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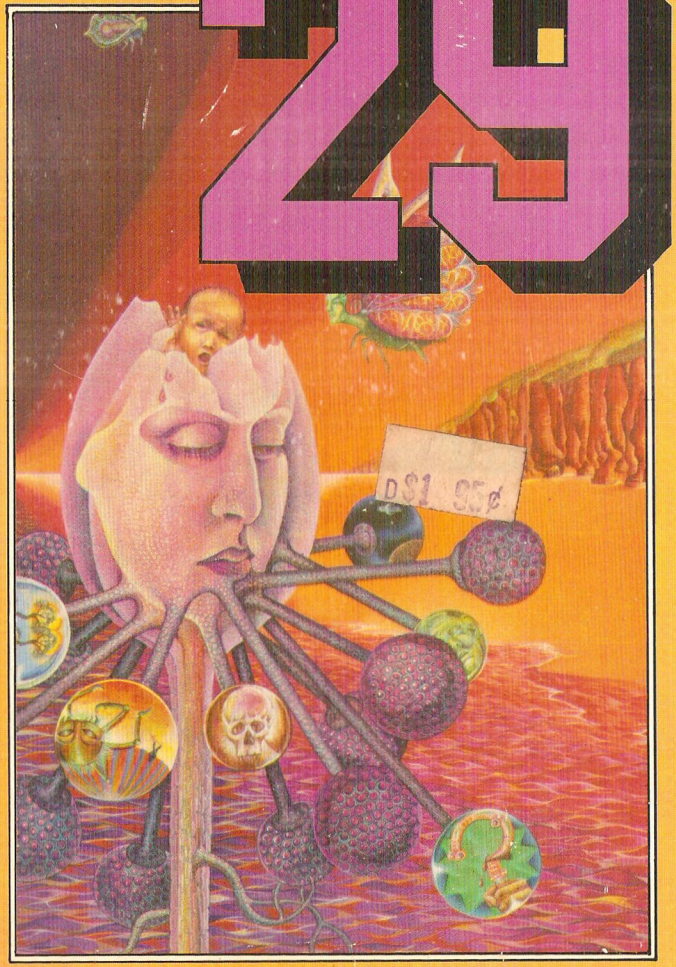
EDITED BY KENNETH BULMER

NEW WRITINGS IN SF 29



New Writings in SF 29 is now one of the most well-established and respected series in the science fiction world. Created in 1964 by John Carnell, in collaboration with Corgi Books, NEW WRITINGS rapidly gained a reputation as a showcase for the most talented writers in the field, and when John Carnell died in 1972 the series was taken over by Kenneth Bulmer whose wideranging knowledge of, and enthusiasm for SF has continued to make NEW WRITINGS the place to find stories of a speculative, forward-looking, and mind-provoking nature, highlighting and illustrating the dilemmas of today - and tomorrow.

In the same series edited by John Carnell
New Writings in SF 1–21

and edited by Kenneth Bulmer
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New Writings in SF 29

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For Brian and Margaret Aldiss –
for many good reasons

FOREWORD

by

KENNETH BULMER

SCIENCE fiction asks much from its readers and in return gives the Universe. One aspect of sf often used in its praise and, perhaps, more often as a club to belabour the whole of sf is its newness. If an aspect can be used as a club, sf has taken more than its fair share of punishment. One school of thought, still applying the somewhat out-of-date slogan of 'idea as hero', stoutly resists this punishment, pointing with large contempt at the comparative barrenness of the contemporary novel. The truth is that the contemporary science fiction novel successfully melds the best of old and new, and the sf short story, a form always pioneering, does the same thing.

The facts are that the imaginative, supernormal, fantasy story began with the first glimmerings of consciousness in the human brain that went beyond the immediate needs of food and sex. A story need not have an entirely new and original idea – they are almost as rare as waterfalls on Mars – but if it is handled in a new and original way it will surely find fresh responses and open up fresh areas of experience. When new ideas do come along they light up the whole field of sf and enrich us all.

The word 'new' in the title of NEW WRITINGS IN SF must be taken in one sense to indicate that the stories are not reprints, as are the stories in almost all the current anthologies. Most of the material in New Writings is sf especially written for the collection. The word 'new' also does not mean that every writer appearing in our pages is a new writer. Readers will know that a balance is struck between the brand new practitioners and the authors who have

achieved some fame in the field. The interesting fact remains that NEW WRITINGS IN SF does publish a very high proportion of high class fiction from brand new writers, and very many of them continue on to carve out successful writing careers for themselves. In this valuable task New Writings is the undisputed leader.

I ought to make the point here, most strongly, that writers submitting material for consideration should enclose a suitably-sized envelope with correct return postage.

It would be useful to me if, when you write your next letter of comment to New Writings, you indicate in which order you read through the book. Do you just start on page one and read straight through? Do you check the contents page and then turn to a favourite author? And then how do you continue? Or what method, if any, do you adopt when reading New Writings? We do not run a readers' column; but all letters are most gratefully received and help to build up our picture of the reader response, which, I am pleased to say, continued to be highly commendatory.

'A Space for Reflection' is not one of Brian W. Aldiss's trios of Enigmas. Laying aside the compilation of the Enigmatic Companion for a space, Brian Aldiss presents us with a story packed with philosophies that will arouse intense reactions and with points of view devastating in their apparent simplicity, enriching in their complexities.

Cherry Wilder, an Australian lady of great charm and presence, has been scoring notable successes of late, and with 'Double Summer Time' she takes us on a strange journey through the motives of human beings, themselves the victims of twists in time.

Donald Malcolm takes a long look at alien mores and customs under terminal strains, and E. C. Tubb presents a puzzle tale in which brawn has no advantage over brain.

With 'The Z Factor' Ernest Hill presents something of a puzzle, too, only this time the puzzle is the tone of the piece as the author swings our attention away from the expected direction to reveal fresh dimensions of man's uniqueness – or is it merely that this pseudo-uniqueness is encompassed within the wheel of entropy?

Charles Partington is building up in a particular style very much of the late nineteen-seventies and I am sure readers will look forward with interest to finding out what Mr. Part-

ington is going to do with the various strands he has been revealing to us in his recent work.

Absent from NEW WRITINGS IN SF since volume 20, where he appeared with 'Canary', Dan Morgan presents in dead-pan style his blackly ironic look at one human reaction to population control.

Appearing in print for the very first time, David H. Walters gives us a double-barrelled reminder of the old saying: 'By the Word shall ye Live.' The trouble here is the weakness of the human throat and vocal chords.

All these stories are brand new and all in their own way and to a variety of degrees contribute to the totality that is science fiction.

KENNETH BULMER

DOUBLE SUMMER TIME

by

CHERRY WILDER

Here is a dazzling new story from the author of 'The Ark of James Carlyle' and 'The Phobos Transcripts' which calls upon many different spheres of interest, approaches to reality, and relationships of human with human, human with robot and human with vegetable. With extra-terrestrial intelligences able to interfere with the flow of Time it was just as well for Charles Curthoys that he remembered the date of his birthday. The story contains the interesting notion that a person would have special qualifications by reason of once having been a tree. And Cherry Wilder's notion of the favourite beverage of the robot is a masterstroke . . .

DOUBLE SUMMER TIME

ONE

SECURITY found the Professor in his laboratory preparing to examine a fragment of rock. Curthoys, the senior research assistant, showed in the two officers with a certain amount of restrained commentary. Hewbry Hall was old; it had grown by accretion over several hundred years. The conservatory had been added during the nineteenth century, the plumbing refurbished during the twentieth, the laboratory ... Curthoys flung open the door ... was quite modern.

Brewster, the ranking NSO man, was impressed; the amount of computer installation alone testified to a large transatlantic bequest. He cocked an eye at Adamson, his colleague, who was bound to appreciate a technological display.

'Expecting us,' murmured Adamson.

There was a camera, of the sort still associated with bank robbers, and a recording device in plain view; Curthoys followed Brewster's glance and gave a thin smile.

A husky young man in lab whites prowled on the periphery. That would be the junior research assistant: Ed Grey from Caltec. Far away on his dais the Old Man looked up from his work with a ferocious grin; he was at the top of his form.

'Good morning!' he barked. 'I wonder what you could possibly want with me?'

Brewster sighed; he had tangled with the Old Man before.

'Professor Latham ...?'

'I admit it!' cried the Professor. 'I am the man. Sidney Erasmus Latham ... got that? And you are my Big Brothers.'

Brewster flashed his identity plate stoically and approached the dais.

'Wait!' The Professor held up his hand. 'I want a further wit-

ness to this interview . . . she takes stenographic shorthand.'

He bent towards his intercom and Ed Grey stepped eagerly towards the glass doors. The security men followed him and Curthoys ambled across: all four men stared out into the garden.

A girl sat under the trees reading a book. The place was overgrown, tumbling with vines and starry clumps of border plants, but ages ago it had been a formal garden. The girl sat reading in chequered shade; leaf shadows moved across her bare arms and the pages of her book.

'Verity!' said the Professor. 'Come in please.'

The girl put aside her book and walked towards the laboratory, brushing aside the curtains of green leaves.

Brewster was captivated by the scene. Verity Latham, the daughter. He had studied her file of course . . . militant ecologist: a greenfreak. Degree in antiquities of some sort . . . English Literature? Classics? First Class Honours obtained while serving six months in prison, then she recuperated in the Kenyan Reserve . . . she still had the tan. Her long light-brown hair was bleached by the fierce sun. She had been interrogated once or twice about the Old Man's security problems but she wasn't co-operative. Blood was thicker than water. What did she think about a father who rigged his intercom to an oak tree?

Ed Grey slid open the glass doors and Verity came in. She took down a white jacket from the peg and slipped it over her sleeveless green tunic. Transformed herself into a stenographer then settled down with her notebook.

'Professor Latham,' said Brewster. 'We have reason to believe you were in the Oakdene area this morning.'

The Professor gripped the grubby lapels of his old-fashioned lab coat and moved forward on the dais.

'You'll have to do better than that,' he said nastily.

Brewster glanced cautiously at Adamson who blinked once and began to read his report.

'Twenty minutes after impact, while the police from Chipping Dene were attempting to cordon off the area, Professor Latham was seen by members of the public and by police officers. He was approaching the verge of the crater and collecting specimens. . . .'

'Brilliant!' the Professor pounced. 'A splendid absence of names, times, bona fides. I can picture the scene only too

clearly. The ancient trees, the early morning mist . . . five or six coppers and their lumbering, petrol driven paddy-wagon. The crater, yawning like the pit of hell, and a white-coated figure flitting about among the trees before the dumbstruck peasantry. Perhaps it was the Minister for National Security in a fright wig!'

The Professor ran a hand over his shock of white hair; he and his two assistants laughed aloud.

Adamson put in impassively:

'You were there, sir. I observed you myself.'

'And your observations are not to be questioned?' snapped the Professor.

'No, Sidney,' said Verity Latham, half amused. 'You can't question *his* observations.'

Brewster was surprised; she had been sitting beside an open window, taking her shorthand industriously with an occasional glance into the garden. He was surprised that she had been the one to recognize Adamson.

'What is it Verity?' said the Professor irritably. 'Are we going too fast for your wretched grammalogues?'

Verity sighed, looked at the two security officers apologetically and blew Adamson's cover.

'That chap is infallible,' she said. 'He saw you. He can't volunteer incorrect information.'

No-one spoke; the hum of the generators filled the room. Curthoys juggled silently with a flask, his eyes fixed on Adamson.

The Professor said quietly:

'Good heavens . . .'

'Yes,' said Verity. 'He's one of the NSO robots.'

Brewster flinched from a blow that never fell. The usual reaction was fear and outrage but Latham was plainly delighted. Brimming with scientific curiosity he came down from his perch, shook Adamson warmly by the hand and introduced his assistants and his daughter.

He announced cheerfully:

'Of course I was at the site! As you well know Mr. . . . er Brewster isn't it? . . . I've been at every site for the past twelve months. The helicopter has done yeoman service.'

'I'm sorry to intrude on you like this, Professor,' said Brewster, 'but your clearance . . .'

'I know, I know, I'm B-minus these days.'

The Professor was observing Adamson wistfully like a boy outside a toyshop window.

'I think that Mr. Adamson can testify if he checks his memory banks that I carried no extra-terrestrial material from the site.'

Adamson nodded; he no longer made the pretence of reading from a notebook.

'Samples of plant life and rocks, a dead blackbird and two squirrels, lying twenty metres from the lip of the crater.'

'Squirrels? Red squirrels?' Verity demanded.

'Grey squirrels,' said the Professor. 'Grey . . . bring out the grey squirrels.'

'That's still pretty bad!' grumbled Verity as Ed Grey nipped up to the dais and produced a carrying cage. 'If these damned meteorites are killing squirrels . . .'

'Hush, child!' said Curthoys. 'The squirrels are not dead.'

The Professor led the security men to the dais.

'Of course these objects kill animal life. I found a dead weasel at one site and at another the remains of a sheep-dog. On the other hand a surprising number of animals in the area of a drop suffer no ill effects. I have had reports of some sheep that were unharmed and I found a pair of rabbits . . . what . . . three months ago.'

'What do you do with these animals?' asked Brewster. He could hardly believe his good fortune. The Old Man had cracked, had become tractable all of a sudden; Adamson had done the trick.

'Yes, Sidney?' asked Verity. 'What *do* you do with them?'

'I test them for radiation of course!' snapped the Professor. 'What d'ye think I do with them? Vivisect them? Get off your hobby-horse, Verity!'

Ed Grey was lowering the carrying cage into a long demonstration chamber at one end of the Professor's work bench. He adjusted the lighting in the chamber, then pressed a lever so that the carrying cage opened and lay flat. The two grey squirrels were ready for observation; they lay on the tanbark lightly curled in sleep, fluffy tails billowing over their noses.

'Sleeping?' asked Adamson, whose inbuilt curiosity was equal to the Professor's.

'Coming out of shock,' said Latham. 'That's all it is. No

trace of radiation. Both animals sound and healthy so far as we can judge.'

'You've examined them?' asked Verity.

'Very cursorily, I'm afraid,' said the Professor. 'Barely had a moment to run the geiger over the wee beggars. We'll be more thorough. Do it yourself if you're so concerned, my dear. Get Grey to run a few tests.'

He turned back to Adamson and Brewster.

'We're not equipped for livestock,' he said. 'At the moment we're working with metals. And talking of metals the so-called 'casing' found at site five, near Hastings, is in my opinion no more than a fragment of igneous rock!'

'Have you found *any* evidence . . .' Brewster began.

'To support this popular theory of an "alien probe"?' chortled the Professor. 'None . . . none . . . Unless you count the regular distribution of these meteors.'

'Your "grid pattern",' said Adamson.

'Exactly.' The Professor jerked his head at Curthoys. 'We'll have coffee in the projection room. I have film that illustrates the grid pattern.'

Verity continued to observe the two squirrels; they stirred in their sleep, fur rippling, and twitched their feet a little. One opened its eyes and brushed its front paws sleepily over its ears. Brewster looked back as the Professor shepherded them through the heavy drapes into the projection room and saw the two young people, heads together, peering into the demonstration chamber. Ed Grey's work certainly had its compensations.

'Fourteen sites . . . but scarcely any fragments . . .' there came the penetrating obbligato of the Professor's voice. 'They burn up . . . they are consumed away . . . like all meteorites . . .' He gave a familiar bark of laughter.

'Need a pretty hard organism to survive such an entry.'

Two

CHARLES CURTHOYS got into the habit of visiting the conservatory every morning after breakfast with nuts for the squirrels. It was a sad place, with the elegant glass domes overhead and the floor a tangle of rusty piping. Central heating had saved the palms and the hardy tree-fern. Now Verity

had set up her cages and was embarked on some sort of program with the squirrels. Curthoys was surprised that she persevered; the squirrels were healthy and attractive but in no way remarkable. He wondered if she might be trying to impress her father with a show of scientific zeal. The Professor was ambivalent: he told Verity he was pleased to see her keeping out of mischief, but he alarmed the housekeeper, Mrs. Furness, by suggesting that a squirrel had grown two heads. More to the point he refused to let Ed Grey assist with the program. They were approaching a critical stage in their work with the alloys and the new transformer.

Curthoys fished in his pocket for the hazel nuts and went into the conservatory chirruping. One of the squirrels was unusually tame and Verity let it have the run of the place. This morning it was sitting near her shoulder as she typed up her confounded reams of notes.

'Go to Charles,' said Verity absently.

The pretty creature came skipping along the bench towards him and accepted his offering. He exchanged pleasantries with it, then became embarrassed. Verity was watching him with a curious expression.

'. . . Verity?'

'Something has come up,' she said.

Her tone was serious but soothing; he could have sworn she was trying to break something to him gently. She took the squirrel out of his arms and returned it to the big cage. Inside, near the roof, the second squirrel chattered on a tree stump; it ran down and timidly accepted a hazel nut from Curthoys, then scampered back to its perch.

'She's the shy one,' said Curthoys. 'Female of the species.'

'They are both female,' said Verity, with the Professor's dryness.

'I fancied they were an old married couple,' Curthoys said cheerily. 'Sitting on the same branch when the blow fell.'

Verity turned some pages.

'It's in the notes . . .' she said. 'I've underlined some passages. Ed made the preliminary examination . . . couldn't determine the sex of Squirrel A . . . the tame one . . . but later it was definitely seen to be female, like Squirrel B.'

'Haven't you given them names?'

'No,' said Verity. 'Charles, what became of the pair of rabbits found at site twelve?'

'Wait a bit ...' said Curthoys. 'I gave them to a friend of mine, Dave Jenkinson ... local schoolmaster. That was one of the sites where there was a scuffle with the police. This damned cordon business. It will be a great relief if your father can wangle a better clearance through Brewster. Yes ... yes ... we tested the rabbits in the field with the geiger counter and I gave them to Jenkinson. He's a great admirer of the Old Man and he'd been helping to fight off the bobbies.'

'And the rabbits survived?'

'Of course. He took them back to school. Ordinary rabbits, sort of heather mixture in colour ... looked very dead when I went to pick them up. I suppose one expects to see rabbits dead. Last we heard one had got away.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Verity.

'Look here!' said Curthoys. 'You're not suggesting these animals were contaminated in any way?'

'Of course not,' said Verity. 'Were they both of the same sex?'

'Yes,' said Curthoys. 'Come to think of it they were. Jenkinson hoped to breed, you know, object lesson in multiplication, but the rabbits turned out to be Bill and Bob, not Bill and Betty.'

Verity added a footnote and began to gather all the pages into her file.

'Charles, what would you do if no-one believed your hypothesis?'

'Attempt to prove it, I suppose.'

'If you made a discovery that was difficult to believe,' she said hesitantly, 'would you feel bound to make it public?'

'It depends!' said Curthoys. 'There might be repercussions.'

He could see what the trouble was. The poor child had a touch of the extra-terrestrials. She had hit upon some tiny mutation, some behaviour quirk in her bloody squirrels and built it into a theory of alien influence.

He said kindly:

'Verity, I've worked with your father a long time. I remember your mother. I often think how she would have loved this place, Hewbry Hall ...'

He felt guilty at the emotional blackmail but it was his

duty, surely, to head her off. The Old Man should not be bothered. Another row would be unbearable and the tests were at a crucial stage.

'What I'm trying to say is this,' he went on quickly, 'I'm sure this is not your field. A few months at the reserve with Dr. Nguma ... that's not a qualification. No-one here is qualified to undertake or to evaluate any behavioural study, any zoological work.'

'All right Charles,' said Verity, wearily.

She seemed disappointed but not surprised. Strange girl. He had heard the standard comment ... how did old Sidney come to have such a striking daughter? It was no surprise to him because he did remember Alys ... more beautiful, more womanly, played the piano, worked at her gardening books ...

'You are on much firmer ground with your literature,' he said. 'What happened to the seventeenth-century monographs that were going to spin off from your thesis? What became of Marvell, Andrew Marvell, wasn't he your favourite?'

'I'll get back to him,' said Verity.

She opened the cage again and Squirrel A came out. It flew up to her shoulder and nestled in her long sunbleached hair; they whispered together. Charles Curthoys felt the tiniest flicker of discomfort: surely it wasn't natural for a creature to be so docile. He must have a word with Grey ... perhaps he had noticed something worth reporting.

'I'll release the squirrels in the garden this afternoon,' said Verity.

'So the project is finished?' said Curthoys eagerly. 'Much the wisest plan.'

He looked at his watch.

'I must be going. Time's winged chariot and all that.'

'Take the file, Charles!' ordered Verity. 'I want you to read it.'

He snatched it up, unable to protest.

'Does your hypothesis have a name?' he asked. 'I mean, what is it about generally?'

Verity stroked the grey squirrel.

'I call it Mimesis.'

'What? Doesn't that have something to do with *acting*?'

'You could say mimicry. Or metamorphosis.'

'Changing shape?' said Curthoys. 'I'm afraid you've lost me.'

He was lying; the idea was simply more of an enormity than he had expected. Mad, quite mad. Caterpillar into butterfly, nymph into dragon-fly, tadpole into frog . . . these were natural processes. Alien into squirrel, squirrel into . . .

'Something organic . . .' said Verity.

'But what?' said Curthoys, thinking as laterally as he could. 'Surely size is a consideration . . .'

'What was common to all the sites, Charles?'

'Uninhabited,' said Curthoys. 'Lonely, wooded . . .'

'Yes,' said Verity.

'Trees!' said Curthoys. 'Unless there was some other suitable form of organic life to . . . to . . .'

'To copy,' said Verity.

'Nonsense!' cried Curthoys. 'Verity, put that squirrel away and get out into the fresh air!'

He rushed out of the conservatory; mad, quite mad. He found he was clutching her green folder so tightly that his fingers ached.

Three

Ed Grey lay on his four-poster bed in the East Wing and made his report into a minicorder lying on his pillow.

'I don't like what I'm doing any more than I did at first and the compensations are all turning into complications.

'Politically speaking the old guy, the Professor, is clean, unless you find naïve socialism frightening. He has no links with any subversive organizations or any foreign powers, unless you count our friend the multi-national corporation that may benefit from his present research. He is interested in alloys not allies; you might say he is welded to his work. He drives Curthoys and yours truly as hard as he drives himself.

'He puts the highest value on personal loyalty and if my cover slips for an instant I'll be out on my ass. Which brings me to those clowns from NSO, Brewster and his custom-built buddy, Adamson. The security pressure that Professor Latham has been under from his own government is totally unwarranted and it has made him mad as a hornet. Like he says, it is red tape; he lost his A clearance because he left the

Institute and set up as an independent researcher under the De Luchy bequest. He attracted the attention of NSO by turning up at these meteor sites.

'Why does he do this? Someone had better re-read the terms of that bequest. The Widow De Luchy made a large portion of the funds available on condition that investigation should be made into ... quote ... extra-terrestrial phenomena and the possibility of communication with other worlds. The Professor is doing his best to comply with this condition and I may add that the De Luchy Trust are getting great value for their money. The old guy hares around in his chopper to every site; the grid pattern now generally accepted is his work. He turns in a report on, you know, size, location, radiation levels, insofar as we are equipped or *permitted* to investigate. For an independent operator he does a good job. No, we have no evidence of "alien infiltration", death rays, thought probes, or the ever-popular little green men.

'However the Security blanket ... joke ... is very heavy in these areas; the media are screaming and there's a whiff of cover-up. If there is anything here and that I should know about for Christ's sake liase with NSO and have me informed. Also, call off Brewster and Adamson before they, query, inadvertently blow my cover. Whoever sent a robot to interview Sidney Latham was pretty smart. The Professor really digs Adamson; he has him to dinner once a week and tries to beat him at chess. But where does that leave me? Out on a limb ... which brings me to Verity Latham.

'To my certain knowledge she has had no communication with the members of her cadre in Greenworld Task Force since she returned from the Kenyan reserve. I know she still holds to their ideology but she has taken part in no green-freak activities for three months. Unless you count talking to trees.

'It would be pointless and kind of embarrassing for me to make a daily report on her activities. She's a beautiful girl and I'm in intimate contact with her. No, I'm not too deeply involved but this situation may change. I really dig her and I feel like hell about it. I'm not sure what she feels. She has to put up with a lot from her old man who puts her down all the time and I guess it has made her withdrawn.

'You may be surprised to hear that Verity Latham has

come up with a really wild theory on the meteors. She worked up this whole deal with, would you believe, two squirrels that were stunned by the blast at site 14. I did some of the preliminary work with her and it was easy for me to put her file on microfilm. I'll enclose it in the next drop. My comment on the work? Squirrely man, squirrely . . .

