol vehicle. He only hoped that, now Felix had heard of it, he would not mention such an occurrence on his news bulletin. But if anything happened, it happened. Felix would have nothing to do with it. Absolutely nothing. It was the guard who had invented the idea of a pass. Now that Peel had given him one, they would have to let him go.

Perhaps this might even be the end of the affair.

'If we lose him,' said Jones. 'It's your fault. You signed the pass.'

'You think I wanted to?' said Peel.

Jones did not reply. He glanced out of the window and did not like what he saw: A place of sanctuary for the rich, for the old, for the useless; while the rest of the world went to hell.

Yet it faced the enemy within, Howard Felix. Though if Jones was to believe Peel, Felix was as much of a menace to the whole world as he was to Sunville. Peel was concerned solely for his own skin, thought the security man, worried that he would end up like White. Yet there was the slightest possibility, even though Jones could not himself believe it, that the mayor was right. It was because of that possibility he had made his arrangements with the guards.

'What about an assistant?' said Peel. 'Do I get him one?'

'I'll handle it if necessary,' Jones told him. 'I've been thinking we needed someone who could get close to him.'

'Getting someone is doing what he wants,' Peel said.

Jones shrugged.

'A female equivalent of you?'

'Something like that.'

The phone buzzed. Jones said: 'It's for me,' and picked it up. 'Jones ... Yes ... Yes.' He replaced it. 'Felix is at the gate.'

Peel nodded. 'And this someone you had in mind. Is she about twenty-five, long black hair, this high?'

'Yes,' said Jones, 'something like that.'

Peel closed his eyes. 'See what I mean?' he said.

WITH his lightest portable camera cased and slung over his shoulder, Felix returned to the exit. He did not know what he intended to film. If he did get an assistant, this might be the last time he would ever use a camera. He felt almost nostalgic about it. He had decided to leave the dome on impulse; now it no longer seemed such an appealing prospect. If he could have gone straight out when he wanted, that would have been fine. As soon as the guard had asked him for his pass he had realised it was not such a good idea. Then, he had been more concerned to be allowed out even if he did not want to go. Having fixed it with Peel, he had lost interest. Now he was stuck with it.

The guard seemed not to have moved since Felix left.

'Will that do?' said Felix, giving him the pass. If he still was not to be let out, he would go right back to Peel again.

The man glanced at it. 'It's okay by me, Mr. Felix,' he said. 'But I'll have to check.' He went into the gatehouse, and Felix saw him pick up the phone.

After a minute he came out with another guard. The second man sat down.

'I'm to accompany you, Mr. Felix.'

'I see. What's your name?'

'Burns. Max Burns.'

'Right, Max. Let's go.'

Burns handed him back the pass and asked: 'Are we walking, Mr. Felix?'

'What's the alternative?'

'Armoured patrol vehicle, light speedster.'

'We'll walk.' If they had to go, they might as well do it as uncomfortably as possible.

Two sets of doors and they were outside. There was a bridge wide enough for a patrol vehicle. The place was like a castle. The bridge could be drawn up, and when down it spanned a wide moat. All the gate lacked was a portcullis. The moat was a drainage ditch to collect rainwater which landed on the dome. It seemed to have collected a lot of of other stuff. In some improbable manner it was doubt-

less linked to the sewage recycling system. Whatever the case, Felix imagined it would be a lousy kind of death to fall in there.

Otherwise the air seemed no worse than inside the dome, and the sun shone neither more nor less. It was still invisible most of the time. Felix had no idea when he had last seen the moon. Perhaps it had been blasted out of existence. He could not honestly say that he cared.

They followed the road which led away from the dome. Felix was ahead slightly, while Burns was to his right, automatic rifle held obliquely across his chest. All around them, beyond the area left clear for security reasons, were trees. Not all of them real, and the authentic ones were not much by the standards of the ersatz members of the forest. But it gave the villagers something to look at when their eyes strayed further than the boundaries of Sunville. It also cut off the view of a wide and mostly deserted highway, a small town on a clear day's horizon, several electricity pylons and miles and miles of nothing.

'How long you been at Sunville, Max?'

'A couple of years, Mr. Felix.'

'You like it?'

'It's better than being outside.'

'But do you like it?' Felix turned to look at the guard. 'I'm not going to tell anyone.'

'Well if you must know, Mr. Felix, all those old people give me the creeps.'

Felix resumed walking. 'And me, Max. And me.'

They walked on to the point where the road joined the six-lane highway.

'It doesn't seem too bad out here,' said Felix. 'There's no one around but us.'

'Some days are quieter than others. Night-time is usually the worst.' Burns nodded towards the town. 'It must be bad in places like that.'

'And nothing's going to get better for a long time.'

'How do you think it will end, Mr. Felix? Are we going to win?'

Felix shrugged, and they turned back.

They were halfway to the dome when they saw the vehicle. It was one of the armoured security cars but it came not from the dome, but from the highway. Felix had used a few feet of film and it would make a change to shoot something which moved. He stopped. Burns did not.

'Hey!' shouted Felix. 'Where's it been? Do you know the crew?'

Instead of replying, the security man broke into a run.