'Anyhow she gave the project away three weeks ago and released the critters in the garden. One is still around but it is kind of shy. Verity spends a lot of her time in the garden, reading Seventeenth Century Metaphysical Poetry out loud. She is the most beautiful, crazy girl I ever saw and I think I love her. One time I found her reading a botany text-book to this tree, big oak-type tree growing on the east side of this house, its branches reach right up to the balcony of this room. She said she was reading "to improve its understanding of the xylem for mimetic purposes".

'If I had been able to find Verity after dinner I wouldn't be making this report I'd be making love. But I looked all through the house and she wasn't around. No, I do not believe she is out there trying to immobilize a chemical complex. I believe she is out there in the moonlight reading Andrew Marvell to some damned tree. Because of her I have learned a whole poem by this guy . . . it is called The Garden and he talks about.

"Annihilating all that's made.
To a green thought in a green shade."

'Obviously this Captain Marvell was some kind of a green freak.'

Ed stopped talking and listened. The long, low whistle was repeated under his balcony. He stashed the minicorder and went out into the moonlight.

'Verity?'

She leaned against the tree, one arm encircling the broad trunk, her cheek against the bark. Her hair hung loose and silvery.

'Coming down?'

'Are you through with the botany lessons?' he teased.

Verity laughed and ran a hand over the tree trunk.

'All through!' she mimicked his accent. 'Now I'm up to biology.'

'I was thinking of your friend . . .'

Ed wanted to prolong the balcony scene a little: the girl, the tree, the moonlit garden.

'My friend?' asked Verity.

'Andrew Marvell.'

'Ah . . .'

She embraced the trunk and quoted:

'My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow.'

'Too slow for me . . .' breathed Ed.

'Come down!'

'Come up here to my room.'

'It's better down here,' she said. 'Climb down. Try that branch over there.'

'You're crazy!' he said, fondly.

He climbed over the rail and reached for the branch.

'That's right,' said Verity, 'let it feel your weight.'

'What?'

'You're getting the hang of it,' said Verity. 'There now . . .'

Ed took her in his arms. He fought off an impulse to tell her why he was there and ask for absolution.

'Ed?'

She took his face between her hands; her eyes were solemn.

'I'm your friend . . .' she said. 'Even if our ideologies are different. Trust me. Perhaps I should try to explain . . .'

He put a finger to her lips.

'No!' he said. 'No heavy confessions.'

She wound her arms around his neck and they kissed. They sank down together; the grass was warm and dry. The moonlight silvered their clothes lying on the grass but did not reach into the deep shade. The tree arched above them; every leaf spun, activated, alert.

FOUR

PROFESSOR LATHAM cut chunks from his apple with a silver fruit knife.

'You know my view!' he twinkled at Adamson. 'One more meteor.'

'Only one?' Verity spoke softly to Curthoys, further down the table.

'Speak up!' said the Professor. 'You're too subdued this evening, Verity.'

'Only one more meteor, Sidney?'

'According to the grid pattern,' said Charles Curthoys.

'Otherwise it means the extension of the grid in another direction,' explained Ed Grey.

'I hope the Professor is right,' said Brewster.

It had been another stimulating evening; the Oval Room was beautiful by candlelight. Adamson, having consumed his 'company dinner', which resembled squares of aspic, was now sipping some amber lubricant. The Professor had enjoyed himself but he was restless. He began to tease his daughter.

'Don't take my word for it!' he said. 'Verity is in closer touch with the . . . er . . . aliens.'

'Not my field . . .' Verity laughed it off.

The Professor saw Charles Curthoys flinch so he pressed on with his teasing.

'On the contrary,' he said, 'your theory has a freakish charm.'

'A theory of alien infiltration?' asked Adamson.

He gazed steadily along the table at Verity in her pumpkin yellow gown.

Verity said firmly.

'No, of course not!'

'Yes!' cried the Professor. 'Acknowledge your work, girl! Mimesis . . . the great theory of Mimesis . . . by Ovid out of Walt Disney!'

'Charles?' asked Verity.

'I'm sorry!' said Curthoys. 'Verity, I'm sorry. He picked it up from my desk . . . it was an accident.'

'I'm not surprised, mind you . . .' The Professor took more wine. 'Not surprised that she hasn't shown it to her old man.'

'I don't want to talk about that paper,' said Verity. 'I've given up the work.'

'Oh no!' chortled Latham. 'You're not getting off so lightly. Mimesis needs a good roasting.'

'Mimesis?' asked Brewster.

He looked at Adamson who was fiddling with his shirt cuff. Ed Grey saw the movement too.

'Acting . . . mimicry . . .' pronounced Adamson. 'Some theory of adaptation, perhaps . . .'

'Got it in one!' smiled the Professor. 'Metamorphosis!'

'Father!' Verity stood up. 'I don't want any discussion of that paper!'

'Discussion?' the Professor was in full cry. 'Don't dignify your behavioural fantasies with words like discussion. Notion isn't worthy of discussion. It belongs . . . I'll tell you where it belongs . . . in a course on bloody Mythology. The werewolf and the doppelganger . . .'

'Be quiet!' shouted Verity.

'The squirrel that is not a squirrel . . .' the Professor went on relentlessly. 'A simulacrum of a squirrel, gradually acquiring its underlying structures. You were in on this, Grey . . .'

'No!' said Ed Grey, unhappily. 'No sir.'

'Where next?' asked the Professor. 'A rock, a tree . . . I've noticed you spend a lot of time in the garden, Verity . . . and why not a human being? Why gentlemen, we're none of us safe! This wily organism may have made a perambulating copy of any one of us!'

'No, father,' said Verity bitterly, 'not *any* one . . .'

'What's that?' asked the Professor gaily. 'Have I got it wrong?'

'Adamson is quite safe,' said Verity. 'He could not be copied any more than a rock. He is not organic.'

'This is too bad!' exploded the Professor. 'Adamson is my guest . . .'

'He is a security officer,' said Verity. 'He is recording everything we say. I don't care to have my projects discussed in his presence.'

'Your projects . . .' the Professor shook his head in furious scorn.

'In prison,' said Verity, 'I was interrogated by Adamson or something very like him regarding your work here at Hewbry Hall, Father. I remained silent.'

'Damn it all . . .' the Professor finally swallowed and shut up.

'Do you know what they call this place at the Institute?' demanded Verity, her eyes fixed on her father's face.

Charles Curthoys could not repress a smile.

'Hubris Hall!' said Verity. 'The fountainhead of bloody intellectual arrogance! Hubris Hall! Ask Adamson for a gloss on that!'

She went out of the room and they heard her run up the grand staircase.

The Professor passed a hand through his hair and drained his glass. Curthoys cleared his throat nervously. Ed Grey ticked off the seconds: the poor old guys still didn't get it.

'Emotional girl . . .' mumbled the Professor.

Brewster and Adamson rose as one man. Brewster blew out the candles, turned on the electric lights; Adamson shut the french windows and drew the curtains. Brewster nodded curtly at Ed Grey.

'Get after the girl!' he said. 'Keep her upstairs.'

'I beg your pardon . . .' said the Professor.

Brewster paid no attention to him.

'You're treating this as some kind of alert?' asked Grey.

'Absolutely!' said Brewster. 'Haven't you been serviced? Liaison has gone out on this. Get after the girl!'

'Brewster!' said Professor Latham. 'Grey is in my employ . . .'

'Not entirely,' said Brewster.

Ed Grey cast a despairing glance at the Professor and Curthoys, taking it in for the first time. He ran into the echoing hall. After a noisy foray up the staircase he came back to the door of the Oval Room, drew out his nifty TLD and listened.

The Professor was warming up.

'. . . bloody hell is going on?'

'Ed Grey? . . . Central Intelligence . . .' Charles Curthoys, polite and puzzled.

'This is a security alert!' Adamson came in loud and clear even through an oak door. The timbre of his voice was now definitely metallic. 'We need Ms Latham's paper on the squirrels at once!'

'Not without an explanation!' snapped the Professor.

'Your clearance . . .' pleaded Brewster.

'Clearance be damned!' roared the Old Man. 'You want Verity's paper. I won't give it up without some facts!'

'Vile harassment!' exclaimed Curthoys, all of a sudden. 'The Professor is a man of science. He was never a security risk.'

There was a pause: Ed Grey swore he could hear Adamson's circuits bleeping as he made an emergency adjustment.

'Professor,' said Brewster, 'there have been firmly authenticated "doubling" incidents at four of the meteor sites, involving . . . er . . . human beings.'

The Professor laughed.

'Mass hysteria,' he said. 'You'll have to do better than that. Hoaxers. Students having a rag with . . . sorry Adamson . . . a few robots.'

'Four sites?' asked Curthoys.

'Three, Nine, Ten and Twelve,' said Adamson.

'Three, furthest north,' said the Professor. 'Site on the Lammermoor. What happened?'

'Rab Menzies,' said Adamson. 'Shepherd. Frequented the wood near the site.'

'Well . . . go on man!' cried the Professor. 'Do we have to drag it out of you?'

'He was seen in two places at once,' admitted Brewster.

The Professor uttered some sound between a laugh and a groan.

'Site twelve?' Curthoys was anxious.

'David Jenkinson,' said Adamson. 'Local schoolmaster. Best authenticated instance. His double . . .'

'Rabbits!' bleated Curthoys. 'Verity asked about the rabbits at site twelve. I gave them to Jenkinson myself.'

'I remember . . .' said the Professor.

'One got away!' said Curthoys. 'Jenkinson . . . is he hurt?'

'The subjects are never harmed,' said Adamson. 'A period of sleep or unconsciousness is usually reported.'

'Professor, we must have that paper,' said Brewster.

'Very well,' sighed the Old Man. 'Just one more question. These doubles . . . what do they do?'

'They leave the district,' said Brewster.

'I'll bet they do!' said the Professor. 'How? By what means? Time machine? Magic carpet?'

'Usually by public transport or on foot. One hired a car.'

Adamson cleared his throat.

'Site nine,' he said. 'Lady Celia Farmer, widow of Sir Usher Farmer, local manufacturer. Her country house is in Yorkshire, twenty miles from the site. She was seen to hire a Bentley in Huddersfield.'

'Fraud *was* suspected,' said Brewster. 'A roadblock was set up. It failed.'

'Special Branch,' said Adamson with a trace of feeling. 'The two officers hallucinated.'

'Oh, there's no end to this idiocy!' cried the Professor. 'Come on . . . what in hell did they see?'

'Two farm carts,' admitted Brewster. 'And a coach. A coach and six.'

'Site ten?' prompted Curthoys.

'The least satisfactory,' said Adamson. 'Mohammed Ali Das. Pakistani student from the McCartney Polytechnic, Liverpool. He had been camping out in the area. His double was reported as taking the train to London. However the sightings were not so firm because . . .'

'Because all Asians are alleged to look alike,' sighed the Professor.

'Correct,' said Adamson. 'Professor . . . we must proceed with the alert.'

The Professor spread his hands.

'What are you afraid of?' he asked. 'Adamson . . . this is a farrago of nonsense!'

'Could there be . . .' asked Curthoys. 'Could there be some sort of . . . intelligence?'

'Spores . . .' said the Professor. 'Fungus . . . No, it won't do! It won't do! What properties could be transmitted? What powers?'

'Exactly!' said Brewster.

'The paper's in the laboratory,' said the Professor,

'I must search the grounds,' crackled Adamson. 'Time is of the essence.'

Ed switched off and took to the stairs. Doubling? Where did those NSO morons get that kind of nonsense? They must be putting the Old Man on. Or maybe it was a conspiracy . . . greenfreaks? He found Verity in the long gallery, pacing innocently in her yellow gown, as if she had just stepped down from one of the gilt frames.

'Are you okay?'

She nodded.

'Ed, did it strike you that those NSO men were interested in my theory?'

'Not specially, honey,' he said. 'Oh maybe Adamson has it down on his intestines somewhere, but that's routine.'

'I don't trust security agents,' said Verity.

'Stay cool.'

He steered her to her own room off the gallery. It was going to be easier than he thought . . . she wasn't on to anything. He couldn't wait to get out after Adamson then put in a report. The idea of NSO pulling heavy stunts among the trees in pursuit of squirrels filled him with unholy glee.

'I'll have to get back,' he said ruefully. 'I kind of stormed out after you.'

'I'll be fine,' said Verity.

He looked round her room; it was smaller than his and dark. The sash window overlooked a brick courtyard behind the house. He offered to fetch her a joint or a tranquillizer but she refused them and lay on her bed full-length, like the sleeping beauty.

'Wish I could stay . . .' he whispered.

'See what they're doing,' said Verity.

He went out, palming the heavy key, and locked her door from the outside.

Ed raced back along the gallery and headed for his own room. He paused on the dark stairs to the east wing; Adamson went by in the hall with Curthoys.

'. . . flamethrowers?' asked Curthoys in alarm.

In his room Ed clambered into his track suit, changed his shoes, checked his magnum; he began reporting as he changed and he was still gabbling into the recorder as he stepped on to the balcony.

'. . . a minor alert at present. My cover shot to pieces and Adamson searching the grounds of this stately home for an alien organism. Meanwhile England's green and pleasant land is playing host to a bunch of these characters who ride on trains and look like you or me. Who does NSO think they are kidding? If the media get hold of this on either side of the Atlantic we are in for the biggest alien scare in a hundred and fifty years. And remember you heard it first from me, Ed Grey, the flying squirrel!'

There was no moon but his eyes had become accustomed to the night. He could make out the tangled paths, the ruined walks, the great clumps and avenues of trees. Far away, by the wall of the kitchen garden, a light bobbed. Adamson with a torch, he guessed, or maybe the guy had a headlight. Ed swung over the rail and grasped the branch of the tree. It

came easily to hand but he found himself dangling, unable to get a foothold as he had done last time. Shaking. The tree was being shaken, was shaking itself.

'Hey . . .!' he was surprised by his own voice. He tried to look down, to climb back. The branch swung deliberately back and forth until he fell. He was pitched six metres to the ground and the branch seemed to droop, following him down. He felt the leaves touching his face as he lost consciousness.

FIVE

CURTHOYS fiddled with the rusted iron gate into the herbarium. He felt Adamson's penetrating gaze shining strong as his torchlight into the shadows of the garden.

'See anything?'

'Quiet!'

Adamson swung the torch suddenly over an expanse of rough grass that had once been a croquet lawn. The iron gate opened with a long, grating cry, an unbearable sound for Curthoys, worse than a fingernail on a blackboard. He stood aside and Adamson strode ahead of him into the darkness. The sage lawn bounced under their feet; the herbarium was an ancient walled garden, round and cosy as a room.

It was separated from the kitchen garden by a crumbling wall and a newer piece of trellis. These two gardens alone had been tended and replenished. The mustard and cress that Verity planted last Wednesday flourished beside old crocks of marjoram and thyme.

'I don't know what you expect to find,' said Curthoys. Adamson had gone off into the kitchen garden now; he could see the torchlight sweep over rows of lettuce. Curthoys pressed on, feeling his way past the gnarled rosemary bushes, until he reached the door into the orchard. He had the distinct impression that Adamson was coming to join him again when he saw torchlight on the other side of the wall. Fellow charging on ahead, going *his* way round with never a thought for poor mortals who couldn't see in the dark.

Curthoys opened the door and marched on angrily into

the orchard. It had definitely turned cold. He dug his hands into the pockets of his Macduff and trudged through the trees. Something nagged at him, zoomed briefly in and out of his consciousness like a mosquito. The sky was quite light now. He had to hurry . . . light growing in the sky . . . in the distance a solitary cock heralded the dawn.

The path ran uphill and Curthoys always stopped on the crest of the rise, beside an old quince. As he looked out, this morning, he heard church bells. *Sunday morning* . . . it added another dimension to his excitement. What was that poem he had been trying to remember, it began at dawn: 'My thirtieth year to heaven . . .' Long gone, long gone, even his fiftieth year to heaven. He was fifty-seven. Best get on with it: visibility good, wind North North West, according to the windsock over the hop-field, no coppers lurking in the back lane.

There *was* a car coming . . . Curthoys ran eagerly down to the stile in the hedge, hoisted himself over and stood panting by the side of the road. The old green Rover drew up and the driver leaned out cheerfully.

'Fine day for it . . .!'

'Jenkinson!' cried Curthoys in delight. 'I had an idea you'd be along . . .'

There was a prolonged bleep. Brewster glanced at the Professor in embarrassment then took out his communicator. The laboratory was pleasantly warm; the computers purred in sleep. The two men sat in a pool of light on the dais while the Professor slashed and scribbled at his daughter's paper.

'What is it?' murmured Brewster.

The urgent quacking aroused the Professor.

'Repeat!' said Brewster. 'What? Of course I'm recording. Adamson . . .'

'Something wrong?' asked the Professor.

Brewster held the communicator away from his ear.

'No!' he said. 'No. There's no question of malfunction. Come to the laboratory at once. Adamson?'

There was no reply; Adamson had switched off. Brewster, who had been on the verge of telling Adamson to pull himself together, turned to the Professor with a stunned look.

'Charles Curthoys has disappeared!'

'You mean Adamson can't find him?'

'He disappeared!' said Brewster. 'He disappeared from sight! He vanished.'

Professor Latham leaped to his feet with a nervous laugh.

'What's this? Another hallucination?'

'Adamson?'

'You can't seriously believe that Curthoys . . .'

'He disappeared in full view of Adamson!' cried Brewster. 'I believe it. I must. He is incapable of error. He has searched the area . . .'

The Professor snorted angrily and wandered off down the lab.

'I wish you would not insist on his infallibility!' he grumbled. 'Of course malfunction is possible. If he's not capable of human error . . . then it's inhuman error.'

'He was quite specific,' said Brewster. 'He sounded distraught.'

'Going to pieces . . .' said the Professor. 'No . . . no, poor devil, I didn't mean that.'

He fiddled absently with a dial then blurted out:

'You don't suppose his perception could have been tampered with? Influenced?'

'It's possible,' said Brewster. 'Either that or something has "influenced" Curthoys.'

'Where's that boy?' demanded the Professor. 'That CIA snake in the grass. Grey, Grey . . . where's he?'

'With your daughter?' suggested Brewster.

'He should be here,' said the Old Man. 'Mounting a search.'

He proceeded down the room, muttering, and switched on a bank of outside lights. Brewster was caught off his guard. When the professor came abreast of the glass doors he slid them apart suddenly and marched out into the garden.

'Curthoys?' he gave an echoing shout. 'Charles? No time to play hide and seek!'

Instinctively Brewster sprang down the room after him.

'No Sir! Stay here!'

The Professor strode on along the broad path of an overhead light. He was heading for a particular tree, his Talking Oak, that he had fitted with an intercom and a garden seat to amuse Verity. He looked to right and left, half expecting Curthoys to emerge from the encircling gloom, a bit dishevelled, with leaves clinging to his overcoat. It was hardly the weather for a coat, he decided: a balmy summer

night without a hint of the rain that had been threatening. The light, the moonlight, was extraordinarily bright; it silvered the tops of the young trees and the formal garden beds. There was a smell of freshly turned earth. He walked directly to the intersection of two gravelled paths and surveyed the unblemished façade of Hewbry Hall.

Sidney Latham took in his situation at once and knew that it was not a simple one. He felt cross at first, and put upon; the fact that he had no recording device, not even pen and paper, weighed heavily. He collected pebbles from the path, fragments of grass, leaves, an acorn, and squirrelled them away in his pockets. He became uncomfortably aware of his clothes for the first time in years: ordinary gear, brown corduroy two-piece with a battle jacket. Old-fashioned according to Verity . . . but not old-fashioned enough.

He stepped off the path into shadow as four horsemen rode in at the main gate; their combined noise and bulk had the impact of a juggernaut. Harness clashed; harsh accents cut the night air; an answering shout went up from the hall. A groom led a saddled horse within a metre of the tips of Professor Latham's synthetic suede boots. A faint luminosity inside the hall . . . how could they read in such a light . . . resolved into a blaze of torches on the steps.

Half a dozen men and women came running up in the moonlight and stood at the very edge of the lawn. One old biddy was wiping her hands on her apron. With a curious fluttering in his solar plexus the Professor moved closer in the shadow. From the back of the little group of servants he saw a man vault into the saddle of his ghostly dapple-grey; then, to a burst of unintelligible cheering, the whole troop wheeled and moved off at a noisy trot.

The lawn began to clear and the Professor strolled as calmly as he could to a round walk. He stared at the burnished face of the new sundial.

'Sir?'

He looked at the two children warily. The boy was younger than his sister and seemed to be wearing a nightshirt under his cloak. The girl, about twelve, said in a polite tone something that might have been:

'Are you Glenster's chaplain?'

'No,' said the Professor, firmly. 'I am a wandering scholar.'

The boy laughed out loud, presumably at his voice and accent, but his sister squeezed his hand. The boy said, trying to make amends and still in barely intelligible English:

'M'fether's declared fer Crummle.'

The Professor laid a hand on the cold metal of the sundial.

'For Crummle?' he repeated. 'I wish him ... er ... godspeed.'

A lucky hit. The children beamed.

'Sir ..' asked the girl suddenly. 'How far off are the sun and moon?'

All three of them raised their eyes to the heavens; the Professor stared at the moon, the virgin moon, with an acute sense of longing. Not even a camera to record the position of the stars.

'Well now,' he said, 'the moon is ...'

He looked down again at these two innocent faces and discovered for the first time in his life a piece of knowledge which he dared not impart. The difficulties that hedged him in were hardly scientific ... social then? or psychological? He could not *burden* the children ... he could not, for the life of him, reel off the figures that were on the tip of his tongue.

'The moon is much nearer than the sun,' he temporized. 'Do you know the shape of the world?'

'It is a globe,' said the boy. 'Orbis mundi.'

'Braggart!' snapped the girl.

'The moon is many thousands of miles away,' said Professor Latham. 'And some say ... some say that the sun is many millions of miles distant.'

He could not swear that they understood his speech. A woman began calling from the front of the hall and as the children ran off across the new grass the Professor experienced a slight dizziness, as if the earth were moving under his feet.

Six

VERITY had dozed off for a few minutes thinking of the tree, how smooth the trunk had been, a pinkish brown column, before it learned to differentiate. She heard

footsteps in the courtyard, voices that penetrated her light sleep. She sat up in alarm and went to the window. A powerful flashlight played over the old espalier trees on the wall of the herbarium: Adamson and Charles Curthoys. She tried the door of her room and was not surprised to find it locked. Where was Ed Grey? What made him go along with Security and lock her door? She could not repress a surge of panic: Adamson had been carrying a hatchet.

She went round the room with slow dexterity; her clothes and equipment had been stowed in five places. She went out hand over hand into the courtyard, then reeled in the grapnel. The western gardens were dark; she had only one difficult area to traverse – a sprint across the front of the hall. Now Verity ran from tree to tree, touching the bark, unable to control her anxiety. Beside the east wing she looked up, searching until she was quite sure of the location, under the balcony. She stood still, among the leaves, catching her breath. Are you there? Can you save yourself? There is a Security Alert . . . But the tree was gone.

Verity stared up at the balcony, letting the seconds pass; she felt numb and foolish. Her panic had gone; she experienced a distinct sense of anti-climax, as if she had succeeded in proving some difficult proposition false instead of true. She was self-conscious: she saw herself standing in the old garden in her absurd green catsuit, hung with the accoutrements of a saboteur. A twig snapped, there was a distinct groan . . . a heavy body rustled the bushes close beside her.

Verity could not move; the forces of gravity tugged at her ankles, her feet were firmly planted . . . a woman turning into a tree.

'Are you there?'

She was hardly aware of speaking the words aloud.

'Cold!' said Ed Grey loudly in her ear. 'Sensation of cold. Is that you? Soles of the feet sensitive, painful. Help me . . . Ensnared with flowers I fall on grass.'

Verity could not move; the forces of gravity tugged at her spread.

'Ed . . .? Where are your clothes?'

'Voice control is difficult.' It was a whisper. 'Is that you? You feel so warm.'

She ran her hands deliberately over his shoulders, the strong neck muscles, the features of his face and his hair,

softer than she remembered, more like squirrel fur. Verity experienced the confirmation of her hypothesis.

'Shut your eyes,' she ordered. 'You're safe. I'll help you.'

She pulled the eyelids down and played her pencil flashlight over his face, which was Ed Grey's face, and on down, over his whole body.

'I can see you,' his eyelids fluttered. 'The pupils are contracting.'

'You have done very well,' said Verity faintly. 'Where's Ed?'

'Unconscious. Two metres away behind a bush with thorns.'

'Is he hurt?'

'His systems are functioning normally.'

'Stay where you are . . .'

'Wait!'