It was only then that Felix realised something was wrong. 'Max!' he called. 'Max!'

Burns kept running. Felix decided that it might not be such a bad idea if he did the same. He dropped the camera and fled, knowing even as he did so that there was absolutely no chance of reaching the dome before the car overtook him. Ahead, the guard tripped and fell, his gun spinning away from him. Felix got to him before he was on his feet again. He grabbed him by the collar.

'What is it?' he demanded. 'Why did you run?'

'The vehicle that was ambushed,' said Burns, panting. 'It was stolen. And that's it.'

Felix let go. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

He looked back. A hundred yards away the car was coming directly for them. He saw a man stand up behind the machine-gun mounted above the cab. He was going to fire. In a second Felix's mouth was dry, his body soaked with sweat, his heart clanging like an alarm bell.

The gun opened up. Felix hurled himself to the ground and rolled over and over. When he had stopped moving he noticed Burns. The security man had his pistol in his hand and was aiming it at him. A moment later, the guard's body was almost torn in half by a spray of bullets from the patrol vehicle.

Felix rolled once more as machine-gun bullets buried themselves in the earth all around him. Then there were no more shots and the car was past. He got up and went over to Burns, unclenching the man's fingers from his automatic pistol. There was nowhere to hide, not a trace of cover. He turned his attention back to the hijacked patrol car. He watched as, hardly reducing speed the vehicle started to

turn. It went into a sideways skid and toppled over a couple of times, finally coming to a halt on its side. No one got out before it started to burn.

Felix went back for his camera, but the car had run over it. He returned to Sunville.

'And finally, folks, an item which concerns you. Yes, you. Everyone who watches Sunville station, and that means everyone. In a couple of days you'll be seeing a new face on your screens. And what a face! I'm sorry to say that you won't be getting rid of me. I'll still be here. And in a few short days so will she. At this very moment Mayor Peel is finalising the arrangements. Yes, our new mayor of Sunville is certainly a man of action. But until she arrives we'll all have to wait. It'll be worth waiting. Goodnight.'

He's badly shaken, thought Peel as he switched off the screen. And who wouldn't be after going through what he had this afternoon? But he hadn't forgotten that bit about me getting him an assistant. He did stick to the news I gave him, though. He didn't make up any of his own. That was one thing to be grateful for.

Jones was going to have to be very careful from now on. Three men and an armoured patrol vehicle and they had not been able to kill Felix. It was ridiculous for Jones to pretend that he had not intended the newsman to die, that he only wanted to keep him confined to Sunville.

Peel could only hope for Jones's sake that the White story had been properly covered up. If he and White had acted differently, White would still be alive. It was too late for regrets. In any case, through it he had become mayor. What good was it? How long would Sunville last? If Felix could be eliminated soon, then maybe his job would still be worth having. Ideally, he knew, he ought to evacuate the villagers. Jones had vetoed the scheme. It would have alerted Felix—as if this afternoon's fiasco had not alerted him enough by now—and anyway Peel knew it would not be practicable.

John Butler had run the television service before Felix

took over. Up until then Felix had done electrical repairs, and he happened to be in the studio when Butler suffered the heart attack. Someone had to read the news and White had given Felix the go-ahead. Butler never recovered and died the same week. Felix had been there ever since.

Few in the village had access to news from outside. Peel was one of them. It was he who first noticed that Felix started adding pieces to the bulletins. It did not really matter; it helped give a bleaker picture of the world beyond Sunville, and several of the items were quite amusing. Gradually Peel noticed from further data that Felix's reports were correct. At first he thought the man must have had other sources of news, although he could not imagine what they might be. Soon he realised this was not so. Because Felix gave the news before it happened.

Peel had built up a dossier, listing the events Felix added to the news and dating them when they occurred. He had been right about everything, whether it was a matter of a few minutes or a week, the birth of a two-headed child or an earthquake. Peel had added nothing since White's death, and now the data was in Jones's possession.

Peel had shown his list to White, and White had been as frightened as he. Did Felix simply—simply!—know what was going to happen or was the reason more sinister? Did he control what happened? Was it possible that things happened because Felix said they would? It did not seem that the man was himself aware of his ability—whatever it was. Peel had been careful to exclude from the news he gave Felix any item which the man had already mentioned.

They tried an experiment. Making up a complete day's news, they gave it to Felix to read out. None of it came true, except for Felix's own improvisations. To White this meant Felix could see future events but believed they were things he had made up. Peel was not so certain, but White decided to put an end to it. He had ordered Felix to stop inventing news items and threatened him with dismissal if he did not.

That evening, Felix concluded with a sad piece of news. Mayor White had slipped and fallen downstairs, breaking

his neck. Peel went to find White immediately, but he was too late. He saw it happen. The mayor had gone straight to see Felix and fire him. He never made it. Peel was at the bottom of the stairs when the mayor fell.

They got the body away and it seemed Felix never knew the truth. He even appeared to have forgotten what he had said about White breaking his neck. Was his conscious mind unaware of the unscripted news he gave out? Whatever the reason, it was White's death which convinced Peel that Felix did not predict what happened, but somehow caused it to happen. And if the man ever discovered what he was capable of, there would be no stopping him. The world would be at his feet ... and he would kick it.

Jones did not believe that Felix could manipulate the future. He thought his talent was only predictive. Even so, it seemed that he had come to the conclusion that Felix was too dangerous to live.

Yet Felix was a man who could arrange the events of the future to suit himself. Could such a man die?

THREE

THERE was never much for Felix to do and he had no need at all for an assistant. It was like deciding to leave the dome: once he said he was going, he had to go. All he did was read out the news, link the programmes and make short films of events within Sunville. He watched a lot of programme tapes from outside, but this was more to pass the time than see if they were suitable for the villagers. The residents had no other choice of television station. Their screens were cable-linked to the studio. They could borrow cassettes, but that was their only alternative viewing.

He had a captive audience and wondered if they knew exactly how captive they were. Had any of them tried to get out recently? There was no reason why any of them should want to. Sunville was designed for them to live in until they died—though the word 'death' was taboo. And when one of the residents 'passed on' the corpses were

smuggled out under cover of darkness in order not to remind the others that the same fate would eventually befall them, that the future held nothing else. It seemed that death was the only exit from Sunville. Nor was there any way in except for those bringing supplies or for new residents. No one visited the village. Relatives, heirs, friends, all were prevented from even so much as phoning.

Reluctantly, his thoughts drifted towards what had occurred outside the dome. Why had Burns tried to shoot him? He did not for one second believe Jones's story that the man was trying to cover up for running away. Burns had been Jones's man. He was sure the security captain had something to do with it. But what? And how could he find out?

The armoured patrol vehicle which attacked them: the guard had fled the moment he saw it. It was as if he had been expecting it. Why should it have appeared at the same time he was out of the dome? Jones said it had not been seen since it was stolen. But Felix would not believe the man if he told him what day it was.

Not that it made any difference; but today was Tuesday. If his assistant had not arrived by Friday, he would have to go and see Peel again.

He stood up and shut the drawer containing the post-1970 feature film index. Before switching out the light and closing the door, he patted the bulge where his shirt hung over his belt. Only when he finished giving the news details did he realise he had not surrendered Burns' pistol. He could not recall deliberately concealing it; but now that he had it he was going to keep it.

He walked along the corridor towards his room. All he wanted was sleep. Going into the sitting room first, he pushed the gun down the back of one of the chair cushions. Undressing, he hung his clothes on the floor and went into the bedroom. After lying in the dark a few minutes, he got up again and felt his way into the bathroom. He had just closed the door behind him when there was an explosion in the bedroom. The door was blasted open. Felix fell down.

When he finally looked into the bedroom, there was not much of it left. Someone, he thought, is trying to kill me.

'A bomb?' said Su Harrison to Captain Jones. 'Have you gone out of your mind?'

Jones said nothing.

'He's bound to know something's going on now. How did you explain it away?'

'I said we didn't know.' Jones paused, as if waiting for her to say something. He added: 'It's given me an excuse to have an armed guard on him all the time.'

Su Harrison looked at the security captain with little favour. Jones's attitude was typical. If there was something he could not understand, he tried to destroy it. It did not matter that Felix's talent might be useful: and from what she had heard it almost certainly would be. It was fortunate she had arrived in time. She had to try not to antagonise Jones too much; they were both on the same side. He was only a second grade operator. Had he been anything else, he would have been engaged on work too important for him to be dragged to Sunville. But he had realised the situation was bigger than he could handle, and the importance of this man called Felix had filtered through. That was why she was here.

He probably thinks, said Su to herself, that I'm here simply to get Howard Felix into bed with me—where, overcome with passion, he'll tell all. She had not had to do that yet, and she was determined not to start now. Her body was her own. Anyhow, it appeared that Felix knew nothing about his ability and was even unaware of its existence. That suited her fine.

'You do nothing without telling me first,' she said. 'Understand?'

'What if he tries to leave the village?'

'Tell me. There'll be none of this "shoot first, ask questions later" stuff.'

'He's got a gun,' said Jones. 'He took it from the guard who went out with him. Should I get it back?'

He had not been violent so far, but that did not mean

he would not be in future. It was a risk she would have to take.

'No, leave it. Don't go anywhere near him. It'll only make him more suspicious.'

'And the men I've got guarding him?'

'You'll have to leave them. He won't believe they're there to protect him, but he'll think it even odder if you take them away.'

'Anything else?'

Yes, she thought, try and conceal your dislike for me a little better. 'No,' she said aloud. 'I hope I'm not too late, that's all. Remember what happened to White.'

She had meant it as a joke, but Jones said: 'That isn't at all funny. And when you've been here a few more days you won't think so, either.'

He went out, and Su picked up the phone.

Peel put down the phone. Jones had told him she would arrive today, but he was annoyed to discover she was already in the village without him knowing. He was the mayor, after all, and he ought to know what happened in Sunville. Was Felix aware that she was here? he wondered. He would soon find out. She was in the security office and she wanted to talk to him. He knew that she should come to him, not vice versa; but he was prepared to make an exception for once.

When he got there he wondered whether he should shake hands. He stood waiting for a sign, but all her attention was focused on a handful of sheets he could not fail to recognise—his own Howard Felix file. Another spring-clipped folder was on the table in front of her.