The eyes were dark and glistening. She remembered how the squirrel learned to differentiate, how the tips of its ears became darker.

'When I stand close to you I feel sensations of warmth and pleasure. They come from a region of the brain I am completing . . .'

'The pituitary?' suggested Verity.

'I begin to understand your poetry much better.'

She disengaged herself gently and found Ed Grey lying in a foetal position behind a rosebush. He had a bump on the head but his systems *were* functioning normally. She found the magnum, the minicorder, the listening device; she shone the torch on his flushed, childishly handsome face. Ed Grey was a security agent. Verity could make nothing of his disloyalty. She removed his shoes, his socks and his track suit in the cause of science.

She had a sense of false haste, slow motion. It was very difficult to dress another adult.

'We have to hurry. Now the other foot. Security men . . . the robot . . . they're out after you . . .'

'Calm yourself.' He laid a hand on her head.

'Please!' said Verity. 'We don't have much time.'

'Time? All that we need. The others have too much.'

'What do you mean?'

'Imagine a circle . . . Come, set me on a comfortable path.'

She led him through the trees.

'How shall we travel?' he asked. 'Where shall we go?'

'We'll take Brewster's Electra,' said Verity. 'I can fix the switches. We'll go to the nearest Greenworld contact point and I'll get through to H.Q. Unless Adamson . . .'

'Brewster and Adamson are in the laboratory,' he said. 'They are marooned in the present. They dare not come out.'

'But my father and Charles Curthoys . . . have you harmed them?'

'By no means. Trust me. I'll explain presently.'

They came out on to the unclipped lawn beside the old sundial; the sky had been overcast but now the cloud was lifting. A few stars were to be seen. He took Verity's hands with that smooth control which characterized all his movements.

'Even long lives are precarious,' he said. 'Yet we must come. We insist on these experiences.'

Verity could only stare at him and touch his face. He began to speak more softly:

> 'My Love is of a birth as rare
> As 'tis for object strange and high:
> It was begotten by despair
> Upon impossibility.'

SEVEN

THE PROFESSOR woke Curthoys at four-thirty with a cup of tea. The two men were quite alone in the house; they were camping out in the laboratory. Hewbry Hall was entirely given over to ghosts and shadows: children, servants, Ed Grey in his underwear, Adamson rendered inarticulate.

'This was the day?' inquired Latham.

'I'm positive,' said Curthoys. 'It has been a long six weeks.'

He picked up a torch and nipped off, half-dressed, to the bathroom. The lab generators were shut down; operations at the hall had been suspended; the grants had not been renewed.

The Professor drank his own tea at the work bench and listened to news broadcasts.

'Anything?'

'No, yes . . . not on our project,' said the Old Man. 'Verity and her people are in the news. Their new leader . . .'

'Andrew Green.'

'Green is flourishing unchecked,' said the Professor. 'Plastered all over the media.'

'Even with the beard,' said Curthoys, 'he looks like Ed Grey.'

'Why should we doubt that it *is* Ed Grey?' rapped the Professor. Infiltrating. Turning his coat. Grey was given a bad time by his masters following that alert. Where did he go from here?'

'He flew home and dropped out,' said Curthoys. 'You know that Green is a different proposition.'

'Green is a will-o-the-wisp!' cried the Professor. 'A walking hypothesis . . .'

He sighed.

'I hope Verity is taking careful notes.'

'Sidney . . . I'm certain there's no danger . . .'

'Don't pester me, Charles!' the Old Man shook his head. 'My dilemma, insofar as I have one, is very ancient. How would you like your daughter to cohabit with one?'

Time was getting on; Curthoys checked the pockets of his Macduff and handed the Professor a rucksack of spare clothing.

'You had no problems refuelling the chopper?'

'None,' said the Professor. Surveillance is at a standstill. NSO have lost interest since that monstrous shake-down.'

'Tore the place to pieces,' agreed Curthoys. 'And there was poor Adamson . . .'

They were both silent, thinking of Adamson.

'Brewster . . .?' asked the Old Man. 'Where did you say again?'

'Working a metal detector in the Channel tunnel,' said Curthoys heavily. 'The Dieppe passenger terminal.'

They walked through the laboratory side by side.

'Charles,' said the Professor. 'I want you to know that I'm extremely grateful. You withheld information . . . made this excursion possible.'

'It was a subjective experience,' said Curthoys, pleased. 'I told them I lost some hours. Suddenly found it was morning.'

'But you knew . . .'

'Yes, I knew what day it was,' said Curthoys. 'And of course I made no mention of Jenkinson.'

'Whoever it was . . .' admitted the Professor.

'At any rate he was driving to Littlemarsh.'

The Professor took from his pocket a wrinkled, blackened object that could have been an acorn; he rolled it between his fingers.

'These experiences . . .' said the Professor. 'These apparent experiences . . .'

'You've never told me yours in any detail,' said Curthoys, wryly.

'I believe there is something didactic . . . or do I mean hortatory . . . in each one.'

'Littlemarsh completes the grid,' said Curthoys.

'With a slight adjustment.'

'Any plans? If we do anticipate?'

The Professor looked wildly at Curthoys.

'We have nothing to lose!' he said. 'I am prepared to lie down at the very brink of the pit . . . to obtain a further specimen.'

He drew his eyebrows together.

'How much this would have interested Adamson.'

They shook hands in the vast, empty kitchen: Professor Latham set off up the back stairs towards the helipad on the roof. He turned back.

'Positive about the day?'

'Quite sure,' said Curthoys. 'I told you how it stuck in my mind.'

'Of course. Happy Birthday, Charles.'

Curthoys crossed the flagged courtyard and opened the squealing gate into the herbarium. He took a zigzag path over the sage lawn and a wet tree-branch caught him full in the face, raising his adrenalin. He opened the door and marched on angrily into the orchard. It had definitely turned cold. He dug his hands into the pockets of his Macduff and trudged through the trees. The sky was quite light now. He had to hurry . . . light growing in the sky . . . in the distance a solitary cock heralded the dawn.

THE Z FACTOR

by

ERNEST HILL

Eddie Kale might be king of the dumping ground that made democracy viable, a powerful and dangerous man in his own world; but that millennia-old chromosome, inherited from a mother he had seen flung onto the dead-cart, itched away at him demanding he fulfil a destiny never hatched on this Earth.

THE Z FACTOR

ONE

EDDIE KALE remembered the day he was born as clearly as yesterday. His mother had died in the street. A prostitute, of course. They had all been prostitutes in Mapel Street in those days. There had been some sort of a fight and he'd slipped into the world unnoticed whilst the mobs were loading their casualties on to handcarts and wheeling them away. He remembered lying among broken bottles on a wet sidewalk and a rough hand closing around him, lifting him, swinging him in the air. The cart was there with his late mother sprawled among the rest, her hair tousled and bloody and her legs hanging over the tail-board. He no longer knew how it was the memory of the cart was still with him nor how he had understood the voices that were part of the general noise. A melody on the orchestration of the screams. He knew.

He knew with the certainty of all those with the Z factor in their chromosomes. The tall ones. The tall in stature and in intellect with antecedents not of this world. The Priors. The dominant strain from the beginning of men's time on earth. The strange ones who must lead, dominate or die. He knew even at this moment of his birth that this was so. That he, muddied and blooded in the gutter an arm's length from the dead-cart, carried in his blood-stream the Z factor from the Prior race. That he, unique among the bearers of the Y's and X's, was about to be extinguished. Tossed into the cart and wheeled away and that with him the strain would die. The hand and the arm moved and he heard again the woman's voice.

'It's Bertha's kid! Bertha's popped her brat!'

'You want him?' the man with the big hand had asked.

'Who? – Me? What would I want with Bertha's brat? Got a room-full as it is.'

And then that other voice. Softer than the rest. Different in tone and volume. Gentle even. But how had the gentle voice survived in the wilderness that was Mapel Street? Among the taunts and howls and bawling threats of mutual vengeance. The clubs, the bottles and the guns.

'Give him to me. I'll take care of him.'

He had never known who the woman was in those early days who had washed and fed and cared for him. Women had not lived long in Mapel Street in the twenty-fifties, nor men either. Had she also been a Prior, a bearer of the chromosome? How many Priors had there been at any one time anywhere? With him the strain would have died perhaps because it would have died with her also. Perhaps there had never been more than one in any generation anywhere in the world. Had she, a Mapel Street prostitute, known herself, for all the squalor of her life, unique? Sensed, as a Prior must do, that he, Ed Kale, was of her kind and needed life? Her care for a short while. Cared for until he was old enough to steal, to fight, to bludgeon his way to the top of any society in which an accident of birth had brought him?

She had gone, the first kind, gentle woman and there had been others after her. Fat and noisy, smelling of sweat and dirt, plying their trade for food and drink and drugs. Dying in the gutters, beaten down in the gang fights for territory, dying of anything, almost, except old age.

It had been like that in Downtown London in those days. Anarchy. Mob against mob. Gang against gang. Until he had grown to manhood and taken charge. It was said now that gangland London was better organized than its law-abiding counterpart across the Thames, the great automated mass-producing goose that laid the golden eggs. Banishing its misfits, its unemployed and unemployable, its unwanted sons to that other world across the river. Paying its tribute as the price of peace and waste-disposal of its human garbage.

In the old days, undisciplined mobs had been content with small, sporadic raids across the bridges, led by men whose heads were thicker than their cudgels. Looting the less prosperous, less well defended areas, short of arms, short of ammunition, short of everything but lice and vermin; scampering home when the Fuzz appeared in strength. No unity. No organization. No strong hand at the helm, wielding undisputed power. No one of the stature, mental and

physical, rising from the blue-print of the Prior chromosome. Himself.

'I'm king of the underworld!' he said.

The girl on the couch yawned, and, reaching up, pulled at a strip of wall-paper, hanging, yellowed and mildewed above her head. It peeled downwards, the plaster adhering, leaving a patch of dusty concrete the size and shape of a man's chest.

'So what?' she asked.

He swung to the couch and lifted her with one hand bodily by the nape of her smock. He thrust his beard against her face until all she could see of him was his deep-set eyes and the high arch of his thick-matted, jet-black brows.

'I'm king of the underworld!' he whispered.

'O.K.!' she said, 'O.K.! O.K.! O.K.! So who's saying you're not? What you want me to do – cheer?'

He tossed her down on to the palliasse and stood, hands on hips, staring at her moodily, pleased at her easy composure and lack of fear of him. She was a China-doll girl and yet the pink and white of her was moulded sharp and positive along the jaw and the prim lines at her lips' ends were etched more by severity than by smiles. She was small-breasted, short and slight, would have passed unnoticed in a crowd, but very decidedly, she was his girl. He turned and rested his elbows on the window ledge staring out through the broken panes over the crumbling sprawl of the down-town city below.

'I'm bored,' he said.

'Yeah – aren't we all?'

'I'm boss,' he said. 'I'm the uncrowned head of all gang-land south-London slums. Look at my empire! I hold the entire law-abiding north to ransom. I keep my vassals this side of the water and the clean-faced, faceless bastards over there pay me tribute. Danegeld, that's what they pay me. And every ragged oaf in every mob is paid by me. More than they ever got by honest thieving and crooked murder before I took the job in hand. I'm boss, I tell you! I'm king! – But, Sal – it's not enough. It's small. It's mean. It's dirty. I want out, Sally Blunt! I want far away, far-off bigger things than this.'

He heard her laugh, low, soft, like a cat chuckling as it purred.

'Cross the bridges,' she said, 'and they'd have your balls for breakfast. They're them and we're us. You've enough to do here, come the next palace revolution, the small-pox or the plague.'

'The plague can take the lot of them,' he growled. 'There's something out there – over there. Something I have to do – somewhere I have to go to.'

'Why?' she asked.

'Because I'm a Prior!'

'Oh my God!' she yawned. 'Not that again. Come you got to kill someone. Come you're bored. Why? Because you're a Prior. What's a Prior? What is all this Prior business anyway?'

He wanted to tell her. He had never before tried to explain to anyone what only he and a handful of geneticists knew about himself and the giants of history and the human race. The origins of mankind. Moses, Alexander, Charlemagne, Genghis Khan, Henry VIII, Attila the Hun. The refracted chromosome, dominant with tiny stature – Hitler and Napoleon. The two divergent strains, the warrior and the meek and – dotted here and there in every age, the restless, alien Priors.

'It's like dogs,' he told her. 'You know about dogs?'

He leaned back against the window, turning the ball of his great, hairy fist in the horned palm of his hand, biting at the upturned tufts of his beard.

'What about dogs?'

'What we call a dog evolved from the two different species – the jackal and the wolf. They were quite unlike to start with; but in the end they became just dogs and unless you knew what to look for, you couldn't tell them apart. The chow came from the jackal, the collie came from the wolf.'

'Just fancy! And what's that got to do with the rest of us? You came from a big hairy gorilla called Rastus and I came from a Persian cat?'

'It's got this to do with it. We, the human race, or, rather – you, the human race, – are just like the dogs. Everyone we now call people started off as two quite different things. The origins are still there in the genes. About a million years ago it was. Out of the basic stem, two quite separate primates evolved. One was a fierce, weapon bearing carnivore whilst

the other was herbivorous, peaceable and got along quietly on his own. Australopithecus and Zijanthropus. We've got them now all over the world. The toughies and the mildies. Fortunately for the world, there's a lot more mildies – the Y chromosome. 99 per cent of the world would never go to war if the 1 per cent factor didn't lead them on to it. If you want to know which is which, spit in a man's eye and you'll find out. The X factor will kick you in the crotch and the Y will take out a clean white handkerchief, wish you good afternoon and call the Fuzz. The wolf and the jackal. Man and the otherman.'

'You don't say!' she asked. 'And which are you? A jackal or a wolf?'

'Neither!' He brought his fist and palm together with a crack like breaking bones. 'I am what I am. At the time when both breeds of hominid were still half ape, the Priors came. Five men only. The Z factor in their chromosomes. One single ship, lost on its way among the stars. Four died on landing. One only survived. They worshipped him as God. He interbred and in the end he died. But all the Gods in all the world, all man's ideas of God, stem from that one stranger from another, different place.'

'What place?' she asked.

'Out there!' he gestured wearily over the grey, smoke-laden sky. 'Somewhere out there. I know the place. Every Prior must know the place. At least, he must know there is a place. There is no direction in a world than turns and a sun that moves. It's there somewhere and not so very far away. We shall know it when the time comes.'

'A million years, you said?' She yawned, but there was a glimmer of interest in her eyes. 'How little oaks from mighty acorns grow! Your oak seems a long time hatching.'

He threw himself down in a brown upholstered chair, the springs and canvas tape protruding through the slits. Head thrown back, he stared at her with his deep, black, eyes.

'The Z factor is eternal,' he said at last.

'How many of you are there? And do they all look like you? God help them in their hour of need.'

'There was one Prior among ten million hominids. Once the proportion may have been the same. Now, the strain is refracted, pure Priors come once in every generation at the most. Yes – they are like me. They must master or they die.'

'Sounds like you need your chromosome right now.' Would that be another revolution down below or have the Martians landed?'

Two

SHE JOINED him at the window as the first shots rang out and puffs of concrete perwizzed from the walls and the last pane of glass shattered. The street below was filling from either end with two mobs having contrary objectives, whilst from the side alleys reinforcements joined whichever side happened to be passing at the time. Others, caught between the front lines, formed a third force of their own until it was impossible to tell which of the three was gaining the upper hand and less still, the direction in which any one at a given time was moving.

'Mayhem,' she said. 'Just like the old days.'

'Here they come!'

A group, breaking away from the main battleground headed for the block, the leader holding a sub-machine gun by the barrel and whirling it around his head like a copter at speed.

'Who's that?' Kale said. 'Do we know him?'

She lifted a rifle down from a nail in the wall and, sighting it along the window ledge, picked off three members of the party before they gained the entrance and passed out of sight into the building.

'No.' She shook her head. 'Tommy Murduck'll be behind it whoever they are. Tommy's been wanting a go at the imperial crown for some time now. Ever since he started to fancy me as imperial queen.

'Shall I blast them when they come in or do you want them all to yourself?'

'I'll take them,' he ordered. 'I've a liking for bare hands when it comes to mutiny.'

'Well, go easy on the heroics,' she said. 'I don't want you dead. I never did fancy Murduck and its me he wants. That thick lip of his gets an erection every time he looks at me.'

The door burst open and the four survivors of the raiding party exploded into the room behind their leader, now with the machine gun under his arm and his finger on the trigger.

'Right, Kale!' he shouted. 'This is for you, boy!' He raised the barrel.

'With that thing?' Kale laughed. 'Just try it! Look at the safety catch, Mac!'

The gun-toter dropped his eyes only for a second but it was long enough. The knife whistled and caught him in the throat. Before he could fall, Eddie Kale had charged, lifted him bodily as a battering ram and swept the other three against the wall. Two heads smashed together. The third man, falling, was kicked senseless before he could touch the ground. One by one, he carried them to the window and pitched them into the milling crowd below. There was suddenly complete silence as the opposing sides backed away, faces upturned towards the great bearded figure now straddling the sill and presenting himself as a target for anyone with the courage left to try his luck.

'Good old Eddie!' someone shouted.

One or two more took up the cry and soon they were all chanting the same slogan. Waving their cudgels and assorted weaponry they began to disperse. Backwards at first, like subjects leaving the presence of their king and then breaking into groups and disappearing up the side-alleys from whence they had come. In ten minutes the street was peaceable and deserted. Only an occasional cry rose from bands reforming in yards and courts behind distant walls to re-tell and re-live the excitement of the short-lived revolution.

'Good old Eddie!' the voices echoed.

A moan or a scream or two from the wounded left lying on the side-walks and then the comforting sound of organization and order returning. The crunching wheels of the dead carts, the cheerful voices of the attendants, Ed's own private army come tidying the streets and wheeling the human garbage away for emptying in the Thames.

'The fun's over.' She uncorked a bottle of Scotch and poured a good measure into two tumblers extracted from a pile of dishes in the sink. 'I'd slit Tommy Murduck's throat for this.'

'Yep,' he agreed. 'You're right about Tom. But I need him. He's a good X chrom type. Notice he never showed his face although he'd stirred them all up behind the scenes? That's the good old 21st century australopithecine. He's good

executive material and he'll do as he's told as long as I'm firmly in the saddle.'

'What about me when you're not in the saddle?' she wanted to know.

He put his hands on her shoulders and ran his thumbs along the line of her jaw, smooth and straight above a long and slender neck. He slipped a finger over the pursed lips and tickled the upturned snub of her nose.

'I'll be around for a while yet,' he promised her. 'And if they wheel me away one day, you're a good X chrom yourself. I wouldn't be in Tommy Murduck's shoes if you took to the small of his back for a target.'

Tommy Murduck was there in the doorway, short and squat, a Tommygun slung over his left shoulder and the stub of a cigar in his mouth. There was, Eddie noticed, a certain erect quality about his lip, tilting the cigar butt upwards like a chimpanzee dubiously exploring an under-ripe banana.

'You O.K. then, boss? That's fine. Just fine.'

'I've got a mind,' Eddie said. 'I've got a mind to take that shooting piece and wrap it three times round your fat little neck.'

'But you ain't going to,' Tommy told him, sitting himself in a basket chair by the door and taking the gun carefully from his shoulder, barrel first, to avoid suspicion. 'Because beating me up won't do no more than let off your steam. And without me, who've you got to hold the fort any time you like to take a trip out into the great big world across the water?'

Eddie sat at the table, facing him, turning his glass thoughtfully in his hand. He felt Sal's fingers on his shoulder and, without looking up, he raised his free hand and held them by the tips.

'When would I be wanting to take a trip into the great big world?'

'I dunno,' Tommy's eyes were sleepy under their thick, heavy lids. They were indeterminate eyes, he noticed, the whites yellowish and merging with the veined green of the iris. They seemed permanently averted and out of focus.

'What's on your mind?' he asked sharply.

'He's up to something, Eddie,' she whispered. 'Slit his damn throat for him before it hatches.'

'I thought,' Tommy said, wearily, as if addressing a point on the floor half-way between them. 'I thought you might be taking up the challenge. Of course, you're quite right not to, if it's right you're not, but, knowing you, I thought it was likely in your line of country as you might say.'

'Shut up Tommy!' He felt her fingers tighten in his hand. 'You're heading for trouble!'

'What challenge is this?'

'Don't tell him!' she said. He knew, when she withdrew her hand sharply, she was going for the holster strapped to her thigh and he caught her wrist in time.

'Go on, Tommy,' he said.

'Of course, you don't read the papers, do you?' Tom withdrew his cigar and stubbed it carefully on the arm of the chair, 'You wouldn't know about this flight to Barnard's Star?'

'Barnard's Star!' he repeated sharply. There was something stirring inside him. A yearning. The cold ice of moonlight on a river. A woman – the shape of a woman somewhere among the trees. A great void with no end but the distant shimmering of a single light.

'I warn you, Tommy!' Sal breathed. 'I'll kill you if you say a word more.'

Tommy Murduck ran a finger around the folds of his neck where they spread over the collar of his old khaki jacket. He lifted his head and his eyes looked in their direction; but still opaque, moist and out of focus.

'The trouble with you, Ed, is,' he said, 'you've got too soft a spot for women. Do you want to know about Barnard's Star, or is Sal the boss here? She's got a lot to say for herself, has Sal.'

Eddie lunged across the room and swung him from the chair with both hands grasping the lapels of his coat. Thumping him against the wall, he held him, his short legs dangling a foot above the floor.

'Anyone's boss I say is boss,' he said. 'And if Sal wants to carve you up, Sal can carve you. No one spikes at Sal while I'm still breathing.'

'O.K.,' Murduck gasped. 'O.K. – so I'll be going. You don't want to know. I thought you did, that's all.'

'Tell me!' he said, throwing him back into the chair and turning in time to take the gun from Sal and return it to her holster. 'Barnard's Star. What about it?'

'It's in all the up-town papers. Six month's count-down from the launch pad on the Lueneberger Heath. The first flight out of the solar system. They've broken the light barrier, whatever that means. And there's a planet they've located. They're going there.'

'So what? – They asking for volunteers?'

'No. No. Nothing like that. They've got a crew. All scientists and that. It's the thing that's going with them.'

'What thing?'

'Well, they don't know what they're going to find when they get there, do they? Might be anything – bug-eyed monsters or dinosaurs. So they've built this thing to protect them. Whatever it is they run up against, this Warrior thing will fix it.'

'Warrior thing?'

'You blasted slug!' Sal whispered, throwing herself down on to the couch. 'You've done it now!'

'You knew about this, Sal? What is it? What's a flight to Barnard's Star got to do with me? What's this about a Warrior?'

'He'll tell you,' she sighed.

'O.K.,' he ordered. 'Carry on talking!'

'Well,' Murduck coughed and spat towards the fireplace. 'That's where the challenge comes in. It's a sort of Public Relations exercise – getting the world in on the act to show how good they are. They've built this thing they say is a match for anything or anyone alive. And just to prove it, they've put out this challenge. Meet the Warrior, either with weapons, in which case it will use its own arsenal, or without when it'll be just bare hands, man against machine. Its strength and cunning against yours. Anyone who can beat the Warrior's got a free trip to Barnard's Star.'

'You don't say!' He turned to the window and, resting his hands on the sill, looked out at the darkening sky. A few stars glimmered through the haze.

'You can go now,' she said, wearily. 'You've said your piece. Nothing will stop him now.'

'You did want to know, boss? I did right to tell you?'

He slipped a knife out from the sheath strapped to the inside of his left arm. He balanced the point thoughtfully on the palm of his hand.

'Yes,' he said. 'You did right, Tom. But if I go. If I take up

this challenge that's Sal so sure I'm going to, I shall come back when I've fixed their Warrior for them and taken them to their star and back. And when I come back, anyone who hasn't been nice to Sal is going to die very slowly, a slice at a time. You won't get any ideas, Tom, will you?'

He pushed him through the door and, tossing the gun casually for him to catch, turned his back and walked to the couch.

'You'll do that act once too often,' she warned as Murduck returned the weapon to his shoulder and disappeared down the stairs.

'Tom?' he asked. 'No. He's quite sure this Warrior will kill me, he won't take a chance himself.'

'So it will,' she sighed.

'Tell me! You seem to know all about it.'

'Yes, I know. I read the papers now and then. It's been hitting the headlines for some time, diagrams and pictures and all. It's like a spider, about the height of a man, they say. Apparently a spider is better designed for combat than we are. Nicely balanced body and the head central instead of vulnerable on the top where anyone can cave it in. It's supposed to be quite impregnable, can see forwards and backwards, pick up a scent quicker than a bloodhound. It runs faster than a cheetah on four or six legs or it can stand on two and fight with the other six. Added to all that, it can fire every micro missile known to man.'