'Sit down, Mr. Peel. I'm Su Harrison.'

He nodded and sat.

'I'm taking over from Jones.'

'He's leaving?'

'No,' she said. 'He's staying but I'm running things.'

Which, reflected Peel, was doubtless exactly what Felix wanted. She met the newsman's physical requirements perfectly, and who was to say he had not intended her to

replace the murder-bent Captain Jones? It was bad enough to have Jones telling Peel how to run his village, and now there was a woman to make things worse.

'You wanted to see me, you said,' said Peel as her eyes returned to the papers spread before her. 'I'm a busy man.'

She looked up. 'Too busy to bother about Felix?'

'No. I'm scared of him. I've known him a long time and I've been involved with this ... this ...' He ended the sentence with a slight shrug of the shoulders. It was the truth, and he wanted to make it clear from the start where he stood.

'I'm interested in your experiment,' she said. 'Inventing a complete news bulletin. I thought of trying something similar.'

'It won't work. Things don't happen because he says so; he has to say what he wants to happen.'

'And if I could persuade him to want something to happen? If I could make him believe he'd thought of it himself?'

'Maybe,' said the mayor after a few seconds.

'If it worked, we'd have a way of controlling the future.'

Did I hear right? Peel asked himself. Did she also believe that Felix did more than predict?

'You think Felix controls the future?' he asked.

'To a slight degree, possibly.'

'It would be dangerous to try anything. What if he found out?'

'After preliminary investigation, I'm anticipating moving him from Sunville.'

'Why not now?' The sooner the village was rid of him—one way or another—the better.

'It may not be safe. We still don't know what he can do.'

'What will you do with him? Eventually he's bound to discover why he's so important. He can't be trusted.'

'We'd drug him. Permanently if necessary. Drugs to make him behave and do what we want. Experiments to see if his talent can be improved.'

Peel thought Felix's power was sufficient, it needed no improvement. Harrison had read the dossier. She knew

how many he could kill, what he had done. Perhaps she meant pushing him beyond his current seven-day limit. Whatever it was, he would much prefer him dead. Something in Peel's expression must have shown what he was thinking because she said:

'You're like Jones, aren't you? You want him dead.'

The man nodded.

'But he should only be destroyed as a last resort, not because we don't understand what he does or is capable of. You're like ... like one of those ancient kings who slew messengers bearing bad tidings. What Felix tells us is mostly bad—defeats, catastrophes—but we ought to arrange it so we get nothing but good news.'

'Glad tidings,' said Peel quietly, but the woman seemed not to hear.

'Is there anything else you can tell me about Felix,' she asked, 'anything I ought to know?'

Peel gestured towards the papers on the table. 'It's all there. I don't know anything about him before he came to Sunville, or even before he took over from Butler.'

'I can't add much. Born thirty-four years ago, only forty miles away. Left school at seventeen. No police record. No record of any medical checks. Didn't do military service. He's had close on two dozen jobs of various sorts. Doesn't seem to have any friends. His parents are dead. No other relatives.'

'And now he's here,' said Peel. 'Do you have files like that on everyone?'

'Yes. Though this is the most vague I've ever come across. But then our Howard Felix might not be this Howard Felix.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning anything. He could have killed the real Felix and assumed his identity. The description's the same, but it's very generalised.'

'He could be a spy, you mean? Someone planted here to confuse us.'

'It doesn't make sense.' She slammed the file shut. 'Perhaps it's about time I met him.'

They stood up.

'Do you know about television?' asked Peel.

'Enough.'

'How do I say I found you for the job?'

'You don't. I do. I can handle Felix.'

Peel thought otherwise. He said nothing; she would find out.

FOUR

SU DID not believe Peel's theory that Felix exercised a degree of control over the future; but she had two reasons for pretending she agreed with him. Firstly, so that she would have an ally in him against any more of Jones's insane plans to kill Felix. That was the idea; but she had not much faith in it. Even during her first few seconds with the mayor it was clear that he resented outside interference, and she tried to channel that resentment against Jones and away from herself. The second reason was to cover her true intentions. Whatever she had said to Peel was picked up by one of Jones's microphones. What she wanted to do seemed so obvious, she wondered why neither of the men had considered it.

Peel's observations seemed to give conclusive proof that Felix could foresee future events, and knowledge of such events could provide immeasurable benefits by acting now on what had yet to occur. She saw her task as attempting to direct Felix's predictions towards things which mattered and could be acted on, whether it was a terrorist raid or a hurricane. Felix should be able to develop a sense of timing, to know precisely when a thing he foresaw would occur. That would come later, of course, when the significance of her discovery had been appreciated. Peel had warned that Felix was dangerous, that he would use his ability for his own ends once he found out what he could do. Perhaps the man was right. By that time, however, it would not be her problem. Someone else would be handling the affair, and she would have moved on.

Six days ago she had known what she intended, but in-

tentions had not been enough. She had made poor progress and she knew she needed results soon. If not, Jones would turn in an uncomplimentary report, demanding that she be recalled and he be allowed to execute Felix as a threat to national security.

Almost the first thing she said to Felix was: 'What's he there for?' Meaning the armed guard.

And Felix replied: 'Because someone's trying to kill me.'

She was not concerned about the guard's reporting back to Jones: he would have the studio as well as Felix's and her quarters under constant surveillance. She was more bothered with the effect the security man would have on Felix. He would not trust any of them and their presence was likely to make him unwilling to talk freely or even to behave naturally.

'Kill you?' said Su. 'I don't understand.'

'Nor do I.'

She looked at the guard, then at Felix, then back at the guard again. 'Will he be around all the time?'

'No,' said Felix after a couple of seconds. 'I'll tell Peel to make Jones get rid of them.'

'And will he?'

'Yes.'

Felix was correct. The guards were removed. Su and Jones had talked about taking the guards away without raising Felix's suspicions, and Jones had removed them at the first opportunity. But had Felix been so certain they would go because he had read the future and they were not there? That was the way it looked.

'How did you know the guards would go away?' she asked once the order had been carried out.

'Because I wanted them to.'

Because he wanted them to. Said Su slowly: 'And you're used to getting your own way?'

'I suppose I am,' said Felix, not paying much attention. Then he glanced up and their eyes met. 'You ask a lot of questions.'

Su freed herself from his gaze. 'I'm only trying to find out.'

'Yes. But find out what?'

'My job, of course,' she told him. 'You wanted an assistant. That's what you wanted me for.'

'What I want and what you want don't necessarily correspond.'

She pretended not to understand. 'I don't see what you mean.'

At that moment something occurred to her and she said: 'You were going to tell me about censoring.'

He nodded and told her.

What had occurred to her was that Felix probably guessed who she was already—that was, if he could see how she would behave over the next few days and what she would ask. His words tended to indicate that this was so. But how precise was his knowledge of the future? Could he see everything or only a few things? Was it somewhere in between? Was the future viewed in terms of probability, with more likely events seen that much more clearly? Just as higher mountains stood above the clouds while the lesser peaks were veiled in mist. If that was how Felix saw the future, it ought to be possible to change the probabilities through decisions made in the present. That was what Su Harrison wanted. Yet there were so many questions and the answers could only come from Felix. To ask him would only make him realise what he could do. But if he already knew she would question him, it followed that he was aware he could predict the future. Under such circumstances, she might as well go ahead and question him. Yet how could she be certain she was right?

She had waited another two days before asking him about his news broadcasts.

'I've noticed, Howard, that you add news that isn't scripted,' she said when he had finished.

'No one knows. Except Peel who gives it me in the first place.'

'He doesn't mind?'

'Why should he? It doesn't do any harm. No one in Sunville knows the difference. White once asked me to stop it.'

'White?' said Su, who in her role as Felix's assistant did not know about the last mayor.

'He was mayor before Peel took over. Only ten days ago, that was.'

'I see. But why do you do it? Just to make it more interesting?'

'Do what?' said Felix vaguely, staring into the camera lens and twisting it.

'Add to the news.'

'I don't know. You can do it if you want.'

'Read out a bulletin?'

'Yes. It'll give them all another chance to look at you. Invent what you want. No one will listen. They never do. They don't care what goes on in the rest of the world so long as they're safe here.'

'Do you plan what you're going to say?'

'I'm not conscious of it. It comes while I'm reading the rest. It's as though it belongs there.'

'Like what you said tonight?'

'How should I know? I can't usually remember what I said any more than I can remember the rest of it without looking at the script again.'

She seemed to be getting through at last, finally making some progress. She debated whether to let the matter drop and take it up later, but instead she pressed on. 'Why don't you make up the whole bulletin if it doesn't matter?'

'I can't invent fast enough.'

'You could think of it before.'

'No,' he said. 'I don't have to think of things, they come of their own accord. If I did it consciously, it wouldn't be the same. Why bother? You do it tomorrow and see how it goes. All right?'

'All right.'

Su invented all the news and gave it to Peel. Peel sent it to Felix, and Felix gave it back to her to read out. So far none of it, even the item she dropped in spontaneously, had happened. She had expected this. Meanwhile, more of Felix's predictions came true.

She had the list Peel had made as well as what Jones had

added to it. But when she presented Felix to her superiors she intended to rely solely upon her own data. What she needed was something big, something she could report was going to happen and which would prove the value of what she had done when it did occur. Even better would be knowledge of a future event which would lead to a course of action being chosen to take full advantage of it.

She had not learned much; but it might be enough. All she had to do was wait, continue noting down Felix's prophecies and when they came true. Perhaps she could work out the timing, although so far it seemed completely random.

I know I'm waiting, she said to herself, but I'm not sure what for. Obviously for something to happen. Obviously? Could it be that she remained with Felix because the man wanted her to, that she had no choice? He said he was used to getting his own way and it seemed he was correct. I loathe him, she thought, but I can't get away. I'm trapped.

She had been doing exactly what Felix wanted from the first day she arrived. Or, more precisely, from the first evening. There had been other men before Howard Felix, but none had disgusted her so much as he. It was not so bad at the time, when she thought she was doing what she wanted. It was later, when she recalled what he had done and made her do, that she felt so repulsed.

It was made even worse by the fact that Jones would have been watching it all, missing not a single detail.