'Interesting,' he murmured. 'Quite a little one-man army.'

'But don't be a fool, Eddie. They're not really expecting anyone to take it on – it's only a publicity stunt. So the public will know their money's being well spent. If you answered that challenge, they'd laugh their silly heads off. If the Warrior wins and kills you, they're well rid of you anyway; and if by any chance it didn't, they'd never let you go back. You're king of the Underworld – you said so yourself.'

'I could do a deal.'

She laughed her husky, musical laugh.

'Eddie, for a king with a – what was it? – Z factor, you're a maddening romantic. Do you think they'd ever keep a deal with you?'

'Yes,' he considered. 'They would. You forget, Sal, what

I've done for them. They've got the underworld anyway and they wouldn't be without it. What would their nice civilized society be like without ours to take their misfits, their cripples, their mental defectives, their angry young men? They drive them over the bridges and leave them to us. They're well rid of them. It's easy and it's cheap and it's tidy. But it only works so long as there is a somewhere and a someone like me at the top to keep the other world in its ghetto. Why do you think they pay me tribute? It's money well spent from their point of view. They could bomb and burn us out if they wanted to, but they don't. This way, they've got democracy. A free society. Anyone can opt in or out. To have democracy, you have to have somewhere to opt to. I give them that.'

'O.K.,' she sighed. 'You're going. I knew you would, if you found out it was on. You can't help yourself. But when you go, Eddie – come back to me.'

'Sal.' He sat and took her gently in his arms. 'You care. You really care that I come back.'

'And you,' she nodded. 'The man-killer of the underworld. You care that I care.'

Her voice, he thought was very like that of the woman who had taken him in from the dead-cart, low-strung, husky, soft and coolly competent. He had never heard Sal's voice so soft before.

THREE

LARRY HAWKSWORTH, the publicity officer, stood as near to attention as his corpulent forty-five satin-suited years would allow. There was a vacant steel chair beside him in front of the wide, polished, steel desk, but the polished steel gaze of the general 1st class (Operations), Combined European Space Agency, did not invite him to use it. The general, although seated behind the desk, was buttoned very much to attention. He glittered and bristled. Every hair of his grizzled, up-curled, crisp moustache was spiculated straight as a regiment of Potsdam guardsmen on parade. His right eyebrow was cocked to the peak of his gold-braided hat. Short in stature, general 1st class Gluttenburg specialized in keeping taller subordinates to attention. The taller they

were, the longer they stood and the very much happier it made him.

'Dummkopf!' the general shouted.

'It's not so dumb really, sir. The situation is, I admit, somewhat unexpected; but properly exploited, it can turn out very much to our advantage.'

'I have here the business to run, the space agency to control. I have not the gimmicks to make. A circus it is you wollen daraus machen. Mein lieber Gott! I could have you for this shot. Against a wall. Shot! Shot! Tot geschossen!'

'But sir, you did approve the project before we published. None of us were to know . . .'

'It is to know for which you are paid, mein Herr! Was wollen Sie? Dass ich mein thinking allein do? Publicize you said! Tell the world! Here we have the Warrior, nicht wahr? Eine Herausforderung! A – a – what you call a challenge, you say. No man will the challenge up-take you say. We throw the gauntlet and wir lachen, nicht? Ha! Ha! Ha! So wir lachen. And was ist nun? There comes this man. He will fight mit our Warrior. A gladiator, nicht wahr? It is to kill one foolish man we build the greatest Warrior on earth? It is for this we shall be loved by alle Nationen der Welt?'

'If you feel that way, sir, it's not too late to call the whole thing off.'

'It is much too late.' Larry Hawksworth had hardly noticed the grey figure of Sven Petersen, stiffly erect by the window, looking out on to a skyline dominated by the outline of Icarus II. He should have noticed. Sven was political liaison officer and in his own quiet way much more dangerous than the general, who bellowed more because it was expected of high-ranking Teutons than because of any built-in bellicosity.

'You think so, sir?'

'I know so. Both the New York and English state governments wish the confrontation to take place. They consider Eddie Kale potentially dangerous and therefore expendable.'

'Well, surely, sir, we shall be doing them a service?'

'The E.S.A. is not an executioner for petty state administrations.'

'Nein, mein Gott!' the general exploded. 'We did not the Warrior develop as a kleiner Wachmeister, a terrestrial polizist. When he this man kills, alle governments will want

Warriors for themselves. Our technology is not for so petty ends developed.'

'He's right, of course,' Larry considered. 'Even making allowances for the German desire to outdo all other nations in the art either of war or the humanities, the general's not such a bad old Hun. He just simply doesn't want anyone killed. Not even this thug Kale.'

'What would you like me to do, then sir?'

'Sit down, Larry,' the general relented. 'Setzen Sie sich. You must the challenge arrange to happen as you advertise. Invite the visitors, spectators arrange, wie vorgesehen wurde. The wood, the forest, the Warrior at one end and this Ed Kale the other. But first you speak to Ed Kale. You tell him he cannot against the Warrior triumph. Tell him that wenn auch he lives, the polizei there will be. They will not let him go back.'

'I think, sir, Eddie foresaw that difficulty. He's taken a hostage. An English diplomat. I am afraid that, should he survive the Warrior, we are committed to take him to Barnard's Star.'

'Gott, mein Gott!'

'This was a very foolish idea of yours, Larry Hawksworth.'

'Not really, sir. There's no chance of anyone surviving once the Warrior is told to kill.'

'And the press and the heads of the state government sit around the arena sucking their thumbs whilst the gladiators fight it out? Very edifying. I sometimes think the only outposts of civilization left in Europe are the military establishments. You had better make the arrangements. I will need an article of Eddie Kale's clothing or some object he has touched to programme the scent. If we let the Warrior loose, he must know exactly which man he has to kill and no other. We can't have him confusing the spectators with the quarry. Does Kale intend to meet him with or without weapons?'

'Without, I understand, sir.'

'Very well. We'll play fair with him. If he carries no weapon, the Warrior will not use its armoury. But since it really is invulnerable, I agree with the general. If you can dissuade this curious man, I wish you to do so.'

'I'm afraid there's not a hope, sir. He's quite made up his mind.'

'Then you must arrange for the contest and a suitable venue next month.'

A month to the day saw Eddie Kale completing his inspection of the battleground. Open heath, a wood about 500 metres square, a river twenty metres wide and three deep running across the south-western corner. The whole enclosed by a high chain-link fence supported by concrete posts. The fence, he concluded, was more to mark out the area than to confine the contestants. They would be expected to concentrate on the elimination of each other rather than on exploring means of escape. He was impressed with the E.S.A., his first contact with the outside world on its own ground. He had expected some attempt at a double-cross as a matter of course, eminent hostage notwithstanding. But the tall, dapper man with the broad waistcoat, Larry Hawksworth, had done his very best to dissuade him from the contest, had tried to convince him that the Warrior was invulnerable and had finally supplied him with a map of the area. The map, to his astonishment, proved accurate in every detail. The E.S.A. were playing fair with him and even wanted him to withdraw. Their fairness had had the opposite effect to that intended. Suspecting that the state governments themselves and their law-enforcement officers would never have shown the same concern for his well-being and safety, he was more than ever determined to dispose of the Warrior and earn his place as a member of the E.S.A. by right of conquest and insist on his inclusion in the mission to Barnard's Star.

The thought of failure never occurred to him. This was the peculiar manifestation of the Z factor directing force. A Prior usually succeeds because he is convinced of success from the outset. There is a massive build-up of psychic force and plasma associated with utter conviction in any man. The psychic force cannot assure success or provide invulnerability in battle; but it goes a long way towards it. The converse is even more true. With utter conviction, you may not succeed but, haunted by the fear of failure, you most patently will not. Eddie Kale allowed himself no further scruple than a twinge of excitement at the thought of the next day's battle, the disposal of the Warrior and his welcome as a worthy member of the space team.

The next day dawned and with the dawn, the assembled dignitaries took their seats on the tribunes outside the perimeter fence, the news men unclipped their recording pads and the camera crews, taking advantage of a lead-in framing the rising of an overlarge red sun through a causeway of streaked apocalyptical black clouds, panned down on to the opening of the drama, man against machine.

Eddie Kale, stripped to the waist, was led in at the western end and the Warrior through a gate in in the east. The Warrior was mean, ugly and black, very light on its four foot long, triple-jointed legs. It had the advantage of the wind in its favour and the sun behind it. Its antennae could pick up the scent of a man at a range of five kilometres under ideal conditions. Today the conditions were ideal. Eddie Kale had only the Z factor and the peculiar psychic other-dimension that differentiates man from machine, not always to the man's advantage.

A confrontation in fact between the logical and the supralogical. Had Eddie Kale possessed the logic of the Warrior and no more than that, he would have realized that the odds were insuperably against him and withdrawn from the contest. So also would any man with an australopithecine X factor in his chromosome. Only the Z factor is utterly indomitable. Eddie Kale began moving swiftly up wind as the Warrior set off in his direction.

They circled each other for some time, the Warrior relying on the particle detectors in its antennae, the long range of the multi-directional eyes in its head and, periscope fashion, the single optics in its claws, each capable of being raised to a height of eight feet, clearing the scrub and bushes on the heath. Eddie, manoeuvring carefully, kept an eye on his adversary by climbing an occasional tree.

It was the tree climbing that in the end gave him an idea. He could not continue to evade the Warrior until its batteries ran down. It was unlikely he could master it in open country; but up a tree, the odds should be heavily reversed in his favour. He found himself a long log, light and strong enough for use as a weapon and then, climbing the bole of an oak tree, settled himself in a fork of its branches a good ten feet from the ground to await developments.

The Warrior was not long in arriving. It stopped twenty feet from the oak tree and began circling it cautiously.

'If I can break its antennae at the first blow,' Eddie thought. 'It will have trouble locating me at a distance.'

The Warrior moved in, extending claws from each of its eight feet. Swinging its forelegs around the trunk, it began to climb. At the same time, as if sensing their vulnerability, it retracted its antennae. As it came within reach, Eddie brought the log down heavily on its head. It hung where it was for a moment, whilst Eddie, wielding his cudgel, continued to pound. A gasp went up from that part of the audience lucky enough to have a view of the right sector, whilst the camera teams came running and driving their vehicles from all sides to be in at what appeared to be imminently the death of one or other of the contestants.

The Warrior took the pounding silently and without relaxing its grip on the tree. Then it began inching upwards and, at the right moment, struck out with one leg, a blow which Eddie, in the restricted space between the branches, was only just able to parry. He too began climbing higher. The Warrior struck again and this time Eddie was able to bring his weapon down on its extremity almost certainly shattering one of its peripheral eyes. Apart from this one success, the legend of the Warrior's invulnerability seemed well founded. The beating on its head had not even dented the metal and it seemed to have had no effect at all on its performance.

It had one leg hooked now over the first of the lower branches and was pulling itself upwards. Eddie could risk time for one blow only which seemed to flatten the claws slightly before climbing higher out of reach of the next attack.

'Never thought the bastard could climb like this,' he thought. The idea of taking to the trees had been a bad one. He was now trapped too high above the ground to risk jumping and dislocating a limb or at least spraining an ankle. The Warrior below him was climbing with all its eight legs and watching him with the glow of its eyes behind the slits in its skull-circling grille.

'I'll beat you yet,' he said. 'I have the chromosome. I can think, reason ahead of you. There's always a way.'

The Warrior said nothing but its eyes glowed brighter. One of its extremities flicked up and missed Eddie's foot by an inch, carving a deep V channel around the branch.

'Think! Think! Think!' he whispered. 'There must be something I can do that bastard can't.'

He bent forward and brought his log down once more on the upturned head but this time a limb closed around it and wrenched the weapon from his grasp. It was waved once or twice exploratively whilst the Warrior considered the implications of its possession. Eddie climbed rapidly higher. The log would give the Warrior an added three feet reach once it had perfected the technique of weapon usage.

It was the swaying of the branch that gave him the idea. The Warrior was considerably heavier than he. If he climbed out along the branch above the one on which the Warrior was now settled, it might not be aware of its own weight and follow him outwards. He crawled along as far as he could and then, standing and jumping for the branch above, he swung himself outwards hand over hand. He realized then that this was his last possible ploy. If the Warrior ventured only as far as the branch would bear its weight, it could either wait until he tired and fell or club him down with his own weapon. Having swung out as far as he dared, there was nothing further he could do but dangle and await developments.

The Warrior followed him along the lower branch, its seven feet curled sloth-like around the timber, the eighth holding the club. The branch began bending downwards away from him encouraging the Warrior to move further outwards still, whilst the green wood bent further downwards ... As if realizing that it was now or never since the outward movement was offset by the downwards bend, the Warrior stopped and swung its club, in range now with the dangling figure above. It was almost the end. The log whistled in a wide arc and then, a moment before impact, the branch broke with a loud rending sound and swung inwards against the trunk. The Warrior maintained its grip although its head took the full impact and for a few seconds it hung until the heel of the branch peeled away, slivered and crashed to the ground.

A low rumble of cheering broke from across the perimeter fence as Eddie worked his way back to the trunk and climbed down. The Warrior was lying on its head, its eight legs stretched upwards, bending occasionally at the joints, rubbing its feet slowly together in pairs like a fly. It was not

yet dead if a term so anthropomorphic could have been applied to its workings. Even as he picked up the log and began to hammer at its central body, four of its legs curled over against the ground and it struggled like an upturned beetle to right itself. Paying no attention at all to his efforts, it finally succeeded, rolled over and, whilst seven of its legs appeared to be exploring and feeling itself for damage, the eighth flashed upwards, curled around the log and twitched it from his hand with a jerk that nearly dislocated his shoulder. He jumped back in time and the thing was coming for him again, two forelegs extended like a lobster. He dodged first behind the tree and then made for the open country and the river. The Warrior followed but it was noticeably slower in its movements. He now had the great advantage that he was quicker and could outrun it. Although this gave him a better chance of survival, it brought him no nearer to its destruction. So far the Warrior had lived up to the legend of its indestructibility, if not of its absolute omnipotence.

Eddie thought swiftly as he made for the river. Its makers would have ensured that it was able to operate in all weathers but its manhandling might well have broken some essential seal or joint and affected its water-proofing. He dived into the slow-moving, black water and swam to the farther bank. The Warrior followed and, without hesitation, disappeared beneath the surface. Eddie moved slowly upstream, watching and waiting. Minutes passed.

Five. Ten. A shout went up from the crowd.

'He's won! He's won! He's beaten the Warrior!'

It seemed they were right ... Nothing stirred on the muddy, scum-crested water. Not an eddy. Not a ripple. The sun came out from behind the clouds and a light wind blew across the heath. It had succumbed. Either it had sunk in the silt of the river bottom, or it had ceased to function, its intricate relays put out of action by the seeping-in of the water.

He turned and began to climb the bank. He clasped his hands above his head like a victorious boxer. The crowd roared. The camera crews came jolting down the heather-lined, sand-rutted track and somewhere in the distance a brass band began to play. He did not see the ripple in the water behind him, the flash of a metal leg like the tentacle of an octopus. He saw and heard nothing but the band and the

cheers and the sunlight on the heat-hazed heath until a clawed foot seized hold of his ankle and pulled him back towards the river.

Four

It was a combination of both the inherited Z factor and the environmental effect of his early training in the Mapel Street battles that made him fight now with a cold and contemptuous fury, refusing to consider for one moment the possibility of defeat. He somersaulted forward towards the river in the opposite direction to that which the Warrior would have expected, came up with his shoulder under the member and thrust upwards. The claws came apart, tearing the flesh of his leg and ankle but he hardly felt the pain in his struggle to uncoil its new loop around his neck and to dodge the second leg that lifted out of the water like a long-necked dinosaur.

There was some lack of co-ordination between the members as he ducked under the second limb, struck up at the first just as it was tightening to choke him and, as the two tentacles struck and scraped together, it momentarily loosened its grip. He dived free and made for the top of the bank. The Warrior rose out of the stream and followed. He was now between the river and the perimeter fence, cornered with the Warrior cutting off any escape back to the open country where his superior speed might save him. There was nothing for it but to climb the fence. There had been nothing in the rules to say that this would bring disqualification. In fact there had been no rules at all. The organizers had assumed that the Warrior would, in a matter of minutes, catch and kill him and that would be that. What instructions had they given to the Warrior? Apparently none either in respect of the fence, because he was scarcely over when it began climbing in pursuit.

A great shout went up from the crowd as it straddled the wire at the top and came, four legs at a time, down the outside. The idea occurred to Eddie that if he could lose himself among the spectators, it might confuse the Warrior in the same way that a fox will put off the hounds by weav-

ing through a flock of sheep. This was easier said than done, since the crowd, with no means of knowing how discriminating the Warrior might be, were taking no chances and bolting in every direction as fast as they could.

He had run perhaps half a kilometre when he saw the train stopped on its monorail with the driver and passengers watching the spectacle from what was a particularly good vantage point. He looked over his shoulder. The Warrior appeared to have the advantage of some self-repairing contrivance in its body. It was certainly moving faster now and gradually gaining ground. He made for the train, clambering up the girders to the rail and beating on a door until someone opened it and let him in.

'Get going!' he shouted. 'Get going before he makes it too!'

The train began to move as the driver realized the danger; but it was too late. The windows of the last carriage shattered as the Warrior leapt aboard and held on. Eddie fought his way through the milling and screaming passengers to the driver's cabin.

'Give it all you've got!' he ordered. 'Shake it off before it breaks in!'

It was of no use. At 300 m.p.h. the Warrior had pulled himself on board and was winkling the passengers jamming the corridors one by one from his path and throwing them through the windows. It was not in any way confused like a hound in a flock of sheep. It knew who it was it wanted and the disposal of the others was done without rancour for the one reason only that they stood between it and its quarry.

'You'll get off my train!' the driver shouted, applying the brakes so powerfully that more passengers were killed in the crush than the Warrior had disposed of in its own fashion. Quite by chance the train came ultimately to rest in a station and Eddie was able to jump from a window on to the platform. The Warrior also emerged and took up a position between him and the exit. It began to move slowly forward. The train lurched and accelerated fast out of the station. This time there seemed to be no escape. The Warrior was implacable, bent on pursuing him to the ends of the earth and there was no doubt now that it was, to all human concepts, totally invulnerable.

Eddie looked up and down the platform. There was no other exit. Only a line of small, one-storey shops. A tobacconist's, a drug-store, a chemist's, a perfumerie. He was unarmed and exhausted. But even now, when there was no hope at all, the Z factor continued to operate. He abandoned himself neither to panic nor to resignation. He stood his ground, alert, thoughts generated and evaluated with kingfisher swiftness, convinced that from somewhere, in the nick of time, the one saving idea would come.

And then, suddenly, it came. First – a question. By what means had the Warrior selected him, alone of all the passengers on the train, the spectators on the tribunes? How did it know which was he and which another? All Chinamen look alike to Europeans and no machine could differentiate one man from another by sight alone. It could only be sight in conjunction with smell. Every dog knows the scent of its master as different from all other scents. The machine must have the built-in mechanism of the dog. It could track and recognize by scent. What would a dog do if it recognized its master by sight but he smelled like the postman or the man from next door? The dog would come to some conclusion, but would the machine? No sooner had this thought occurred to him than he had also reached the conclusion of how it might be exploited. He dived into the perfumerie and, to the horror of the assistants, swept an armful of bottles from their shelves and began pouring the contents over himself, applying the many sprays swiftly from front to rear and from his head to the extremity of his toes. He finished in time to meet the Warrior on the threshold.

It was a remarkable confrontation. The machine, believing that at last it had its quarry in its power, but having learned also to be wary of its quarry's prowess, squatted back on its haunches and raised a single leg to strike. Eddie stoutly stood his ground and looked his mechanical adversary in its grille. He felt confident of success. The machine could no longer match his total characteristics with the blueprint of its instruction card. When this happened, it would – what? The claw was still poised above his head and the body was rocking to and fro with a rhythmic bending of its knee joints.

'Get lost!' he ordered.

The single foot came down slowly. The claws, opening

and closing, touched his cheek, moved around his neck, closed on to his right ear. Hesitantly no more than a tweak, and yet he felt the lobe had been punctured.

'God!' he muttered. 'It wants my blood group!'

An analysis of the Z factor would probably outweigh its confusion with the scent and steer it towards a decision. He stepped backwards and struck the claw away.

'Quit fooling!' he shouted. 'Get out of my sight!'

It withdrew its claw and began to back out on to the platform on four legs, moving the other four with the motions of a Hindu temple dancer or of a praying mantis at prayer.

'Back!' he ordered.

He could force it to the edge of the platform and direct one of its members on to the live rail. Alternatively, he could make it jump. All he had to do was to establish his own ascendancy. It was programmed to obey, to kill only what it had been told to kill, and now it was exhibiting every sign of cybernetic neurosis. 99 per cent of him fitted the instruction in its memory bank but the 1 per cent that was scent did not. It needed the whole picture to complete its aggressive circuit.

'Down on your knees!' There passed a long minute whilst the two human eyes met and held unwaveringly the equally steady glow of the optics behind the grille. They seemed less bright than formerly. Slowly at first, alternating between left and right, they began to flicker.

'Down!' he repeated.

It settled down on to its penultimate joints, holding the two leaders aloft like the horns of a mammoth.

'Quit stalling!' he barked. 'Down!'

Gradually, its knees bent until its body rested on the platform, its legs curved high around it, taking on the shape and symmetry of a lobster pot.

'That's better! Now turn over!'

It up-ended itself and lay with its legs in the air, bent at the knees and with the exterior joint that might have been referred to as the ankle, waving the claw slowly up and down, indicating, if anything at all, a submissive desire to play. He slapped its underbelly and it let out a sound like a low bark. He set his foot between its joints and, creaking, it began to gurgle. Putting his hands on his hips he laughed

until the tears wet his beard and the Warrior's legs wriggled and contorted as if it were being tickled.

'I've not only beaten it.' He laughed. 'I've tamed it.'

'I can't wait to get back to the European space agency and see that general's face when you follow me in,' he told the Warrior. 'Get on your feet and let's get mobile. On second thoughts – no! Why should I walk? Pick me up with your front legs and carry me!'

The guests had left the arena along with the press and the camera crews who had either gone home or were scouring the countryside for news of the Warrior who, the experts said, would now hound its challenger to the ends of the earth unless someone could catch up with it and stop it. Larry Hawksworth and the director i/c robotics were having a hard time of it with the general when someone saw the Warrior trundling through the gates with Eddie Kale lying crosswise in its forepaws. There seemed to be no doubt that cybernetics had proved their worth against both swords and sorcery as they in the end were bound to do. Mech-man was now bringing home the bacon. They watched it stalking sedately up the long drive between the block houses, along the avenue flanked by overlarge busts of European presidents, through the rose garden and up the long stairway to the general's quarters.

'Was it programmed for this?' the general asked.

'Curious,' Sven murmured. 'Its orders were to kill, not to return with the body.'

There was a knock at the door and an aide entered hurriedly. Springing to attention, he saluted and voiced his warning simultaneously, fingers trembling a little against the peak of his cap.

'Es kommt die treppe himauf!' he stammered. 'The stairs – it up comes.'

It was too late for further comment. The Warrior was already there, sweeping the aide aside and swinging the double doors backwards for an effective entry. It reached the centre of the room, fell on to its knees like a camel at the end of a safari allowing its rider to dismount, even extending one claw to allow Eddie to step comfortably down and confront the astonished general.

'I reckon,' Eddie said, 'the battle's over. I ain't killed it, as

it seemed a pity. It ain't a bad bag o' tricks. However, if it's in the rules, I'll tell it to jump out of the window. Whatever you want, Daddy-o. Just say the word and it's as good as done.'

'How have you done this?' Sven asked quietly.

'Oh! Well!' Eddie reflected. 'It's a matter of IQ. I reckon mine was a mite higher than its was. We've got a sort of rapport now, me and it. Tame as a tickled Tom cat, your monster is.'

'Hey – you!' he said to the Warrior. 'Pick up this jerk's desk and throw it through the window.'

The Warrior meekly obliged and, lifting the large steel desk with its front members, raised it ceiling high and sent it splintering through the long plate-glass window and down on to the rose garden.

'You see,' Eddie explained. 'It's a handy kind of body-guard to have around if you want one and I'm reckoning that's what I might be needing any time now.'

To his surprise, the general, stiffly erect and his hand held protectively on his own desk, was beaming.

'Das war gut!' he approved. 'Das war sehr gut, Petersen, mein Freund, nicht wahr?'