FIVE

'I WANT your help in destroying Felix,' said Jones.

'Really?' said Peel.

He's still angry at me, thought the security man, for damaging Felix's room. For breaking a few windows and disturbing a handful of insomniac pensioners.

'I thought that woman was giving orders,' continued the mayor.

'Not any more,' said Jones, pacing around Peel's office. 'She's in no fit state to do anything. Felix has got her.'

'Got her? What's he done?'

'Everything.'

Peel frowned. 'Has he found out he's under observation?'

Jones did not know, but he said: 'Yes.'

'Maybe he's known what he can do all along. He could have been playing with us. It's the sort of thing he'd find funny.'

'What do you think we should do?'

'Get as far away as possible, though nowhere could be far enough.'

'What good would that do?'

'Do you believe yet that he can control what happens,' asked Peel, staring out of the window while Jones continued his walk. 'Or do you still think he only sees events but can't do anything about them?'

'I think I agree with you,' said Jones truthfully. He was certain that Harrison would not have behaved towards Felix as she had done, even in the course of duty, if he had not forced her—with a force which was not merely physical.

When he had tried to blow up Felix, he could understand that the man might have foreseen the bomb going off and so left the bedroom. He had left in the darkness without the camera noticing him. If he knew it would happen, why had he waited until the last moment to get away? The apparent explanation was that to deceive Jones he pretended he did not know. But it could be that he realised it only seconds before the explosion and barely escaped in time. Yet if Felix could manipulate events, why had he allowed the bomb to be planted? Could Peel be right? Was Felix playing games, using them as toy soldiers for his own warped amusement?

He might have known he would be attacked outside the Sunville dome but get back safely. Or the attack might have been a surprise and he only lived because he had the ability to regulate what happened. Jones had heard Felix's account, and he had also been out to the scene. The machine-gunner was their best shot; but he had missed

Felix and killed Burns. An armoured patrol vehicle could not fall over and burn. Yet one had.

'Do you think he can be killed?' asked Peel.

'I do,' said Jones. He was not going to say that he had failed twice more and had only come to the mayor to see if he had any ideas. He had considered calling in further aid, but that would be an admission of defeat. He was not beaten yet, and if ever he was, he could arrange for Sunville to be missiled into oblivion. Even Felix could not survive that.

'Even though he's God?'

'Don't exaggerate. The world existed before he came along. He doesn't control everything, he can't. I'll accept he can control a few events, but that's all.'

'Events like White's death?'

'Yes.'

'And a cow giving birth to a donkey?'

'I don't believe that.'

'It happened. What about a submarine being sunk, a school burning down, a flood killing ten thousand?'

'You don't have to go on,' said Jones. 'I've read the list. I wrote some of it. Those are his predictions, not things he fixed.'

'You only hope he isn't that powerful. You don't know.'

'I know he could be rid of you and me just like'—he snapped his fingers—'that. We'd better do something before he does. Or in case he can assassinate a President or destroy someone's capital and really start things escalating.'

'I agree. But I think he can't be killed. Not by us. Perhaps not at all.'

'I think he can.'

'You hope he can.'

'We almost had him with the bomb. If I'd detonated it a few seconds earlier, he'd be dead. He's human, he must be mortal.'

He thought for a moment that Peel was going to deny this the same as everything else. Jones had come to him for help and reassurance, not doubt.

'I think,' said Peel, very slowly, 'that you may be correct in supposing Felix can only control a few events, and perhaps relatively minor ones at that. But to him, like us all, his own existence is very important. He has a built in survival mechanism to protect him from danger even when he may be unaware of it. That's why he went into the bathroom before the bomb went off. His survival mechanism knew there was a threat. It's the same as anyone else crossing a road. We step out of the way of anything coming without having to think about it. It's automatic.'

'But people still get run over.'

'Crossing a road isn't a very good analogy.'

Peel meant Felix's survival device would not let him down; but Jones was not going to say it for him. He did not believe it. He refused to believe it. Everyone could be killed. Everyone and anyone.

'What about poison?' suggested Peel.

'I thought of that. We could put it in something he drinks.'

'He's a gin man, I know that. There's usually a bottle in the studio. You could put something in that. Tasteless, colourless. Is there such a thing?'

'Yes. But he'd drop the bottle and break it,' said Jones, who knew because that was exactly what had happened.

'How can you be so——' Peel broke off, then said: 'You tried that?'

'Yes.' Was it that transparent? Peel could read his mind as easily as could Harrison. It had not used to be like that. He could feel himself going to pieces. Felix was a gin man, but with Jones it did not matter.

'What else?'

'I tried to gas him last night.' Last night when he had been with Harrison, too busy to hear even the slightest sound. Had he succeeded, she would also have died. That did not matter. She would be out of the way for good; there would be little difficulty explaining her death.

'What happened?'

'I was going to pump it through the ventilation, but the nozzle of the cylinder came away in my hand. I was wear-

ing a gas mask. If I hadn't been, I'd be dead. I can get another cylinder.'

'And you think it would make any difference?' Peel shook his head. 'Have you tried anything else?'

'Not yet. He's got a pistol. I wondered if we could make him kill himself.'

'How?'

'I've no idea.'

'I think,' said Peel, 'that we shouldn't try to kill him. Not right away. You've tried it and you've failed. We should drug him, put him under sedation. That should be simpler. And then he could be killed.'

'Yes,' said Jones. 'Yes.'

Felix was bored. Bored with what he was doing, with Su Harrison, with Sunville. There was not very much he could do to change things. There was nothing to stop him leaving the village. Peel would be only too anxious for him to go. But Felix knew when he was well off. In spite of everything, he still felt safer inside the dome than out of it.

He could not deny that someone had tried to kill him. Peel? Jones? Renegades to avenge what had happened to their stolen patrol vehicle? He had no way of finding out. And whoever was responsible was still at large. Perhaps he could leave Sunville and try for a post in another dome.

'Su,' he said, 'leave that for a minute.'

'What is it?'

'I'm thinking of leaving Sunville. What's it like outside? Is it as bad as what I read out, or is that only for the villagers' consumption?'

'It depends what you mean.'

'I've told you what I mean. Would I be better off, be safer outside of Sunville than in it?'

He was not certain why he was asking her. Would I take any notice of what she said? No, he answered himself immediately, probably not. But, he thought, I'm not asking her what I should do, only trying to get some information on which to base my decision. She still had not given him an answer.

'Thanks for nothing,' he said. 'Carry on what you were doing.'

She did.

Ever since she arrived, he had been thinking of getting rid of her. She did what she had to do well enough, though Felix unnecessarily duplicated her work simply to fill in time. That's what it is, he realised: Time. I'm throwing away my life here in Sunville, using up all my time on nothing at all. Yet what was the alternative? He had to do something.

He glanced down at the automatic pistol in his hand. Without knowing what he was doing, he had got it out of the empty shell of the broken editing machine. He wondered why he had taken it from its hiding place. Instead of replacing it, he stuck it down his trouser waistband. He looked over at Su, but she had not noticed.

He stared out of the window, out through the dome to the real world. What do I want with the outside? After all, thought Felix cynically, Sunville is but a microcosmic replica of the rest of the planet. Tiny though perfect in every detail. The villagers were kept safe from their enemies: the have-nots, anyone less than six decades old. They thought they were in the best place on Earth, here where they lived in fear and hate. But it was those outside who were the fortunate ones. They lived. There was still a chance they would outlive the dome-dwellers, while the latter fell victim to the inevitable: age.

Felix laughed silently. It was so funny. And here am I, he said to himself, going all philosophical.

'What's so funny?' asked Su, and Felix realised that his laughter was no longer silent.

'Life,' he said, thinking how pompous and clichéd that sounded: Life, y'know, is a damn funny business.'

'Oh,' she said, which was almost as bad.

What would happen, he wondered, if I broke into the programme and gave them all the Felix philosophy? Probably nothing. What he said would go straight through them. He could tell them they would never leave Sunville; but they did not want to leave. The only way he might pro-

voke a reaction was to string together a series of things he had cut out of old films: things like sex scenes, reminding them of what they had lost for ever. Maybe even that would not do. Yet he felt like blasting them out of their complacency. Make Su undress in front of the cameras and then murder her? He was fantasising and he knew it. He had never done anything remotely disturbing to the villagers; he was not about to start now.

He was bored and stuck with it. He would never get out of Sunville. Not alive. He would go out the same way everyone else did. At night inside a rectangular box.

Behind him Su coughed. She coughed again. It sounded like she was choking. He turned, and as he did so the woman fell to the floor. He took a few steps in her direction, then felt a tickle inside his mouth. He coughed. His mouth began to burn, the fire moving down his throat.

SIX

IT WAS the air. Something was wrong with the ventilation. Coughing, he reached the door and turned the handle. The door would not open. He stopped breathing. The windows were sealed units, not capable of being opened. He picked up a chair and hurled it at the glass. The chair fell back, the pane starred. He threw the broken editing machine and it broke through. He leaned out of the gaping hole, breathing deeply. He smashed all the other windows. Next, he took off his shirt and wedged it in the slats of the ventilator cover. Su was still breathing, and he dragged her across the floor. His fingers bled as he knocked away glass stalagmites and held her to the window. His own breathing was ragged and he wondered if he should attempt to clear her lungs.

Something could have gone wrong with the ventilation. Something could have made the door jam. But not both together, not by accident.

Felix sat the woman down on the floor, propping her up against the wall. With bloodied hands, he took hold of the gun and moved towards the door. He turned the handle and

pulled. It still did not open. There was no keyhole and Felix could not imagine what device was holding the door. He had come through it half an hour before. There had been nothing then. Holding the barrel six inches from where the door met the jamb by the handle, he squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. He found the safety catch. He aimed again and the door opened.

It only opened slightly, but Felix grabbed the handle and pulled. Jones stood there. He was putting something in a side pocket. He saw Felix and he opened his mouth.

'Felix,' he said.

'Jones,' said Felix. 'You'd better say something worth hearing.'

The security man reached for the gun at his hip, but Felix raised the automatic and pointed it at the other's chest.

'Speak.'

'The ... the ventilation. I came to ... came to ...'