'So,' Eddie demanded. 'I get the job. I go on this flight of yours?'

'Sit down,' the general ordered. 'Setzen sich, mein Freund. First we must talk – ja?'

The ship passed out of space and into supra-space-time-plasma in exact conformity with Karkov's Law. 'Where the velocity of a body in relation to its starting point plus the velocity of the starting point itself in relation to an assumed fixed point in space time exceeds the theoretical speed of light in a static universe, the time dimensions of the body will foreshorten according to the formula $m \times v_1^2 - v_2^2 \times K$. K being naturally Karkov's Constant. The mechanics of the operation had been understood for some twenty years before the launching of Icarus II on its way to Barnard's Star. The difficulty had been solely the location of a fixed point in space from which to base the necessary calculation. Since the earth moves in relation to the sun and the sun moves in relation to other suns and the galaxy moves in

relation to other galaxies, an ultimate cosmic starting point seemed likely to have substance only as a mathematician's debating point.

However, there was one. Less a starting point than a pivot. A maypole around which the galactial maidens danced. It was located a few quintillian light years behind Barnard's Star. Its distance however was immaterial, since the combined velocities of the solar system and Barnard's Star itself in relation to it, plus the speed of the ship, was considerably above the theoretical speed of light in a static area.

Not only did the ship slip over without bump or fuss into supra-space-time, it came out again within hailing distance of Barnard's Star itself. All exactly in accordance with Karkov's Law. If indeed the tiny twinkling light ahead of him was Barnard's Star. At the very beginning, when the great, grey folds of space-time had opened like a dry womb and closed again with a flutter of its myriad shadowy planes, he had resigned himself to the double-cross. Icarus II was not the manned crew ship to Barnard's Star. No space agency would have named anything other than an expendable probe after so unsuccessful a pioneer as Icarus. The state governments had brought pressure to bear to get rid of him, the anthropologists had pointed out that half the evils of all time had been due to the Prior strain. Only his hostage, hanging by his heels with a good down-town Cockney standing by to twist a pair of skewers up his nostrils, had got him a place on a ship of any sort. That perhaps and the general's quite honest desire to keep at least some part of an officer's word inviolate.

He had no regrets. He, the last of the Priors, had left the world probably for ever, but in return, he had been given the honour of being the first man to pass through the time gap and out again. The first man to experience the indestructible, inviolability of time, stretched out from the beginning to the still unfolding present. To see and to know himself still in battle with the Warrior, still at his point of birth, his mother still on the Mapel Street dead cart. Ever. Ever. Ever. The witch burns eternally at the one moment in time of her burning. Christ hangs for ever on his cross. There and there and there. The great static scroll stretched across the cosmos eternally unchanging, the only movement at the old world's

present where the spool unwinds constantly against the stylus of the minds of men. The folds had pursed their lips and spewed him out. Descending the misty myth with only the time-foreshortened mistiness of a ship around him. Down. Down. Down.

He was back again on the familiar hot, dry earth of the high Savannah. His old space-ship leaning wrecked and awry on the stony outcrop and his four companions dead and buried in a deep crevice opening at its foot. He sat in the shade of an old wild lemon tree whilst across the clearing a round-shouldered Zijanthropus nuzzled and probed at a dead log for wood lice and beetles. Ever. Ever. Ever. It was only a point static on the scroll of time like any other. But Zijanthropus was moving. Moving towards australopithecus. Time was unfolding as it only did in the conscious present of man's understanding and awareness of it. He was man now and something was about to happen, to spin off the scroll and nothing that had been for 500,000,000 years would be the same again.

Australopithecus dropped down from a nut-tree and smiled at him. Young and female, familiar and forgotten as a mother's breast. Australopithecus himelf bearing his teeth preparing to give battle for his mate. A good warrior a Prior must conquer and in due course tame. Cross with australopithecus perhaps. He raised an eyebrow at the female whilst throwing the charging male and pinning him to the ground with an armlock learned in childhood in that other place behond the stars.

'Hello, Sal!' he said.

A SPACE FOR REFLECTION

by

BRIAN W. ALDISS

Very much in the superior English tradition, Brian Aldiss presents us with a Stapledonian story of a philosophical quest that embraces the universe of the macrocosm and the universe of the microcosm within us all. Perhaps any young lad blessed with three successive letter f's in his name would tend to a philosophic bent. It might also be that any energy-hungry society that dismissed a device for mass-producing suns would inevitably suffer from economic decline; but then, this apparent suicidal waywardness but in reality vision beyond materialism, is just what is reflected from that certain small dark corner of the universe . . .

A SPACE FOR REFLECTION

THERE once lived a man called Gordan Ivon Jefffris who achieved galaxy-wide fame at the age of five. This is his story.

Gordan Ivon Jefffris was born in a period when the major cultures of the galaxy were suffering from a combination of economic depression and spiritual uncertainty. The achievements of man, as he diversified on a million planets, were many and various. And yet, and yet . . . among the thinking people everywhere – even among ordinary thoughtless people – grew the suspicion that achievement was somehow hollow, as if success were an apple that, once bitten, yielded no juice.

In an attempt to combat the disillusion, a consortium of leading planets which dubbed itself The Re-Renaissance Worlds arranged a curious competition. The terms of this competition were deliberately left vague. The winner was to be the man or woman who presented something that would contribute most to a fresh direction for mankind. The nature of the submission was left to the ingenuity of the entrants. The prizes were enormous.

This competition met with almost universal criticism. It was said that it would deflect useful endeavour into what was a dead end, that the idea of competition itself was one of the main concepts which required combating, that things philosophical were best left to philosophers, and so on.

Those who launched the competition were not deterred. They set no particular store by the idea of one outright winner; their hope was that the whole body of entries might together contribute the sort of vital injection of innovation for which they sought; and they believed that the kinds of entries they got would provide some consensus of opinion as to which way galactic culture was moving, as diagnosed by the best brains.

Unhappily, the best brains considered themselves above such a competition, and forebore to enter. Submissions were nevertheless almost countless, pouring in from every civilized planet. Some were works of art conceived to inspire; some were technical ingenuities designed to improve the daily lot of ordinary citizens; some were vast works of analysis; some were computerized plans for changing whole societies; some were projects for novel transmutations, for instance for transmuting light into food directly; some were syntheses of different disciplines, expressing gravity as music, or whatever; new languages, new media, new symbolic systems, were put forward; und so weiter.

In short, the organizers of the competition, and their committees and computers, were provided with much material over which to scratch their heads, much muddle from which they never, ultimately, achieved any significant order.

They bestowed first prize on a child of five, Gordan Ivon Jefffris, who presented the briefest entry of all. That entry was a sheet of plakin on which the boy had written in a childish hand, 'The universe has a dark corner, the human soul, which is its reflection.'

A fresh storm of almost universal criticism greeted the award. It was said that the thought was banal, that the concept of human souls was obsolete by about a million years, that the idea expressed was so pessimistic that it had no place in a competition designed to generate fresh directions, that there was no practical application, that in any case Ching Pin Jones's prospectus for mass-producing suns was a thousand times more brilliant, und so weiter.

The organizers stuck to their guns. (They were old and stubborn, and in any case had nothing else to stick to.) They held that one of the things which had brought near-stagnation on a galactic scale was an insane optimism which lent a cloak to exploitation and tyranny in all their forms; that they were on the side of youth, even extreme youth; and that they admired the way in which the boy Jefffris had linked macrocosm and microcosm. Und so weiter.

Both competition and controversy ensured that livgrams of the five-year-old, his fair hair tousled and becoming, his round face smiling, were flashed to every planet in the galaxy. Fame had never been so universal.

Gordan Ivon Jefffris was brought from his backwoods

planet and his parents' cloned-clatbuck farm and installed in the Institute for Creative Research on Dynderkranz, in the Minervan Empire at the heart of the galaxy. There, for twelve years, he specialized in non-specialization, learning randomly from computers, superputers, and parent-figures.

The teaching was liberal (it was generally agreed that liberalism contributed to the decay of the Minervan Empire), and Jefffris was allowed to some extent to follow his natural bent. He was a perfectly normal child – a fact greeted with delight by half his teachers and dismay by the other half – while manifesting a tendency, evidenced in his prize-winning dictum, to regard man as a vital manifestation of the universe. He divided his study time between the phenomena of the external world and the phenomena of man and his culture.

The long training was only the preliminary part of Jefffris' prize. As his days at the Institute drew to a close, the superputer Birth Star, which now administered all his affairs, revealed that unlimited funds were at his disposal for the rest of his days, as long as he maintained an inquiring mind, moved about the galaxy, and reported reflections and findings back to the superputer.

There was no conflict between superputer's intentions and boy's ambitions. Jefffris' intellectual curiosity had been whetted. He longed to set out into the universe and experience its conditions for himself; the odyssey could last ten lifetimes for all he cared. With a male friend and two girls, competition-winners all, he set out in a superbly equipped flittership to travel whatever distances could be travelled.

'The universe has a dark corner, the human soul, which is its reflection'. The words had travelled round the known galaxy, together with the livgrams of the five-year-old face. The face had been forgotten for almost as long as Jefffris had outlived it; yet the words had not been forgotten. It could not be said that they changed anything, for a general decline continued. But it could be said that people discovered some mystery in them (if only the mystery in what is familiar) and were perhaps reminded that, for all the vastness of the humanized galaxy, it still rested upon the power of words to transmute formlessness into design. So it might

be argued that the decline would have been faster had it not been for Jefffris' dictum.

However that might be, Jefffris and his companions travelled the civilized worlds without being recognized – fortified by the knowledge that he had lit a light, however tiny, in the skulls of almost everyone he ever met.

Everywhere, he talked and listened, building up a picture of the spectre that had laid its spell over the galaxy.

'What is wrong with humanity is an ancient wrong,' said an ancient lady living on a core of a burnt-out sun. She had been an organizer in her day, and understood so much that most people became bemused just by gazing on her face. Consequently, she wore a mask; but she removed it to speak with Jefffris.

'What is wrong with humanity is not what philosophers of this world commonly suppose,' she said. 'I mean, that man's involvement with technology, with its consequent divorce from what is called Nature, impoverishes him. True, that may be the case, but if so it is merely a reflection of a deeper division between intellect and the passions. The Babylonian invention of a written language, back on Earth so long ago, institutionalized a division that was already latent in the psyche of humanity. Writing departmentalizes, detaches. It bestows upon the ratiocinative faculties a dominance they should not have over the play of human emotions. The passions become feared, mistrusted.'

'Whole planets full of people have reverted to Nature, have abandoned literacy,' said Jefffris. 'The results have never been anything that responsible people would wish to copy. I visited one such planet, Bol-Rayoeo. Everyone's every breath was ruled by a maniacal belief in astrology, the human instruments of which were an iron priesthood. That priesthood had control over a series of holy factories in which machines were made – elaborate but non-functional machines. The machines were sacrificed in specific dates at specific hours. A paranoid mathematics was their language, yet such was their fear of a written alphabet that a mere glimpse of the letter A scrawled on a rock could kill them at once.'

'The first effect of a written literature,' said the ancient dame, 'is that it undermines the power of Continuers. In the Old World, Continuers were as vital to society as kings or

slaves. They moved among all ranks and ages of society, conveying in their persons – in their gestures, their faces, their very breath – history, myth, story. Those elements which were alive, and lived through countless generations, became dead when impaled on a page, and the Continuers ceased. Records have been substituted for legend, the letter for life.

'You yourself, Gordan Ivon, may through fortune regard yourself as a free agent. Yet you are a slave of history. You are gathering facts, a profession which superseded hunting, a dusty parody of it, sans blood. The search for knowledge is too highly lauded.'

'You are yourself consulted as a repository of knowledge, madam.'

'The search for knowledge is an artificial goal – and, even worse, an achievable one. Eventually, all knowledge in the universe will be garnered, reduced to recorded impulses. Which will mean the absorption of all that is real. Even our breathing will be codified. Classification will have supplanted diversification, all processes will terminate.'

He laughed. 'You speak as if it were a mystical process.'

'It is a mystical process. The further we go, the closer we come to our origins.'

'Nevertheless, I am sorry to find you so pessimistic.'

'Operative in each of us is the blind optimism of biological process; but you will appreciate from what I have already said that words themselves, in my view, tend towards the pessimistic, since they represent an energy-sink from life to abstraction.'

Jefffris was silent a while, picking his way among her statements. 'Is it mere coincidence that you speak more than once of breathing, as if it holds a special symbolism for you?'

'There is no "coincidence",' the ancient lady said, resuming her mask. 'Consciousness is the breath of the universe.'

Jefffris visited the system of Trilobundora, where the three central planets had been welded into one unit by means of transuranic metals. These enormous struts formed FTL roads for UMV traffic. Trilobundora was famed as one of the great industrial centres of the galaxy; in proof of this,

all about it for many light years were impoverished planets, populated only by old and broken people. Trilobundora was a Mecca to which all went hoping to be turned into gold.

He visited a great school on Primdora, where children were trained to be administrators from the age of two onwards. The children poured out after class, flocking at every level of the enormous tower to meet every sort of flying, leaping, and wheeled vehicle which came to bear them away.

Plunging to the lowest level, Jefffris found a stooped man of middle age waiting at an entrance with his hands in his pockets. A gale blew, carrying rain with it, although the air was still and dry at higher levels.

'It's always like this here,' said the man. 'Something to do with the structure of the building, I guess. Creates its own storms.' His voice was neutral, passive. He never looked directly at Jefffris.

A small boy came running out of the entrance and stopped before he got to the stooped man. The man put out his hand, took the boy's, and, with a word of encouragement, started to walk away with him. Jefffris fell in beside him.

'Are you the only parent here who meets his child on foot?'

'I have to watch every cent. Besides, public transport doesn't run where we live. It's a slum district. I'm not ashamed; it's not my fault. You may have noticed I'm the oldest person to collect a child. I'm not this lad's father. I'm his grandfather. His parents were killed on their holiday, so now I look after him.'

The boy glanced up at Jefffris to see how he took this information but said nothing. Then he turned his pale face down again to his shoes.

'Is he a consolation?' Jefffris asked.

'He's a good enough lad.' The man had a listless way about him which seemed to have communicated itself to the boy. After a pause in which he appeared to weigh whether it was worth saying more, he went on, 'You see the trouble is that the accident which killed my daughter and her man occurred on the V-lane of the FTLR between Primdora and Secdora. Their vehicle collided with a Secdora vehicle right

at mid-point between planetary demarcations. Legislation could not decide which planetary government should pay compensation, Primdora or Secdora. The issue is still being heard in the courts. That's been the situation for five years now.

'Meanwhile, I couldn't work because I had to look after the boy. So I've forfeited my state pension. Now he has started school, I have a small morning job, which helps. I could have got someone in to look after him and worked myself, but that would have brought legal complications, since I am still not officially his guardian, and they might have taken him away into care. I want to be his official guardian, but I'm separated from my woman and she is litigating to become his guardian. I think she's only after the money which may accrue, so I fight back.'

'I don't want to go to grandma,' said the boy. It was the first time he had spoken since leaving school. 'I don't know grandma, she don't know me.'

'The uncertainty makes his life difficult,' said the man, ignoring the boy's remark. 'He can have no proper career without an official guardian or parent to sign forms – you have to sign forms every day on Primdora – and so he is getting sidetracked and will probably be Z-graded. I do my best but I get sick of it all. Everywhere there's regulations. They keep bringing in more regulations. I just found today that they're re-structuring the educational system, so he may be sent to another school further away. Then we'll have to move rooms. More expense. All these regulations, you can't escape them ... They're supposed to rationalize community life, aren't they? Instead, they're like a wall round you.'

'I hope the lad's a comfort to you,' Jefffris suggested.

'Who makes all these regulations? I can't understand how they get so complex. It didn't used to be like this. Where did they start, where do they stop? Do you know, I get a small supplementary family allowance for the boy which is taxed with my wage so that I in reality keep less cash than I would if I didn't get the allowance?'

'Can't you forgo the allowance?'

'I went to see the computer about it. If I forgo the allowance now, I can never reclaim, and the tax structure might

change next year in my favour. Then again, the rating scale comes into it – the amount of living-space we can claim . . . it's a headache.'

'Your grandfather has a lot of problems,' Jefffris said to the boy.

The boy nodded. 'He has a lot of problems.' He kept looking down at his shoes.

In the Beta arm of the galaxy, Jefffris rested with his companions on a delightful satellite called Rampam. It was a pastoral world, where a simple philosophy ruled and crime was almost unknown.

Wandering down a country lane by the sea, one moonlit night, Jefffris encountered a slender man who appeared to be of no more than late middle age, yet claimed he was a million years old.

'Longevity and immortality are among the oldest dreams,' said Jefffris, 'and are likely to remain dreams. No biological structure is stable enough to remain intact over long periods of time.'

'A biological structure is only a highly organized state of inorganic material. All material carries the potential of life. The secret of continuous organization was discovered right there on Argustal,' said the ancient youth.

He pointed up at the gibbous moon sailing over the treetops.

'If you've got time, stranger, I'll tell you a story about it.'

'I'd be glad to listen.'

'That's a rare talent, stranger,' said the slender man. His expression cheered slightly, and he launched into his story.

Argustal is the parent world of Rampam. Long ago, there lived on Argustal a regal young man called Tantanner. He possessed an equable temperament, and was content to let the years drift by in sport and laughter. Happiness came easily to him because he was married to a beautiful lady called Pamipamlar, whose nature was fully as sunny as his.

I have to pass over all their years of content together, for contentment has no history – it leaves its traces, indeed, but they cannot be described. Suffice it to say that one day Tantanner saw strange marks upon his beloved's face. He said nothing to her, so as not to alarm her, and imagined that the marks would fade away. Dawn followed dawn, and the

marks did not fade. They deepened. He watched more anxiously. The times of snows came and went. The marks remained. They formed little lines upon Pamipamlar's forehead, below and beside her eyes, and about her pretty mouth.

Still he said nothing to her, but one dark night he rode out silently. Crossing a bleak moor, he went to where the last of a degenerate race of sub-humans eked out their existence in underground caves. These sub-humans – who, I've heard, are to be found on every planet in the early millennia of its development – were savage but cowardly; they fell back before Tantanner's royal insignia and, when he showed himself unafraid, they fawned upon him, as rabbits will try to charm a fox. He knew these untrustworthy creatures held old legends which the human race of Argustal had discarded, and so he demanded of them the meaning of the increasing marks upon the countenance of his beloved.

The sub-humans disputed among themselves, sometimes almost scratching each other's eyes out as they asserted and denied. Some maintained that the marks belonged to an ancient force called Illness, but eventually another point of view prevailed. A gnarled man with a face studded with hideous warts and hairs stood forth and addressed Tantanner where he stood beside his mount.

'Lord sire of the Upright Ones, when Knowledge recedes like an ocean, it leaves Names like shells upon the great beaches of History. We can only pick up these shells and offer them to your inspection, without ourselves understanding their contents.'

'Speak and tell me what ails my fair one.'

'Lord sire, her cheek of vellum is being inscribed by Age.'

'Age? What is Age?'

'A shell we pick up, Lord sire, knowing not its contents – except that one or two of us supposed that upon that spotless vellum you have discerned the faintest handwriting of Death.'

'Death? What is Death?'

'It is another shell, O Lord sire, lying half-buried in the vast sands of the Past.'

With that, Tantanner had to be content. He rode back to the castle and settled by his fragrant Pamipamlar; but those

two dark shells, Age and Death, returned continually to his mind.

Eventually, they drove him from the castle, despite his love's protests. He kissed her lined face and went forth. This time he ranged far away, scouring the planet's distant places. He inquired in the towns and hedgerows, in farms and on highways, seeking someone or something to enlighten him.

No one knew much. A few people knew a little. Contentment had stuffed their heads with obliviousness, you see. Once he met a solitary woman with a face like a bone who farmed forty llamas in a desert region; she turned on him savagely and said, 'Go home, let remain buried what has remained buried! Lies at home are to be preferred to any truth abroad. You will let loose a great evil on the world if you meddle. Go home!'

But he went on. He went on, although he felt increasingly the truth of what the woman with a face of bone had said. For he was gradually piecing together the shreds of ignorance he collected, and making a garment of revelation for himself.

He wandered into the periphery of a volcano which had been an active sore on the face of Argustal since the world was formed. By the coast, he halted at a spot called the Green Grotto, where the sea steamed and vegetation grew thick. Turtles slithered on the beach and birds scuttled underfoot. A lizard-man and a blind youth came to visit him as he sat eating wild artichokes; he told them of his problems.

For a long while, neither lizard nor blind man spoke. Then the lizard-man said: 'This region is named End Quest, and I never understood why until now. It marks the end of your quest. Like you, I have some shreds of knowledge. They made no garment until joined with your shreds.

'For more years than can be told, I have wondered why leaves remained on trees whether the sun shone or snow fell for, according to legend from Olden Pretimes, trees went bare half the year. I wondered also why birds hop naked under our feet, when legends from Old Pretimes say they flew with feathers far above the heads of men. Now I know the answer.'

At these words, 'I know the answer', a great fear de-

scended on Tantanner. He recalled the old lady with the face of bone and he turned to run. There was no escape. Curiosity got the better of him. He turned back and said, 'Speak, lizard.'

The lizard-man said, 'Long, long ago, further than our minds can stretch, a process was invented on this planet. It was called continuous organization. I cannot tell you what it was – that's a secret for ever lost, I suspect. It worked upon this planet, when set in motion by its masters, worked as tirelessly as the weather machine which keeps air circulating about us all. Under continuous organization, all biological processes remained intact as hitherto, no longer subject to the previous ageing which led to a state of energy-transference called Death. Death was feared, pale Death. Continuous organization guaranteed life. All biological creatures have been immortal on this planet since that day.'

'We have not to fear Death?'

'Listen. Death had a second, rosier face called Birth. When Death was banished, so went Birth. There was no need of her. Everything alive lived. For replacements there was no room. But those things which lived were subject to the attrition of external factors. No trees shed their leaves – and that original set of leaves is now made skeletal by the action of winds and frost. Birds cannot die, but the elements have eroded their feathers, so that they must go naked on the ground, being no longer able to fly. The carapaces of our turtles have worn thin as silk against the eternal sand. Many more delicate creatures – insects – have simply been fined away by the atmosphere.'

'And my Pamipamlar, what of her?'

The lizard-man looked down at the sand by his webbed feet.

'Death is returning to its throne, my lord. Generation is again needed; continuous organization must itself die, its machineries run down.'

'Answer my question. What of Pamipamlar?'

'If you looked in a mirror at your own face, your question would be answered. The handwriting is set upon your cheek too. Death will call on you as surely as upon her.'

Tantanner swung into the saddle and turned for home. His bitterness towered to the heavens; perhaps he recalled the words of the sage who says that the human soul is a dark

corner which reflects the whole universe. His questions were answered. Fear and regret rode with him, regret that he had neglected his beloved so long. And it was a long way home.

Alas, stranger, it was such a long way home that that foolish man arrived too late. Death had already claimed the one he loved. The world was in action again, the cycles of regeneration beginning again. But Tantanner's world had run down to a dead stop.

Jefffris sat silent, reflecting on the regenerative processes of the universe and looking up at the world of Argustal gleaming in Rampam's night sky.

'What brought you here?' he asked the solemn story-teller.

'I couldn't bear that world any more, with my beloved dead. Now I linger here in exile, waiting for Death to escort me home.'

After many years of travel, Jefffris came to the planet Earth. He had listened to countless profound comments, abstruse theories, and moving tales. All this he had reported back to the superputer.

At this stage in its history, Earth was a second league world in the Procyon Bloc. It called itself a republic and was ruled over by the Committee of Twenty-One, the President of which was Kuo Waung-Tang.

In a bar in a large city in Antarctica, Jefffris met a genial man who had served under Kuo Waung-Tang. He now called himself Dumb Dragon.

'Yes, I have served under the great Kuo Waung-Tang and much admire him,' admitted Dumb Dragon, as he bought Jefffris a drink. 'I read his thoughts every night.'

'Yet he sent you into exile for ten years when you refused to serve on the Committee.'

'What else could Kuo do? I am grateful for that ten years. Now I have nothing to do with politics. I merely tell animal stories to anyone who cares to listen.'

'Thanks, not today. But I'd like hear why you left politics.'

Dumb Dragon laughed engagingly. 'I simply discovered that mankind is not rulable although he perennially wishes to be ruled. Why? For a simple reason: because your per-

spectives change so radically when you make the transition from governed to governor. It's like a high tower – you can't see the top from the bottom, so you climb to the top, and then you can't see the bottom. It's hopeless. Ruler and ruled are almost different species.'