Jones took a step backwards and his foot came up. It made contact with Felix's kneecap and his arm veered sideways just as the gun went off. The captain turned and ran. Felix fired down the corridor after him but did not think either of his shots hit the target. He limped back into the studio, closing the door and wedging it shut with the back of a chair under the handle. He went over to Su. Her eyes opened slightly as he knelt by her side, putting the gun on the floor and brushing hair out of her face.

'You were gassed,' he said to forestall the inevitable question.

She nodded almost imperceptibly. 'Knockout gas, or else we'd be dead. I'd be dead.'

'It was Jones.'

'Jones.' There was no hint of query in her voice.

'He'll be back with help,' said Felix. 'You'd better tell me what you know.'

'I don't know anything,' she said.

But Felix took no notice. He had thought of something. He stood no chance against Jones's men, but perhaps he could make them leave him alone.

He went over to the desk where he sat when he did his news bulletins and introductions. First switching on the camera, he turned off the automatic programme control, then flipped a switch on the edge of the desk.

'Hello, folks,' he said, smiling. 'I bet you're surprised to see me. First off, a couple of apologies. I apologise for interrupting the programme you were watching, and I must also apologise for my appearance. This is a special news announcement. It concerns something which happened only moments ago. In fact, it's still going on right now. Someone tried to kill me and Su Harrison. This person pumped poison gas into the studio ventilator. I wedged my shirt in it to block it off, which explains why I'm not wearing it. If you don't believe me, come along and take a peep up at the studio. It's the room with the broken windows. I broke them to let the gas out.'

'This isn't the first attempt on my life. I was almost killed twice last week. Once when I was fired on by one of Sunville's own patrol vehicles, and later the same day when a bomb exploded in my bedroom.'

'One of those responsible is Captain Jones, chief of the village's security.'

'I'm expecting to be murdered any minute. So if I suddenly vanish from your screens or never appear again, you'll know the reason.'

'Stay tuned for further details.'

Felix flipped back the switch.

'They cut you off after the first few words,' said Su.

'They probably tried,' said Felix. 'But everything is controlled from here. I changed the cables, by-passing the other circuits.' He did not know why he had done so at the time, but now it seemed he had been preparing for such an eventuality.

Felix answered the phone halfway through its first buzz.

'What do you want?' asked Peel. He was in it, too.

'I want to know why you want to get rid of me.'

'We don't want you in Sunville.'

'Then I'll leave. I want to go, you want me gone. Where's the problem?'

'Very well.'

'You'll guarantee my safety? I'll have the woman as my hostage.'

'Whatever you say.'

'All Jones's men to be disarmed.'

'Yes.'

It was too simple. Naturally Felix did not trust the mayor. He had no alternative. It was a chance. By staying here he would die in this room.

He looked over at Su, who still had not tried to rise. She had not heard Peel's side of the conversation, but he said:

'Can I believe what he says?'

'Yes. They're helpless. They can't do a thing.'

He wanted to ask her what she meant. He was certain she was somehow linked with Peel and Jones. She was ready to talk. To admit defeat? He could wait. He would get them all together.

'Come up here,' he said to Peel. 'You and Jones. Unarmed.'

'We're on our way.'

Felix set down the receiver and continued to sit behind the desk. Shakily, Su got to her feet.

'Peel and Jones are coming,' he said to her. 'Move the chair and open the door. Jam it again as soon as they're inside.'

She walked to the door.

Now the two men were coming, Felix wondered what they were coming for. All he wanted to do was leave. That was what they had to arrange. They would want to get him out as quietly as possible.

Peel entered, Jones following. Su closed the door and leaned the chair against it, wedging it shut.

'We're here,' said Jones, 'unarmed. The guards have all been withdrawn. No one's going to stop you if you go.'

Felix was not sure what he should say, much less what he should do. Why can't I simply stand up and walk out? he asked himself. There was nothing keeping him here. All he needed was a few minutes to get his things. He licked at his lips, but his tongue was still dry from the gas.

'What happens next?' he asked.

He should be making his own move, he knew, but for some reason he was waiting for one of the others to take the initiative. He was, literally, at their mercy. But they also seemed at a loss as to what they should do.

He acted. Without thinking, he did something. His hand operated the switch on the edge of the desk. Not looking at the camera, but instead watching the people by the door, he said :

'Hello, folks, I've just time to say goodbye. This is the last time you'll see me on your Sunville screens. I am about to be shot dead. Goodbye.'

Jones was the first to react. He walked quickly to the window where Felix had left the gun, bent down and picked it up then continued across the studio to the desk. He pointed the pistol at the seated man and shot him, once, in the temple. Felix was knocked back, toppling over in his chair, and fell to the floor.

Why did he do it? wondered Su Harrison. He had no reason. He had died because of what he said. He could not have said it because he knew he would die. Or could he?

No one had moved. She and Peel remained near the door. Jones stood in front of the desk, the gun hanging by his side. They all looked at one another.

Felix's last words before he turned on the camera were in her mind, and she knew they were in the minds of the other two : What happens next?

She turned her head to stare through one of the broken windows, out beyond the dome, and wondered if anything would happen anywhere ever again.

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