'The lust for power has a history as long as mankind.'

'Certainly. But I refer to something more complex. I really must tell you one of my latest animal stories. Do you mind very much?'

Jeffris enjoyed the man's company. 'Make me like it.'

'That's good. Story-tellers are brave men – they always battle with the listener's wish to dislike what they hear, for the listener wishes to be ruler of the story, although inwardly he longs to be dominated by it. Okay, this story is called "The Lion Who Had Ecology", bearing in mind that on Earth this year ecology and conservation are fashionable subjects. It probably means we are due for another big destructive war.'

He beamed at the wall, as if turning a smiling face towards the future no matter what happened, and commenced his story.

The last African lion was sitting comfortably under a deodar, reading the current issue of 'Digest of World Lion Problems', when a zebra of his acquaintance called Leopold galloped up and coughed expectantly (said Dumb Dragon, making lion and zebra faces as he went along).

'Begging your pardon, sir,' said the zebra.

'What is it now?' asked the lion. He had a grudge against Leopold, just could not stand the zebra's airs and graces, and promised himself that he would eat him one day soon when it was not quite as hot.

'The animals would like to have a word with you, sir,' said Leopold. 'Looks like there's another ecological crisis brewing.'

The lion gave in with a bad grace and padded north across the game preserve with the zebra. Crowds of animals and birds of every variety – every remaining variety – were heading in the same direction. The leaders of this multitude had halted by a dried river-bed and were staring across it, meanwhile uttering many cries of disgust, if not actual oaths. They stood back respectfully to let the lion through.

'Well, what seems to be the trouble this time?' he asked.

Nobody liked to thrust forward and answer, although a couple of jackals sidled up and said, 'We tried to get the mob to disperse but they wouldn't. Do you want us to try the skunk-gas on them?'

Ignoring them, the lion peered across the river-bed. On the far side, a short distance away, some black men were working, unloading bricks from trucks and marshalling heavy machines. Nearer at hand, other men were watching elephants push down large trees and drag them away.

'Scabs! Blacklegs!' hissed the crowd, but the elephants ignored them and continued working.

'Oh, isn't it terribly awful!' exclaimed an ostrich called the Rev. Dean William Pennyfever, wringing his hands. 'Bang goes a slice more of the veldt. They're putting up their simply nauseating little dwellings on the very spot where I emerged from the egg.'

'Dwellings, indeed,' exclaimed a giraffe, contemptuously. 'Putting up a whole bloody town, more like it, right where I enjoy a spot of necking. Perishing blacks! Dirty beasts!'

'Now then, remember they're victims of colonialism,' said the lion sharply. 'Besides, we don't *know* it's a whole town. We must get our facts right before we issue a complaint. Has anyone – you parrots – actually asked those men what's going on there?' Silence fell, the animals shuffled about uneasily, not looking up at their leader.

'There you are then,' said the lion. 'Typical silly emotionalism. You moan and complain and you haven't a clue as to what is actually happening in the world. You're too parochial. Naturally, I share your anxiety about anything – anything at all – which encroaches on the amenities of the jungle, but statistically, let me assure you, those black chaps are having absolutely no effect on this continent's magnificent natural resources.'

Many animals, including hyenas, monkeys and snakes, clapped this fiery speech and shouted 'Here, here.' But a bespectacled hippo, recently divorced, came up to the lion and spoke in a grumpy way. (Dumb Dragon put on a hippo face.)

'That's all very well as far as it goes, Mr. Lion, but I represent the Amalgamated Mammal and Reptile Union, and the workers have vested in me the authority to ask you to do something positive about this latest infringement of our

territory. We don't want words, we want action, right, lads?'

A great cry went up from the beasts, especially the rhinos, many of whom acted as shop-stewards.

'We *all* want action,' the lion said impressively. 'I am much more anti any attempt to curtail living space than you are, because I am more aware of all the ecological factors involved. Nevertheless, it would be extremely unwise to let the sight of a few bricks precipitate us into a hasty move – a stampede or something silly, in which our weaker brethren might get trampled underfoot, or eaten, or even left destitute and incapacitated.'

'We'll go into the vexed question of sick benefits later, if you don't mind,' said the hippo, adjusting his spectacles. 'Meanwhile the workers have empowered me to demand immediate action in the shape of crossing yon river-bed and eating up all the blacks on the building site. I am further empowered to demand that you take the tigers along, so that no feeble excuses like failing appetite can deflect you from our allotted task. As for your liberal-lacky remark about that being just a few bricks over there, it looks to me more like a whole frigging new suburb of Nairobi!'

The animals muttered and mewed in approval.

'This is entirely unconstitutional,' said the lion. 'If our nuclear commitment were up to strength, the situation might be different, but you opted for detente, remember. We must not offend the black men, or they will do us real harm, and then you workers will be the first to regret it. Don't they depend entirely on us for hides, horns, souvenirs of the chase, feathers, ivory, handbags, and leopard-skin rugs? Supposing they refuse to trade? As it is, we've got an adverse balance of payments because they're turning to plastic while we play hard to get. No, my friends, I know your business better than you do yourselves! Forget about that mangey scrap of ground, and let's get back to the veldt.'

The animals all started milling about, undecided what to do. The hippos and rhinos conferred together, and Leopold said to the lion, 'I'm afraid we'll have to face the fact that this may mean the workers will try to depose you as king of the beasts.'

'Well, it's a democratic age,' said the lion weakly. 'I have political common sense on my side. Look, if we did as the

hippos say, it would only encourage the young tigers; they cause enough disturbance as it is. All that's needed is a token gesture. Why don't you nip over on your own and kick a few black arses, just to show willing?'

Before Leopold could reply, a shot rang out across the dried river-bed. The animals who were looking in that direction could clearly see a man in a bush-hat standing on a truck, firing a rifle with telescopic sights. In the silence which followed, the lion collapsed, as leonine blood gouted from a hole in his forehead.

'A judgment from above!' said the Rev. Dean William Pennyfever. 'Let's get back to the veldt before similar punishment strikes the entire congregation.'

'Buzz off, you old fool!' shouted a hot-headed young rhino. 'Naked aggression! That just proves we were right. We've got to get those men before they get us. Let's have a show of hooves in favour of an immediate stampede.'

'Not so fast, not so fast!' said the bespectacled hippo. 'I'm in charge now. Let's not be rash.'

'But you were the one who suggested the charge in the first place,' said the young rhino in amazement.

'Circumstances alter cases. Pipe down – you're too free with your comments. Now the lion's dead, I'm managing things to see that we don't get another boss over us, and what I say goes.'

'But those men are building on our land.'

'They've got rights, same as us. Look, I know how you feel, but this needs a constitutional approach. Let's get back to the veldt and talk things over in the light of this new development. Perhaps we can barney the men into a compromise.'

Everyone started trotting back towards the deodars. Leopold called out angrily, 'Are we going to forget our wise old leader just like that? Let's at least give him a decent burial with a copy of "Digest of World Lion Problems" beside him.'

But nobody paid any heed. They left the lion where he had fallen. It was too hot to bother, and only the jackals and vultures stayed with the body for the last obsequies.

Continuing on his travels, Gordon Ivon Jefffris visited representative planets all over the universe. A myriad view-

points were presented to him for his consideration, all of which he sedulously reported back to Birth Star, the superputer. He found every sort of philosophy, every sort of government, anarchies, hive-worlds, individualisms, utopias, some of which worked extremely well for a while but not for ever. He spoke to men of action and men of contempiation, women who laughed and women who cried, old people and young people. He was confronted by an astounding diversity.

Gradually, this diversity swallowed him up. He no longer sought for answers. His companions left him, yet he went blindly on, almost unaware of what he was or why he did what he did. He was open to the whole universe, and in consequence less and less able to reach any conclusion about it. There was always something new; that something was age-old, yet at the same time it was new.

Jefffris himself grew old, despite constant rejuvenation shots.

Finally, the Institution recalled him and he sat in a comfortable geriatric chair before Birth Star itself.

'It is many years since you won the great competition. Have you reached any conclusions after your unique experiences?' asked the superputer.

'Experience ... how does anyone evaluate experience? I was born believing that humanity was a vital, not a freak, manifestation of the greater universe, and nothing I have experienced has altered that view.'

'Have you reached any conclusions, then?'

'No. I began to consider that the universe itself was all-important. Its mere size ... Then, after a long while, I came to consider that human beings were all-important. Perhaps nothing is all-important ...

He sank into a long silence from which the superputer finally roused him.

'Is that your conclusion?'

'What? No, certainly not. It is an error in logic to believe that nothing is all-important. That would only be possible in a universe of nothingness. At last I have come to believe that ideas, like the universe, like man, have their own validity, that they have a genetic structure of their own, that they are the link – no, not the link, the very medium, in which both universe and man's consciousness exist. I'm tired ...'

'Go on, Gordan Ivon,' said the superputer. It played him reviving colours.

'Yes, ideas have a seminal fluid. They co-exist from the beginning of everything to the end of everything. They contain everything; that is why they appear to us, whatever we think of, to be at once fresh yet, on examination, very ancient. Such concepts carry us far beyond notions of pessimism or optimism; they carry us right to the heart of existence. And of course we have always been at the very heart of existence without knowing it. Whatever we are, whoever we are, whether young or old . . .'

The superputer let him ramble on, and said finally, 'So you have reached a conclusion.'

'No. Or Yes.' He drew himself up. 'The human soul has a dark corner, the universe, which is its reflection. But I don't think I want to talk about it, thanks.'

RANDOM SAMPLE

by

E. C. TUBB

When Starship Prometheus *came out of ftl her crew could fairly consider their next task the exploration of this new solar system and their settlement upon the finest of the new worlds. But it wasn't as easy as that. Doctor Chappell faced the hard reality of unpleasant alternatives in a situation where the wrong choice would bring death.*

RANDOM SAMPLE

CHAPPEL noisily turned the latch on the door and paused before entering the compartment. It was one of the mores which had become second nature on the *Prometheus*, a consideration of the privacy of others in a vessel in which privacy was at a premium. He needn't have bothered. The couple within had made no attempt to break apart. Lesley Judd sat with his arm snugly around Linda Parkinson and it was obvious from their expressions that each considered their search was over.

Chappell was glad to see it. He had worried a little about Linda, wondering, at times, if the selection board back on Earth had made a mistake. She had been too highly-strung, too much the extrovert, changing partners as if she had been a child in a toy shop eager to try everything before making up her mind. Over-compensation, he decided, the delusive atmosphere of social freedom on board the *Prometheus* coupled with the fear of making a wrong decision.

A computer should have solved the problem and one had been used but, in the final essence, what machine could determine emotional compatibility? The ingredients had been selected, the various units assembled and thrown into close proximity, and nature had done the rest. Fifteen months of flight-time had been long enough to cure initial errors, dissolve jealousy, form friendships and found the basis for an enduring colony.

If they found a habitable planet, of course. If the ship could re-enter normal space without destroying itself. If no one or no thing objected violently to their presence. A lot of 'ifs', he thought tiredly. But what other way was there to do it?

He moved deeper into the compartment as Judd lifted his free hand.

'Hi, Doc! Looking for someone?'

'Rodgers.' It was a lie and they probably both knew it.

The ship was too small and the crew too intimate for his main function to have remained a secret, yet the excuse served to mask his professional interest in the couple and so avoid embarrassment. 'We were to have played chess. Have you seen him?'

Linda stirred in the shelter of Lesley's arm. 'No, Ian, he hasn't been here.'

'He won't have time for chess,' said Judd emphatically. 'Not now and not for some time. He's busy,' he explained. 'On duty – all the ship-operating personnel are.' He smiled at Chappell's expression. 'Didn't they tell you that the trip is almost over?'

As colony-doctor Chappell had no real crew-status but now, for the first time, he realized just how great was the resentment he had generated against himself. It was a danger he had foreseen and had tried to avoid but, in the tiny universe of the *Prometheus*, that had been impossible.

No man likes to be told that he is unsuited to any woman. No woman likes to be ordered to behave herself. Of the sixty-seven people on the ship forty-nine would form the colony, twenty-four couples with himself as initial doctor and director. The essential operating crew of the vessel numbered six. Which left twelve people, six couples who would return to Earth and, no matter what was said, they would be considered as the rejects.

And he had been the one to make the decision as to who should stay and who should return.

Rodgers turned as he entered the control room. The First Officer was a thick-set, burly man who would have seemed more at home on the bridge of a whaling ship of the early part of the preceding century if it had not been for his hands, slender and delicate and his eyes, blue and compassionate. Like the captain, the chief engineer and Chappell himself, he was in late middle-age, too old to be a colonist and therefore with no reason to resent the visitor.

'Hello, Ian, come to see the fun?'

'If I'm permitted.'

'Hell, yes, why not?' Rodgers glanced at the panels, the men busy before them. 'I expected you before this. Why the delay?'

'I didn't know,' said Chappell. 'No one told me.'

'Or everyone thought that someone else had,' said Rodgers, grasping the implication and trying to negate it. 'Well, you're here now, that's all that matters. You know what's going on?'

'You're breaking out of FTL drive. Right?'

'Smack on target. To travel faster than light we had to go somewhere where it could be done. Another dimension, if you like. Now we've got to get back into our own universe. According to the math we've reached about where we wanted to go. The Vegian system, twenty-six light years from good old Sol. A hell of a jump but the area should be lousy with planets. The trick is to break out close enough to reach them but not too close to get trapped in a gravity well.' He nodded to where the captain sat at a console. 'That's the Old Man's decision and he's welcome to it.'

Chappell nodded, looking with interest at the banks of meters, the columns of coloured light. Aside from small noises the control room was silent, heavy with tension as men scanned their instruments. A bell chimed from a panel, the sound augmented by a glare of red light.

'Mass on sector three, sir,' reported the operator. 'About Luna size and approximately ten light minutes—'

Captain Foreman lifted his head. 'Be more precise,' he snapped. 'I don't want guesses!'

'Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. Mass located at . . .'

Rodgers grunted as the man droned his revised information. Leaving Chappell he crossed the room to the panels and busied himself checking data. It was, Chappell knew, a thankless task. From the dimension in which they travelled instruments gathered a skein of information as to electromagnetic phenomena, radiation, local strains and distortions. From it had to be gathered usable knowledge. A local disturbance could be the location of a planetary mass or an electronic storm – FTL flight was still too recent for anyone to be wholly sure, and navigation was a matter of inspired guesswork and dead reckoning. If either were wrong the best they could hope for was the tedious business of re-establishing the drive – the worst would be utter and complete destruction as they tried to fill a space already occupied.

'Stand by for Breakout!' Captain Foreman lifted his head. 'All stations secure. Sound alarm.'

A low moaning echoed through the fabric of the vessel as the alarm signalled all personnel to fasten down. Chappell found himself sweating and looked down at his hands. The first and second fingers of both hands were firmly crossed.

'Now!'

There was a twisting, an indefinable sensation which utterly confused the senses so that the air was filled with lances of dazzling colour and shrieking noise. A sudden nausea which passed as quickly as it had come. And then the control room was normal again, the great vision screens bright with a glitter of stars, the swollen balloon of a sun. And something else.

'A ship,' said Chappell. 'Of tremendous size and totally unfamiliar design; but it could have been nothing else.'

'Are you sure?' Legrain had a logical mind. 'I mean, did it speed up or slow down? Manoeuvre? Did it have a drive mechanism?'

'No.'

'Then how can you be positive it was a ship? It could have been anything, a small planetoid, a rogue asteroid or—'

'We're here, aren't we?' Walsh was a big man, as he clenched his fists muscles bulged on shoulders and arms. 'I think the doc is right. It was an alien vessel and it attacked us on sight. They didn't give us a chance.'

'They didn't kill us, though.' Sears turned from where he examined one of the walls. 'How come – if they wanted to wipe us out?'

'How do I know?' Walsh glared his anger. 'Maybe they saved us to put in a zoo. Or keeeping us for later vivisection. Pets, maybe. Who can tell?'

Chappell sighed. He sat on the floor, his back against a wall, his legs stretched before him. Like the others he was completely nude. The room was about twelve feet square, a featureless cube lit by a soft glow from the ceiling. The walls, as far as they could tell, were completely unbroken. It was hot, the temperature, he guessed, well above body-heat, and the air was so dry that sweat evaporated as soon as it was formed.

Sears turned from his examination of the wall and sat beside him. 'Why?' he demanded of no one in particular. 'Why?'

'Let's take it from the beginning,' said Chappell quietly. 'How did we get here? I think we know that. A ship approached us and used some device which immediately rendered us unconscious. Blacked us out, if you like. When we regained awareness we were in this room. I can't be certain where it is but my guess is that it's within the alien vessel. It certainly isn't a part of the *Prometheus*. I don't feel hungry and I don't need a shave so not much time could have passed. So we must be on the mysterious vessel I saw. Has anyone any objection to that assumption?' He waited but there were no objections. 'So far so good. Now to extrapolate. Our captors must be of a high order of intelligence and have a very sophisticated technology. They matched our speed and course, made contact and effected our transfer. And it is obvious that they are our superiors in spacial navigation.'

'I don't follow,' objected Legrain. 'How can you be so sure they are more advanced than we are? Their presence could have been due to simple chance.'

'True,' admitted Chappell. 'But the fact that they immediately used their blackout device shows they were expecting us.' He wiped his face and began to wish for a drink. 'I think the most important facet of the incident is the proof that they have a very good knowledge of the human body and mind.'

Walsh frowned. 'Hold on a minute, Doc. You're going too fast. Nothing we have learned justifies such an assumption.'

'Wrong,' said Sears quickly. 'I begin to get the drift of what the Doc is getting at. These birds are clever and, to them, we aren't strangers.'

'They know us?' Legrain was incredulous. 'I don't believe it!'

'Then you'd better start trying!' Sears was sharp, his tone betraying his rising irritation. 'For any one species to be able to knock out a member of any other species by means of radiation, vibration or paralysing beam, pre-supposes that they have studied that race. Even back home we still can't develop a beam that will do more than disorganize nervous responses and we've grown up together.'

'Yes,' said Chappell. 'Logic tells us that they know quite a bit about us. Logic also tells us that, in order for them to

have gained that knowledge, they must have contacted us at some time. And so—'

'They were waiting for us,' said Legrain, slowly. 'They knew when we'd Breakout. They had the ship in position and this room all ready.'

'But why?' insisted Sears. 'Why?'

Chappell didn't answer. Twenty-five centimetres from his right foot, a metre from the wall which he would have sworn was one solid piece without crack or flaw, stood what appeared to be a paper cup containing some ten ounces of fluid.

It was water. He tested it with a cautious sip, finding it pleasantly cool and slightly brackish, resisting the impulse to gulp it all. Instead he shared it out, one swallow to a man, the cup collapsing into a sodden mess as he drained the final drops. Walsh, who had been the first to drink, turned from his examination of the wall.

'Nothing,' he said disgustedly. 'It's as solid as ever.'

'Try again!' Legrain was impatient and showed it. 'The cup must have come from somewhere. It couldn't have been passed through a solid. There must be a door or hatch.'

'There isn't.'

'There has to be!'

'Forget it.' Chappell broke up the incipient quarrel. 'Sit down, Legrain! You too, Walsh. The last thing we want is to lose our tempers.' He waited until the others had settled themselves with a slap of bare flesh. 'Let's think this thing out. Sears! Have you any ideas?'

'They could have used their device again,' said Sears thoughtfully. 'Blacked us out, entered with the water, left and then woke us up again.'

'How did they manage to get in?' snapped Walsh. 'The walls are solid.'

'So how did we get in here?' Sears glared at the big man. 'Use your head. Maybe they can swing up an entire wall or open the roof or something.'

'All right,' yielded Walsh. 'So I spoke without thinking.' He ran his tongue over his lips. 'Hell, that water tasted good. I could use about five gallons of it. Iced and poured through a funnel.'

'Me too!' Legrain wiped his hand over his bare chest and licked at the dew on his palm. Chappell watched him with mounting certainty.

Quietly he said, 'We were pondering a question. Why are we here?'

'Prisoners,' said Walsh shortly.

'That isn't answering the question. Try again.'

'Quarantine, then.'

'That's hardly likely,' objected Legrain. 'What about the rest of us or are we something special?'

'A sample batch,' elborated Walsh. 'They could be exposing us to various bacteria and viruses to see what will happen.'

'How about hostages?' suggested Sears. Chappell shook his head.

'That's hardly logical. For us to be hostages pre-supposes that somewhere some of our kind could do our captors harm. Hostages are held to ensure the good behaviour of other members of the same tribe, or group or clan. As the only conceivable persons who could be influenced by our welfare are the others on the *Prometheus* and as they were in all probability captured with us it hardly seems logical that we are held as hostages for their good behaviour.'

Sears cleared his throat. 'All right, that was a bad guess, but how about them keeping us as specimens?'

'I don't believe that is true, either. For one thing if we were we would have been supplied with food and drink. The main objection, however, is that our captors are intelligent. Intelligent people don't put other intelligent people into a zoo. If they did they wouldn't be intelligent.'

Walsh snorted. 'That doesn't leave us much, does it? According to your brand of logic if we can't find a good reason for us being here, we shouldn't be here. We can't therefore we're not. Let's go home.'

Legrain glared his irritation. 'Use your head, Walsh. This isn't a game. This is serious.' He appealed to Chappell. 'That's right, isn't it, Doc?'

'You're both right,' said Chappell flatly. 'It is serious – deadly serious. And Walsh is right also. We are being subjected to intense strain.' He looked at their intent faces. 'I believe that we are a part of a controlled experiment. A test,

if you like and, if we don't pass it, we and all on the *Prometheus* will die.'

There was, he thought, nothing like dramatic emphasis to gain attention. Next to it came the dramatic pause and he used it now, letting his gaze drift from one to the other, allowing the silence to grow until it was time for him to break it.

'And explanation, to be feasible, must fit all the known facts and none other that I can think of does it better. Everything points to it. A sealed, escape-proof cell. No method of determining the passage of time. No clothing. No contact with either our own people or our captors. Sterile surroundings. Reduced to our basic primevality.' He looked around the room. 'Laboratory conditions. A group reduced to a common norm. Carefully regulated stimulus provided and the results noted. I've done the same thing myself a hundred times with rats and mice. Test conditions to determine what will happen in particular situations.'

Legrain frowned. 'But what do they hope to learn? I thought we decided that they must know all about us.'

'They probably do,' agreed Chappell. 'Physically at least, but maybe they want to learn more.' He frowned, thinking, automatically rubbing his chin and feeling the harsh stubble.

Stubble! But he hadn't been here long enough for his beard to grow – or had he? It was impossible to determine the passage of time, the utter sameness of the room, the probability of frequent blackouts of which he would remain unaware. No wonder he felt so thirsty. They could have been here for days in sweltering conditions ideal for the creation of dehydration. And now that his mind was on the subject he couldn't leave it alone. Water! Crystal clear mountain streams, gurgling faucets, limpid pools, the calming beat of rain.

Irritably he wrenched the images from his immediate consciousness. 'What would happen if you put a dozen rats in a cage and only provided enough food for one?'

'They would fight,' said Legrain.

'And if you provided a way out of the cage with ample food at the exit?'

'If it was plain and they didn't follow it you'd know that they weren't very bright.'

'An intelligence test,' said Chappell. 'But we know there isn't a way out of this room so the analogy isn't correct. What else would the behaviour of the rats indicate?'

'They wouldn't be intelligent,' said Sears. 'Or they wouldn't fight over one ration of food.'

'Intelligent?'

'Wrong word. Try civilized.' Sears narrowed his eyes. 'The water?'

'Yes.' Chappell looked from one to the other. 'We can take it that we are under constant observation. Every action, every word we speak is either watched or recorded. What we do and how we do it is important. Probably far more important than we realize.'

Walsh scowled at his fists. 'So I was right. We're specimens. Just what are we supposed to do?'

Chappell drew a deep breath. 'Decide who is to live and who is to die.'

'No!' said Legrain. 'We can't! We—'

'— have no choice,' interrupted Chappell curtly. 'That was made by our captors and we have to abide by it. There are four of us. If we receive only the same amount of water as we did last time, and I believe that we will, then only one of us has a hope in hell of staying alive. The rest will die of thirst. The problem is – who is going to be the lucky man?'

No one said anything but, unconsciously, Walsh flexed his muscles.

'That isn't the way,' said Chappell quietly. 'It isn't as simple as that. We're not animals but, if we act like animals we must expect to be treated like them. What we do may not be as important as how we do it.'

Walsh spread his fingers. 'What do you mean?'

'Look at it this way. We are strangers arriving unheralded and perhaps unwanted in a sector of space already occupied by an intelligent race. They know of us but that knowledge could be thousands of years out of date. So how are we to be treated? Are we decadent? Are we brutes prematurely advanced and bent on conquest? Or are we a race which has kept its culture in step with its technological progress? How are they to know?'

Sears licked his swollen and cracking lips. 'Make a test.'

'Exactly,' said Chappell. 'What else.'

Legrain coughed. He held a paper cup of water in one hand. 'I think it's feeding time again. I just found this.' He began to raise it to his lips.

Walsh roared and lunged at the other man. Legrain saw him coming and tried to dodge. Chappell and Sears joined the fray. When it was over Legrain had a bruised cheek. Walsh a torn ear and both Chappell and Sears ugly marks on belly and torso.

The water had spilled and gone to waste.

Chappell said, 'We'd better come to a decision. I don't want to go through that again.'

'He was going to drink it all,' said Walsh. 'I tried to stop him.'

'You mean that you wanted to drink it all yourself.' Legrain was shaking with anger. 'I was only taking a swallow.'

'That's what you say!'

'Shut up, Walsh,' snapped Chappell before Legrain could answer. 'You too, Legrain. The water should have been handed to me. Don't let it happen again.' He tried to put what authority he could into his voice; but it was little enough, simply that of age and experience. 'As I see it we have a limited choice. We can fight over the water – and we know what will happen then. We can refuse it – all die on the basis of absolute equality. Or we can decide who is to get it – and the rest will have to make sure that he does.'

Sears frowned, 'I don't get that.'

'When men get really thirsty, when the craving for water gets too strong, good resolutions are quickly forgotten.' Chappell looked at the others. 'As yet any one of us could be picked to receive the entire ration. That ration means continued life and, perhaps, a chance to get out of this place. But it will do him no good if three thirst-crazed men gang up on him. He wouldn't stand a chance and we'd be back to the first alternative where we all fight and no one gets the water. So those who go without must restrain not only themselves but each other. Agreed?'

'I guess so,' said Walsh. The others nodded.

'Good. Now to decide.' Chappell pulled four hairs from his head, knotted one, held it with the others in his hand. 'The hair with the knot is the winner. Who picks first?'

Walsh swallowed, put out his hand, hesitated. Sears shrugged. 'One chance in four.' He drew. No knot.

Legrain stepped forward, quickly, snatched a hair, pursed his lips as he found it smooth. Walsh smiled, 'Even odds.' He drew and muscles bunched on his thick shoulders.

Chappell looked at the remaining hair. It was knotted. As if in ironical reward a cup of water appeared at his feet.

The aliens were cunning, he thought, bleakly. Diabolically so. They had struck at the prime dynamic, the instinct of self-preservation, the fundamental urge of the entire human race. Perhaps of all races. That, at least, was a thing they would hold in common.

The water had tasted like nectar but he hadn't really enjoyed it. He had gulped it down, conscious of the envious stares, the barely restrained craving of his companions. Almost he had felt ashamed; but deep within something had gloated because he was going to survive.

Until, of course, Walsh realized that he was the strongest, that agreements meant nothing, and that he could have all the water, safely and completely, simply by first killing the other three.

That would be the barbaric solution to the problem and the red proof of the survival of the fittest; but no society which hadn't risen above such primitive methods could call itself civilized. Was that, he wondered, the purpose of the test? To determine if the veneer of civilization was strong enough to imprison the beast?

And why had no women been included in the group? Would that have made it too easy? The procreators of the race were always protected unless they were old and ugly and, in civilized societies, even then.

Chappell stirred restlessly on the floor. He lay apart from the others as if already isolated. For want of anything better to do he rose and again examined the walls. They were smooth, of a peculiar substance which gave them the appearance of vertical pools, the surface highly polished with highlights within so that the fingers met the obstruction before the mind was ready for it. An optical illusion, of course, he had seen something like it in a hall of marble with panels of polished jet.

Time passed. The next drink appeared directly before

Walsh, almost touching his foot, His arm twitched but he made no other move. Chappell hesitated then drank it down. The same with the next. The third was wasted.

Like the others it appeared directly before the big man. Both he and Chappell reached for it together. Before the others could interfere the damage had been done.

Chappell reeled back, head singing, the salt taste of blood in his mouth from hammered lips. The water spread in an evaporating pool at the side of the struggling trio.

'You see what I mean?' he said, bitterly. 'Is it impossible to prove that we are human, not animal? Don't you realize that is just what they were waiting to see if we would do?'

'All right, Doc,' croaked Legrain. 'Don't be too hard on him. He's half crazy. We'll see it doesn't happen again.'

Chappell turned, nursing his bruises, sitting apart and staring at the far wall. His thirst was maddening, the worse for having anticipated the water, seeming to burn his tissues, his very ability to think. What more could the test prove? How much longer would it last?

One thing he was sure about. He would share the next drink. No matter how illogical it was, how senseless, he would share it. He couldn't just sit and watch his companions die.

He must have stared at it for a good five seconds before he recognized the cup. It was directly before him, twenty-five metres from the wall, and had appeared as mysteriously as the others. Even as he picked it up something made him hesitate. He looked and confirmed the impression of lightness. The cup was empty.

A croak made him turn. Walsh stared at him, eyes imploring, one hand outstretched.

'It's finished,' said Chappell, tightly, and upended the container. 'There is no more water. There won't be any more water. The experiment is over.'

But not quite. With an effort of will Chappell forced himself to ignore his physical discomfort, the agony of his companions, the desperate need of haste. He took deep, even breaths, lying on the floor and relaxing as far as he was able. When he had achieved some kind of detachment he began to think over the whole thing again as he would an interesting problem.

After a while he smiled, opened his eyes, climbed to his feet – and walked through the wall.

'It was a test, of course,' he said to the captain. 'We realized that quite early. The only thing we had doubt about was exactly what it was designed to prove. And I also fell into the error of being a bit too clever for my own good.'

Foreman shook his grizzled head. 'It still seems unbelievable. If it weren't for the instruments and your testimony I'd swear that nothing at all could have happened. As far as I'm concerned we achieved Breakout and saw an alien vessel. That vessel.' His arm lifted and pointed to where a monstrous artifact hung against a backdrop of stars.

'They'll be contacting us soon,' said Chappell. His eyes were thoughtful. 'They must have blacked out the entire ship, selected us four, put us to the test and then returned us before allowing you to regain awareness.'

'But why?' demanded Foreman. 'Why didn't they contact us in the normal manner?'

'Perhaps they did, normal for them, that is. After all they are probably experienced in meeting alien cultures. We are not.'

Foreman nodded. 'I see. You think that they have devised some sort of test as a working basis. But what made you walk through the wall? You said that it was solid.'

Chappell smiled. 'It was. As I said I was just a little too clever. I thought it was a simple test to determine how we would react to a given situation. And that is exactly what it was. The trouble was that I only fully recognized half of the problem.'

'I still don't get it.'

'There was no point at all in them letting us die of thirst so, when the water ceased to arrive, the empty cup must have been a clue of a kind. Something like "the test is over – now all get out of here". When I sat down to think things over I was suddenly reminded of a joke we once played on a student at school. We locked him in his room. It was on the top floor and he couldn't leave by other than the door. He had a heavy date and almost pulled it off its hinges before quietening down. Later we crept up and unlocked it. He didn't know this, of course, and continued to sit for hours in

an unlocked room under the firm impression that he couldn't get out.'

'So?'

'The point is this, that student had tried the door so often and found it locked that he was unable to think of it as otherwise. We had so convinced ourselves that the room was one solid piece that we just didn't think of it as other than a breakproof cell. At first it was probably just that. But I'm inclined to believe we could have walked out of it simply by refusing to admit that it was an impassable barrier. Perhaps it has a mentally operated lock, or something. After all, our own cages are built something like that. Laboratory ones, at least. A child can open one but an animal lacks the mental ability to operate the simple catch-mechanism. Anyway, I just stepped towards a wall and kept going.'

'What happened then?'

'Nothing.' Chappell met the captain's eyes. 'I mean that literally. As far as I'm concerned I stepped into the wall and was immediately back on the *Prometheus*, dressed, shaved and feeling fine.'

'The others came with you,' mused Foreman. 'They and you must have been given restorative treatment of some kind.' He swore with sudden exasperation. 'Damn it! According to the chronometers we arrived twelve days ago. According to me it was ten minutes. They could have investigated every inch of my ship and probed every member of my crew and I'd never know it. What kind of creatures are we up against?'

Chappell looked at the tremendous bulk of the alien vessel depicted in the screen. 'Clever ones, Captain, and experienced. I think it would be wise for us to think in terms of "work with" rather than "up against". This is one race we can't afford to antagonize.'

'Maybe not.' Foreman looked thoughtful. 'What would have happened if you hadn't walked through the wall?'

Chappell replied without taking his eyes from the screen. 'I believe we would have died in that room,' he said quietly. 'Any race capable of subjecting others to such a test would have no tolerance for stupidity. And rightly so – an idiot must not be allowed access to destructive mechanisms.'

'Fair enough. But it's over now. You passed and we passed with you. But I'd still like to know just what was the de-

ciding factor. Not your walking out, I can understand that, but what made them let you do it. Unlatch the cage, so to speak.'

'An accident,' said Chappell.

'What?'

'Luck.' Chappell turned and stared at the captain. 'We drew straws and I won. I also happened to be the oldest of the four. It didn't strike me at the time but it's obvious when you think about it. What is the concept of law and order based on? Respect for authority. And who is almost inevitably in the highest position of authority? The aged. Those with accumulations of experience, in this case myself. And, by giving me the water, the others showed their respect and deference to established rule. So we passed and so are acceptable to the alien culture.'

Foreman whistled as he stared at the alien ship on which lights began to flash in a familiar code. 'Luck,' he said and added, 'Man! Are they in for a surprise!'

SENTENCED TO A SCHEHERAZADEAN DEATH

by

DAVID H. WALTERS

Life is but a breath away from Death. 'Whilst there's breath there's life' is an old saying and never has that been more true than in the sad case of the sentence passed on the unnamed speaker of this short piece. Of his first published writing, unrepentantly presented, with great pleasure, herewith, David H. Walters says: 'Dedicated to Christopher Priest, who has on several occasions told me that the first sentence in any work is of great importance.' Readers of New Writings in SF *will know Christopher Priest and will now realize he has a great deal to answer for. I have only just the one word of advice – take a deep breath . . .*

SENTENCED TO A SCHEHERAZADEAN DEATH

'GENTLEMEN, for so I must call you, though I do not believe the word in any way to be justified, I, who now stand before you about to perish at your hands, but strongly unrepentant, as yet unbloody and still unbowed, unjustly convicted at your "Court", which I can only describe as marsupial of the worst nature, of an act which you, in your ignorance (and power) determine a capital crime, a felony no less, but which is, I feel, in reality an inalienable right, nay a duty on man, indeed on all sentient life, which it behoves him not to cast aside unwittingly, recklessly or without due consideration, a duty, I reiterate, which is upon us all, everyone, if we wish to survive the all embracing quietude which threatens our mortal coils, both as a race of witting beings on this the best of good earths, albeit a race composed of and comprising somewhat fractious and wayward individuals, though I must state that I find you to be far more wayward and fractious than I can adventure a guess, and individually, each man being his own prosecuting and defending counsels, judge, jury and executioner for this purpose, if perchance we wish not to succumb to the faceless, mindless hordes of ignorance and ignominy or to fall hapless and helpless into the very slime and mire of oblivion, unremembered alike by bird or beast, or any other living thing, neither celebrated nor commemorated even by the uneven memorials of chaste, chased and sculptured metal and stone even now decaying about us, a duty which I have ever striven to obey and uphold, a duty for which I now find myself cast down by my abysmal inferiors, yes you, and face to face with that final arbiter of life – death, and yet a death not sacrosanct by the mores of hallowed learning and ageold tradition, but a sprung up "nouveau" end delivered of envy out of greed, a death about to fall upon me from the bloody and glaring muzzles of those lethal instruments

gripped so slackly in your mind-enfeebled (but muscular) hands, a death to follow swift upon your judgment yet withheld until my completion of this my final sentence, as is granted and allowed me by the so-called laws of this infamous gathering which must be, after all (to give you devils your due), I suppose, still willing, at least for the time being, to allow me to end what I have begun in this brief breath, and to keep to its as yet undefiled but idiotic custom that my final grammatical period shall prove also to be my final existence period as nearly simultaneously as your scabrously itchy trigger fingers can make their fatal journeys after your deadened nerves carry the futile orders from your lack-lustre minds which in their turn must await their last but unappreciative appreciation of the termination of this my sentence (O if I should die think only this of me that there's some corner of the sludge of insensitive unthinking life that is forever grammatical), and for what, aye that's the rub, as t'is merely that I in my wisdom, have more of it than you, that mine is a brain of intellectual virtuosity born too late for its more natural habitat in the fields of academe of yore, and having its, shortly to be terminated, truncated span at a time when the power of the powers that be is firmly grasped by your sticky and bludgeonlike fingers, the unlettered untutored unschooled duffers of a genus, sadly not genius, become dullard, unappreciative of the beauties of iambic or dactylic feet, of rhyme rhythm or scansion, unable to perceive the finer parts of the wondrous heritage of this our English speech (O God my throat is dry), you the repulsive and reprehensible result of unchecked breeding, of lascivious, lustful, lunatic lovemaking, though I fear without true appreciation of the meaning of that lovely word, the overpopulating underintelligent spawn of your barbary and barbarous forebears (foreapes?), overweening and prideful to the very great detriment of my dead peers, you, oh you of little intellect (though I regret to say of vastly superior numerical strength, and of firepower also), you to whom I speak, your inanimate eyes dimming in the folds of unthinking flesh, your synapses rusty with sloth as compared with me, the modern Plato, Prometheus of the Proms, giant for grammar, the very quintessence of mindful superiority, hapless only child of the last remaining family of professorial persons, sages of special sanguinity, whose motto

through the eons has been "Cogitamus ergo summus", whose crest, a field azure with an owl rampant gules with three "Rs" below argent contained within a scroll, surmounted overall by a crown of laurel vert sited atop a gerundive passant, the last of the line, the final phd . . . but why go on . . . and yet I must for while there's life there's breath, while there's breath there's speech and while there's speech there's life, a neat example of the pseudo vicious circle which I feel sure you will not appreciate, and besides I have always held that I must never start a course of action or reaction (though it is you not I who are the reactionary) which I was not able, willing and determined to see through to the bitter final end (cough cough, my throat) and here I have and am the subject of this sentence so far incomplete without its/my verb, a sonnet octave as yet lacking its complementary sestet, a verb which was at first instance to have been "continue", but at the last I do not think I can, and here's my end, without my verb, but true to my teaching I shall end not with a preposition (and my post position will, I know, be horizontal) but with an indefinite article, I who am that least indefinite of savants, to come to this, an ending not with a whimper but with a . . .'

Bang.

BETWEEN THE TIDES

by

DONALD MALCOLM

In this portrayal of an alien culture in crisis, Donald Malcolm gives due prominence to the vital similarities of civilization without undermining the essential differences. If the ancient society of Hasub broke down from whatever variety of causes – including the unpalatable fact that the world had become inhospitable – would not this be a direct commentary on the fitness of that society for the great project? If the wheel failed would not that have been caused by other forces than those of a hostile universe?

BETWEEN THE TIDES

One

THE CRYSTAL wheel rotated serenely in orbit a thousand miles above the planet Hasub like a flawless jewel. It shone with pale fire, pink, almost lilac at times.

Succeeding generations had watched it grow and spread, like a flower opening with all but infinite slowness, reaching, always reaching, for something seemingly unattainable.

Now, with a diameter of a mile, it was complete. Trailing behind it in orbit, like a single strand of a web, was a crystal rope, five hundred miles long, a glittering, tenuous connection with reality. At the end of the rope was the ship.

As he watched the launch of a service shuttle, Not Simde Yorea thought: it's been like a fairy tale, a one hundred and 64-year-old fairy tale. But now it's going to become real and the spell will be broken.

The rocket drew a blade of faceted flame up the sky, for a few moments splitting the glowering mauve-black of the far mountains asunder. Then it thrust out among the stars.

He turned away from the telescope, rubbing his eyes, and leaned against the ledge that ran the full length of the window. Unseasonably warm night air, rich with the scents of flowers and trees, nuzzled his fine pelt through the openwork of his tunic. It was the time of falling leaves, which scuttled like crisp spiders across the land. Soon the world would sleep and dream. His hopes and aspirations were now fully awakened. Not for him, or Atira, or their cubs, or the eight other families, would there be the long hibernation until the sap rose again in the trees and the wind sang with renewed life.

He looked over his shoulder, at the crystal wheel and beyond it, to deep space. As yet, there was nothing to see, except stars. But the capricious planet was there, moving in its immutable course along a track of cosmic dust. The

astro-physicists had shown him the math and assured him that the planet would be on time, as it had been every one hundred and sixty-four years since planets had formed within the binary system.

Something primal in him shuddered at the thought of the venture, and he closed the window, shutting out the night, and his own fears.

The room was in darkness. It soothed him. Imperceptibly, awareness of the objects there began to impress themselves on his retina. This was where it had all begun. In the cabinets along the wall on his left were the tapes and records. They told a story of nadir and zenith, frustrations and discarded plans, high hopes and achievements. Above the cabinets were ancestral photographs, the men and women who had kept alive a project that, many times, must have seemed like fantasy. Their faces glowed whitely, like those of spectres.

He walked across the soft fibrous floor and sat on the edge of his drawing table and, switching on a low light, contemplated the wall plan view of the star system.

Reduced to coloured circles, orbital and trajectoral lines, it all seemed so simple. There were two stars in the system, 8,370 million miles apart. Hasub's star was type M, the other was type F. Hasub was a solitary world, without even a moon. The other sun had four planets. Once every 164 years, a planet from the other star, in a figure-of-eight trajectory, came within twenty million miles of Hasub. But Simde's people didn't have the technology to enable them to reach it. There it was, so necessary to the plan, and so elusive.

Hasub had been growing gradually, but inexorably, colder for hundreds of years. Already the polar caps had spread considerably towards the equatorial regions, where the small population of around five hundred thousand lived on the three linked continents. Prolonged observations had shown that two of the planets in the other part of the binary system would sustain life. Simde was going to attempt to take a small group there, to establish a colony. If the plan to get them there worked, then the race would have a new beginning and continue to exist. If not, it would become one with the encroaching cold.

Atira, his wife, came into the room quietly, as if wafted there gently by the soft light behind her.

'Simde.'

They touched their right hands briefly, their six digits spread out in the ritual fan, the sex digits stirring faintly. This was just one of the old customs being ignored by most of the younger members of society, and many of the older ones. Few had faith that the voyage would succeed and even if it did, it wasn't going to save them, anyway. So ritual and discipline were discarded. Some of the really reckless and degenerate people were even foregoing hibernation by the use of drugs. Invariably, they stopped their food plants, and, often, themselves.

Atira and Simde went into another room and sat on the cushions surrounding the psycho-food plant and each inserted their index finger and thumb of the left hand into the plant and took nourishment through the tubes that extruded from the tips. Their minds began to merge with that of the plant on a subconscious level and they were again part of the sublime cycle of nature. The cold was not the only danger to the continued existence of the inhabitants of Hasub. Many of the food plants were blighted. It was not known how the blight had started. Fortunately, their plant was, so far, untainted.

'Are the cubs in bed?'

'Yes. Cered's reading and Rogdon is annoying him.'

Simde eased his index digit to adjust the flow, and said, 'Then we can expect trouble.'

She smiled, her lips curving over the subdued blue staining on her gums. Some of the other colour combinations he'd seen in use——

'No. He won't keep it up. I've left a few toys beside his bed. He'll soon fall asleep.'

They were silent for a time, letting their minds and bodies respond to the produce of the food plant. He studied the lines of her lowered face, marvelling at the myriad flashes of light gently entrapped in her fine, pale brown pelt and the long hair that reached to her waist. A simple gown enveloped and made a mystery of her figure.

'Simde.'

He waited for her to go on. She withdrew her digits and wiped them with a cloth and handed it to him. The food plant became bright grey-green as it replenished itself from roots deep in the planet. This was their last full bonding

with the plant, which had been a member of Simde's family since before the project had begun and it was one of the oldest functional plants on Hasub. There were others older, but the bonding was of the minds only and no nourishment was provided. Since its initial bonding with Simde's ancestors, the plant had nourished the family regularly every thirty-one days, and eased and cleansed their minds. Neri Falrac, the psycho-botanist of the project, had examined the plant and she had told them that it would soon stop. The plant had been prepared for the imminent farewell for a long time, now, and Neri was convinced that it had decided to stop of its own accord.

She said his name again, this time looking at him, her eyes a clear violet.

'Are you having doubts?'

He finished cleaning his digits and put the cloth in the bowl.

'No. This is something our race would always have had to do. Not merely because we need to reach the other planets to perpetuate the racial existence. Even if all was well on Hasub, we would need to break out of this region, to widen our horizons, physically, mentally, philosophically, spiritually. These are all sound justifications, but they aren't necessary. Since its conception, this project has always been considered as a practical, scientific undertaking. Look at the advances that have accrued to almost every discipline—'

'But our detractors say – rightly – that we haven't learned how to stem the blight that is steadily stopping the food plants, or to defeat the cold.'

He wagged a long digit at her.

'I'm glad you're on my side, Atira. You argue too well. As you know, new strains of food plant are being developed in zero gravity conditions on the space platforms. All the resources of the Yorea Company are being utilized, but the problems are very complex. No one can tell if they will be satisfactorily solved. The cold is more of a long-term worry. People could always go underground. The only doubts I have are about not going. Look how society has changed since we were cubs. The increased pace of life, noise, crime, material pressures, a falling birth-rate and fewer live births. It's almost as if nature has decreed that Hasub and all its life-forms shall stop. This is a world we no longer understand.'

'And no longer want? They say that you are running away.'

She was stretched out on the cushions, hands cradling her head.

'Who says that?'

'Irah and Noss,for two.'

He stared at her.

'I can't believe it. They are among our closest friends. They were witnesses at our joining.'

She reached up and touched his face.

'You've been so involved with the project that you've become blind and deaf to what others are saying. Most of them don't see it as the noble aspiration—'

He was indignant.

'I don't think of it as "noble". It's work, something that has to be done . . .'

He floundered into silence under her unwavering, compassionate gaze.

'But you do, Simde, you do.'

He stood up and wandered into the other room, to the window, fighting the impulse to be hurt. He forced his palms down on the ledge and watched the crystal wheel, his talisman.

'You're right, Atira. I see myself as a minor god, about to crown the culmination of hundreds of years of faith and effort. I've taken that responsibility to myself, almost selfishly, and accepted it. Was it so wrong to make a "noble aspiration" of it? The reality is very uncertain.'

Atira moved behind him and encircled him with her arms as he continued talking and he was conscious of her single, central breast against his back.

'You asked me if I had doubts. I said "no" and I mean that. But I have fears for you, for the cubs, for the others who are going with us. Any kind of simple accident could stop some, or all of us. Even if we reach our goal, perhaps we'll find that, for any number of reasons, we can't live there.'

Atira turned him round to face her.

'We have two planets to choose from and you haven't come this far to fail now. I know you will be successful and together we'll found a new world. Let's go and see the cubs and then go to bed.'

They left the room, their hands entwined, the sex digits

anticipating the joining. Far down below the house, the food plant felt almost imperceptible twinges in some of its roots.

Simde and Atira lay together in the silence. He said,

'Noss and Irah. I really can't believe it of them. At least, not of Noss.'

Atira began to regret having told him, then dismissed the thought. As the time of the launch came nearer, Simde would have found out.

'Don't worry about them. They've involved themselves with a younger, wild crowd. Irah, no doubt, wanted to be among people nearer her own age, while Noss – it can only have been because of Irah, I suppose. They've both been silly. And I think that they're beginning to realize it, now. Anyway, now that the climax is near, Noss won't let anything interfere with his work.'

'I'm sure you're right, Atira,' Simde said. He'd see Noss tomorrow.

Privately, Atira thought that Noss's actions could be traced to his desire to be on the expedition; it had been part of his life for so long. And Irah's influence had also to be considered. Atira was glad that she hadn't told Simde that Irah was joining with one (or possibly more) of her new 'friends'. Even Noss didn't suspect that. Irah had no cubs. Perhaps that was the main reason for her behaviour. Five years was a long time to carry a cub, to have it born stopped, to know that you could have no more. Nature gave three chances, but only if the first cub was born alive. Irah had used her chances and was now barren. Her first cub had stopped shortly after its separation. Atira had been fortunate in separating two live cubs and having them survive the separation. Hasub was a kind world to very few.

Their sex digits joined and it was joyous. It might be the last joining they would have on Hasub. Or perhaps the final one of their lives.

Two

Clouds, grey bronze, pink cyclamen, drifted across the eastern sky as the star rose, starting to dispel the glittering frost. It was an intense, throbbing red. The number of strong flares recorded during the past year had been unpre-

cedented. Birds were busy among the branches of the trees screening the airship shed from the rear of the house. The breeze was light, so Simde didn't have to rotate the shed. He walked the little craft out on its trolley and, minutes later, he was flying down from the hills and across the plain to the launch complex. Everywhere was ordered activity. A service shuttle landed and another was preparing to take off. Ground cars – maintenance, goods, private – zipped about like insects. Simde landed his airship in its place beside the workshops and went to his office on the ground floor. He preferred to be as near as possible to the site, where parts for the space ship were fabricated, then ferried up to orbit.

Noss wasn't in his office and Simde assumed that he was out somewhere on the shop floor, where he usually was. As Chief Technical Officer of the project, Noss was always fully occupied and worked harder than anyone, Simde included. And he was never late, which was more than could be said for some of the younger workers. It was fortunate that the Yorea Company was tolerant.

Despite the rapturous joining of the previous night. Simde hadn't slept well. Concern about the project was probably mostly to blame. But he had been unable to stop thinking about Noss, his life-long friend, his most skilled and diligent employee, virtually a partner and soon to be the owner of the Yorea Company. Simde had never mentioned this to Atira, that he thought that Noss had made a bad joining with Irah. She was younger than Noss, a beautiful and resolute woman who took what she wanted and damned the consequences. At first, she had seemed good for Noss, who tended to see everything in terms of stresses and strains, tolerances and workloads.

Eidas, his vivacious assistant, came in and he asked her if she'd seen Noss. She took some papers from a sheaf in her arms and put them on his desk.

'Not this morning, Simde Yorea. I don't think that he's been in his office.'

'He's probably outside somewhere. Could you put out a call for him, please, when you've finished your rounds? He might be back by then. Thank you.'

Eidas cheered him up. She made everyone feel happy.

He was half-way through the reports when he heard the call go out for Noss. He glanced at the tell-tale on his

communicator. Noss didn't respond. Usually, he would come through, acknowledge the call, and say when he would appear.

Simde went into Eidas' office.

'Come to think of it, his airship isn't outside. Could he be where the call can't reach him?'

'He always leaves a note in that case. Shall I try again?'

Simde had been thinking about what Atira had said last night.

'No. Would you get me his home code, please?'

He returned to his own office as the communicator buzzed to indicate that a line was open and the code being called.

A woman's voice said, 'Noss Sidl's house. Who's calling, please?'

The video screen stayed blank. As Simde's code had automatically registered on her set, she knew who was calling.

'Irah. Simde here.'

He heard her breath indrawn and the screen cleared. Irah looked something – apprehensive, irritated – Simde couldn't be sure. She was wearing a demure lemon-coloured lounging tunic and her long tawny hair glistened. Her gum staining was, for her, subdued.

'Simde— Good morning.'

'Good morning, Irah. Is Noss there? He doesn't seem to be at work.'

'No . . . yes. He's here. He's . . . ill.'

Simde felt a stab of alarm. If anything had happened to Noss at this critical stage—'

'What's wrong with him? Is it serious? When did he take ill?'

She passed a hand across her forehead and her eyes were like enormous green pools.

'I don't know, Simde. The healer is with him now. It happened about thirty, forty minutes ago.'

'Sorry, Ira. I shouldn't have fired off questions at you like that. Is there anything I can do? Would you like Atira to come to you?'

The great green eyes were wary.

'Not just now, thanks.'

'Please call me again as soon as you know what is wrong.'

'I'll do that, Simde.'

The screen blanked out, leaving Simde with the feeling of knowing less than he did before he called.

He punched out his own home code. Atira took the call.

'Simde. This is a surprise.'

He could hear the cubs arguing in the background.

'Noss is ill. I called Irah. The healer's there now.'

Atira's eyes changed colour, to a deep mauve.

'Oh.' That was all she said.

'Oh? What does that mean?'

Simde was getting more puzzled by the minute.

Atira reached down out of sight of the screen and activated the scrambler.

'It means,' she said distinctly, 'that Irah has been joining with some of her young men and that Noss has found out the painful way.'

Simde was suddenly conscious of the blood in his veins.

'Then he has . . . he has—' He couldn't say it.

'Yes. Noss has the disease.'

'You knew.'

'That Irah was joining elsewhere, yes. And I suspected as much when their food plant was causing so much trouble. Noss must have thought that it was blight. Did you never *really* wonder why I wouldn't let the cubs go there in recent months, why we've never taken up their invitations, or given any? There was danger even in the ritual bonding all guests partake in.'

'We've all been busy with the final stages of the project.' He broke off and asked: 'Is there no way to prevent Noss knowing?'

'Be realistic. It's *there*, in his body, in his blood. Irah has tainted him and their food plant. I think it will be too late to save him.'

Simde said through his sorrow, 'How long has Irah – I mean—'

He thumped the desk in exasperation.

'About half-a-year, I'd say. She never actually *told* me, of course, but all the signs were there for a woman to see. Noss might not be as bad as we fear. He and Irah didn't join much, if at all recently. Noss is much older than Irah and she did tell me that Noss was never very keen on joining even at the beginning.'

Atira started to laugh and smothered it at Simde's scowl.

'Irah once said that Noss always tackled joining as if it were a mechanical problem and seemed to be scared that he would strain himself.'

'How like Noss.'

'So you see what I mean—'

'But surely the frequency of joining has nothing to do with it? Once would be enough.'

'We'll have to wait and see. What are you going to do?'

She knew that Noss was vital to the success of the initial part of the project.

Simde was at a loss. 'As you say, wait. We can carry on here for a bit, and hope that no snags arise. I want to go and see Noss, but I don't think that the time is right. And Irah doesn't want you there, either.'

Atira said without malice, 'I'm not surprised. Anyway, I'd better let you get back to work. I'll see you this evening.'

She had reminded him gently that he was spinning out time.

He said good-bye and went into Eidas' office.

'If Irah Sidl calls, let me know and hold till I get back here. I'm going to talk to Remlin Dor – Noss is ill and I don't know when he'll be back at work.'

'Is Noss seriously ill?'

He'd hoped to evade that question and was snappish, unusual for him.

'I don't know, Eidas. I wish I did.'

Eidas – and everyone else – would know soon enough what was wrong with Noss.

Instead of going immediately to see the Assistant Chief Technical Officer, Simde went back to his office and sat at the desk.

Noss. I haven't really thought about him, only about the project and the inconvenience to me. Perhaps Atira was right. I am blind and deaf. Selfish. What would Noss do – supposing he recovered? Joining outside the family was, or had been, virtually unknown on Hasub. Social and environmental conditions were slowly changing that and many other parts of the old, accepted code of conduct, and the pace was accelerating. But among people of their level— He couldn't recall when he'd last heard of such an occurrence.

Would Noss contemplate the ultimate step of breaking the joining? It entailed much anguish for the man, the woman and their psycho-food plant. Fortunately there were no cubs. Simde hoped that Atira was wrong. That was unlikely. Sometimes he wondered if she could see the future, even in a vague way. Cases of such a gift, if that's what it was, had been reported occasionally from remote places.

He went to the fabrication shops and had been with Remlin Dor for about thirty minutes, when Eidas buzzed him.

'Irah Sidl calling.'

He excused himself and returned to the office.

'She sounds very agitated.' Eidas whispered, anxious, somehow, to involve herself in what was happening.

So would you be, if you knew, Simde thought.

'Irah—'

'Simde! Noss has left the house, in his airship. I don't know where he's gone. He won't answer his communicator. I'm worried.'

Simde felt like telling her it was a bit late for that. Instead, projecting a calm he didn't feel, he asked, 'What did the healer say?'

'I – I don't want to talk about it here.'

'But it *is* serious?'

Irah started to react to his brusqueness, then the fight went out of her.

'Yes.' Her voice was barely audible. 'The healer went into another room to arrange for Noss to go for observation and treatment. Noss suddenly ran out and then I heard the airship taking off.'

'Which way did he go?'

'I . . . don't know. I was so confused.'

Simde, his mind racing on, said, 'Try and relax. Noss won't do anything rash. He's probably coming here. I'll ask Atira to go and see you.'

Without waiting for a reply, he cut the connection and dialled Atira. He told her the story and she agreed to go at once and see Irah.

Simde sat drumming at his desk. Noss wasn't coming to the site, he knew. He had said that to calm Irah. The two families had a cabin in the mountains. Noss would go there. It was about an hour's flight from the complex. He called in Eidas.

'I'm going to be away for some time. I don't know how long. If it's vital, you can reach me on the airship circuit. Let Remlin Dor know.'

Soon he was airborne. He didn't try to get in touch with Noss. The extra time on his own might help. Simde didn't know what he was going to say or do when he arrived at the cabin, so he pushed the problem to the back of his mind and thought about the project.

The space ship would be ready, if they maintained schedule, in eight days. The parts being finished off in the fabrication shop would be sent to orbit tomorrow. The main hulls of the vessel were assembled and some engine tests had been successful. Nothing must be allowed to go wrong, now.

The incoming planet would be at opposition in sixteen days, when it would be twenty million miles from Hasub and travelling along its orbit at 25.5 miles a second. If the launch did not take place then, all the years and frustrations of planning and hoping would be for nothing and the opportunity would be lost, perhaps for ever. Certainly, he and Atira would never see the planet again. If the impetus were not to carry them to the new worlds, then it would falter and stop, as surely they would. It had to be now.

He was deep into the mountains. The sun was almost at the zenith and its sombre, fiery glare suffused sky and land in crimson and mauve and indigo and black. Hasub was not a bright world. (How would it be to live in the light of that other star?) It seemed perpetually on the brink of a cosmic cataclysm. Perhaps that was closer than anyone realized.

There, on his right, was the cabin, standing near the edge of a small lake like a mirror of sparkling fire. Noss's airship was behind the cabin. Noss himself was sitting on their boat, idly throwing stones into the water, and watching the approach of Simde's craft.

Simde landed beside the other airship and, alighting, went to meet his friend.

Noss skimmed a stone over the smooth surface of the lake and said, 'I knew you'd come, Simde.'

IT WAS warm enough to sit on the terrace. Irah and Atira, in their deep, fibre chairs, looked elegant and beautiful. The hills formed a wide curve behind the house. The sun was high and, below them, the tall, feather-like trees, pregnant with many birds and insects, swayed in the soft breeze. Beyond lay the plains.

'You must have known for a long time.'

Atira continued to gaze at the view, although Irah's tension brushed her like static electricity.

'Yes. You could hardly help but notice that our social intercourse had fallen away to nothing. I couldn't risk my family or myself being tainted. You understand.'

She looked at Irah; her head was down and her long hair hid her face.

'Why did you do it, Irah? You are young, beautiful, loved, with everything you want, perhaps two hundred years of life ahead of you.'

'Noss made me feel *old*!'

The bitterness of the revelation shocked Atira.

'I should never have joined with him.'

'No, you shouldn't. Simde and I, and many others, always thought that. Noss was much older than you. Maybe he saw in you his last chance for a glimpse of immortality and you couldn't give him even that.'

Irah's great green eyes stared at Atira, disbelieving her words and tone, and her lips were drawn back over her gaudily-stained gums. Her breast, normally always flat in adult females, distended with her tremulous breathing.

Atira had never spoken to Irah in this way before, preferring not to interfere, guiding and advising the younger woman whenever possible. But now she pressed on, determined to make Irah realize the enormity of her fall, before society inevitably did so. It might help to ease the impact of what was to come.

'Noss did everything he could to make you happy—'

'That's part of what went wrong. Our whole life together was minutely planned and calculated. I couldn't bear it all the time. I had to get release somehow.'

She was appealing to Atira as a woman and that drew a response. However, Atira was also a wife and a mother and a devoted friend of Noss.

'You knew all that before you joined.'

Irah pulled her hair with a distraught hand and said in a low voice, 'I admit that, Atira. Only, once I knew that I would have to live with it, all the time – I wasn't strong enough.'

'But you were devious enough, and thoughtless enough, to endanger Noss.'

Irah was crying quietly and the tears clung to her fine facial pelt like early morning dew.

'How serious is it with Noss?'

'The healer wouldn't say, but I knew from his manner that it must be very bad. Noss knew, too. What am I to do, Atira?'

The sound of an airship, coming this way, reached their ears.

Atira went to her and held her. 'Wait. Simde has gone to find Noss, at the lake, I suspect. He must go for treatment. And you must identify those with whom you've been joining. The healers will find out what drugs they have been taking to by-pass their sex-sublimation centre and that knowledge might help to save Noss.'

The airship was recognizable, now. The Custodians. Irah clung to the older woman.

'We'll do all we can for you.'

The airship landed at the end of the terrace and one of the two Custodians, in his smart, effacing tunic, jumped out and came to them.

He acknowledged the women and said: 'Irah Sidl.'

'I'm ready, Custodian.' Irah raised her head high.

They held hands briefly, then Irah went to the airship. Atira watched until it was out of sight. Then she, too, cried. It had begun.

Four

Noss rowed steadily, with economical strokes, until they were in the middle of the lake and he let the boat drift.

'I do this often, when I'm here alone. It keeps me in touch

with the real world. Mountains, trees, birds, animals, clean air, silence. And the knowledge that I just have to tip the boat too far over and I would take my true place in the scheme of nature.'

Simde, the sunlight beating down on his face, let Noss talk on without interruption.

'I kept deluding myself that Irah was contented although I think I knew from the beginning that our joining was a mistake. But people will clutch at any chance when they see life passing them by, and I was no different. Probably sillier than most. I was born to be alone and lonely. I think if you hadn't come, Simde—'

He gestured to the water.

'You knew I'd come. You said it yourself. And things might not be as serious as they seem. We have to go back and take you for treatment. The advances in technique—'

Noss was shaking his head.

'It's too far gone, Simde. I can feel it. Who knows how long it has been here, inside me, killing me relentlessly and efficiently, only now bursting into the open? I'm like a fruit, rotting from the inside. I'm coming back, Simde. But not to go for treatment; to complete the project. I've seen it this far and I'm not going to let it fail now.'

'The healer says you'll have to go for treatment.'

Noss began rowing towards the cabin.

'It's my life, what's left, and I can do with it as I want. And what I want is the success of the project. That planet won't wait.'

Noss let the oars rest. 'We'd better change places, Simde. I don't want to stop too soon.'

He smiled, but there was no humour in it. Simde rowed savagely, his heart in turmoil. Noss sat silently, letting the essence of the world permeate his being.

When they were back on the beach, beside the airships, Simde said, 'You can come back to the project provided you at least go and see the healer. That's reasonable, surely?'

'It is, Simde. I'll see you tomorrow sometime. I take it Remlin Dor is doing all that's required in my absence?'

As he entered his airship, Simde said, 'Need you ask? You trained him yourself. Till tomorrow.'

SIMDE was always thrilled and excited by the view from orbit. Hasub spun slowly, a thousand miles below. The three continents were caught between the glittering jaws of the encroaching polar ice.

The eight families who were to make the journey were gathered together in the space ship, trailing on the end of its crystal cord, five hundred miles behind the wheel, like an afterthought. They were having another session with the psycho-food plant, after having had the rigorous mandatory check by the healers on Hasub.

The ship consisted of three parts, two five hundred foot spheres and a cylinder of the same length, with inter-connecting tubes all held together by framework. Overall, it was 1,700 feet long. The first sphere contained the food plant and the hibernation cubicles, while the second provided all other facilities for the travellers. The propulsion units were in the cylinder.

The food plant was a triumph of psycho-botanical engineering by Neri Falrac and her team. The problem had been three-fold. First of all, a food plant had to be induced to grow and flourish in conditions of virtual zero gravity. Initially, Neri had experimented with speeds of, or near, one gravity, and had found that the plants died. It was found that the compression of the soil against the wall of the sphere was too severe, preventing the growth of the genetically-redesigned plants. On Hasub, plants sent roots very deep into the ground. In a 500-ft. sphere, that was impossible. It was Noss who had suggested a thirty-one day rotation of the sphere. That had worked. The plant was in globular form suspended in a network of tendrils. The position and direction of each tendril was calculated for maximum efficiency and access. The complications posed by the provision of the equivalent of the radiation and light strength of an M-type star had been solved.

The third problem was the inducement into the plant of sufficient capacity and resilience to enable it to sustain the abnormally large number of symbiotes. Each person's psycho-pattern had to be tuned into the plant's system and

the bond regularly reinforced. Assimilation and disposal of even the small amounts of Hasubian body waste provided another difficulty, but dedication and, often, inspiration bordering on genius, had brought solutions.

Neri, her plain, pleasant face smiling, looked into the common room and said, 'Your turn, Simde.'

He went with the botanist, leaving Atira and the cubs watching the manoeuvres of the fabricators as they unloaded parts for the space ship from a service shuttle.

Neri and Simde made the transition from one gravity to virtual weightlessness and entered the plant chamber. Simde had never quite become used to this experience. They went carefully along the catwalk and strapped themselves into the harnesses grouped around the plant globule at the centre. Simde, as advised by Neri, took a short time to relax and accustom himself to the conditions. Once every six days was enough of this, in weightlessness.

When he was ready, he gently inserted the appropriate digits into the resilent flesh of the food plant. Immediately he was aware of warm surges of soft, friendly green-ness filtering into his mind, like water finding its way along runnels in sand. This plant had accepted him at and from the first contact and the bonding was mutually beneficial. Food plants were akin to Hasubians in one respect: their minds were unique. Perhaps comparison was valueless here, as the ship's plant was the first to be exposed to multiple bonding on such a large scale. Simde always left the bonding feeling refreshed.

But this occasion was different. Suddenly Simde's mind was submerged by a green tide of unexpected force. He sent out a soundless cry for help. Neri, who was monitoring the bonding, quickly bonded with the plant herself and contrived to draw off some of the power. Almost at once, the plant responded and the pressure on Simde lessened and faded, to be replaced by the normal emanations, overlaid by what Simde could only think of as contrition.

'Break the bonding gently, Simde,' Neri said and he complied, sagging in the harness.

Neri broke her own bonding after a few minutes and blew gustily in relief.

'Let's go to my office.'

Once there, Simde asked, 'What happened?'

'The plant is hyper-sensitive, because of multiple-bonding, and I *think* it probed your mind to a deeper level than usual. As you know, contact is more of a "layering" than a penetration. Your tension over Noss must have opened you up and the plant poured in. It didn't mean any harm. Rather the reverse. You'll discover that for yourself at the next bonding.'

Atesor Seldolf, the ship's psycho-botanist, was going to be fully occupied on the voyage, but Neri kept the thought to herself. Simde had more than enough to contend with at present.

The bonding had upset Simde and he said, 'Are you sure that it's nothing more than that, Neri? Is the plant dangerous, in any way?'

'No. And I can say that, knowing how vital it is to the survival of you and the others. This plant is unique. It's the culmination of years of research and we have to expect that it will be different – but *not* dangerously so – from ordinary plants. After today, I think you'll have to get used to a more intense contact during bonding. You can adapt yourself to that.'

Reassured, Simde returned to the common room. Atira picked up some of his residual tension but she was discreet enough not to question him. She and the cubs were returning to Hasub, while Simde was going to the wheel. They went with him to the airlock where he put on a suit. Then, from an observation window, they saw him enter a small enclosed robot rocket sled and prepare to ride the crystal cord. He waved to them and set out for the wheel, five hundred miles ahead of the space ship.

The sled accelerated and soon the ship was falling behind. He put out the interior light. There, off on the starboard side, hung the shimmering tendril of crystal. All his life, he had watched the wheel and the crystal cord grow.

The sleds usually had a few occupants aboard, service engineers, fabricators and so on, but not on this occasion. As the ship dwindled, he was alone with his doubts, his fears, his insignificance when measured against the immensity of the venture now so near to starting. He couldn't leave Atira and the cubs behind. But was he right to risk their lives? Anything could go wrong and they would all be doomed. He

looked out at space, with its multitude of stars, as if seeking an answer, and finding no solace in those coldly burning shards of light.

He found his thoughts of the project being continually misted by the images of Noss and Irah and the trouble they were in. He didn't know how it was going to be resolved. Noss had always been such a predictable man. But illness, and betrayal, could change people. At a time when he couldn't afford to be, Simde was irritated and worried by his inability to help Noss.

He noticed that he was drifting away from the cord. He checked the simple instruments of the sled. The controls weren't responding. He mastered an incipient surge of panic. Then the motor cut out. The sled was gradually slipping farther away from the lifeline. Immediately, Simde sent out a distress call and this was answered by the radio man on the station in orbit near the wheel. The transmission crackled.

'It's flare activity,' the man explained. 'We'll send another sled out from the ship to take you in tow.'

'Have I time to reach the wheel? I don't relish getting caught out here during a flare eruption.'

'There's no actual flare in progress, Simde Yorea. But due to the increased frequency in the past year, the level of radiation around Hasub is much higher than normal.'

For a time, Simde was occupied in providing readings and measurements to enable the other sled to find him. And then silence. Simde had put on the interior light at the beginning of the emergency and now he put it off again. He felt as if he were under the sea. Diving was one of his pleasures. Until the other sled turned up, apart from a regular signal, his time was his own. Leisure was something he had come to cherish recently, so little did he get of it. The circumstances could have been better. And Atira would be worried, although she would have been told of the breakdown.

Eventually his sled was found and taken in tow and he continued his journey to the wheel. With nothing else to do, he contemplated the great annular crystal expanding in the sky. The half segment in sunlight glowed with a subdued cyclamen colour. As it rotated like a dream in motion, sporadic sparks of scarlet fire flashed, as if it were an anvil being struck by a hammer of light. The space station, containing workshops and other facilities, orbited nearby.

A service shuttle had docked at the station just ahead of the sleds. Two engineers took the faulty sled to the workshops. Simde thanked his rescuer, then, when he reached the radio room, the operator who had connected him with Hasub. After he'd spoken to Atira, he went to the station commander's office and was surprised to see Noss there. He looked ill. His expression prevented Simde from commenting. Simde greeted the commander, Jaay Hucogum, a life-long friend.

'This lazy existence up here must agree with you, Jaay,' Simde smiled, nudging the commander's paunch.

'It does – except when it's disrupted by people trying to sneak off with sleds. I'll be as interested as you are to find out what went wrong. As you know, maintenance is very regular and strict.'

Simde set him at ease. 'Not everything can be accounted for. Don't worry.'

He turned to Noss. 'What brings you up to the wheel, Noss?'

'An inspection of the electro-magnets. I'm going over now to look at them. Do you want to come?'

Simde sensed the urgency in Noss's apparently casual invitation, and the commander said that his business could wait, so Simde and Noss returned to the hub and boarded a sled. They headed for the crystal wheel. Simde guided the sled to the hub. The crystal was magical, every conceivable hue and tint and shade ensnared in its sparkling surfaces. As they proceeded along an access tunnel, they would find themselves stepping into a blinding copper and saffron pool or drawn into a terrifying hole of sable and greenish-purple. Nothing seemed real.

At last they emerged on the rim and the graceful curves of spectrumed crystal fell away on either side. They were standing on a frozen rainbow.

Simde heard Noss's voice in his helmet radio.

'When I come here, I realize just how incomprehensible nature is, and yet I'm proud to be a minor part of the pattern. I often wonder if, a galaxy away, perhaps another being is gazing out at the stars and trying to make sense of it all.'

As Noss began his inspection, Simde said, 'Did you go to the healer?'

'Yes.'
'And?'
Noss straightened up and looked at Simde.
'I'll stop soon. It could be now, tomorrow, but certainly not more than twenty days. They can't do anything. I've caught some new variant of the disease, one that can remain undetected until it has a hold too strong to be broken. But I'll not stop until I see the ship leaving on its journey and I know that I have done my work well.'

The dark blaze of space and the timeless rainbow of crystal seemed to recede until Noss filled the whole of Simde's vision. Pulses of memory beat across his mind, recalling things about Noss that he thought he had forgotten. There was nothing to say and Noss didn't expect it. Everyone stopped. But Noss— And in this way. Simde felt a gout of hate against Irah, for having stopped Noss. The emotion faded at once. Hate had no comfort for Simde. He knew that Noss would not understand. Noss had no room in his heart for anything but love. For that reason alone he was vulnerable and would stop.

Noss had moved along the crystal's rim, leaving Simde behind. Almost as if he would read it, he knew what was in Simde's mind. They had been friends and colleagues for a long time and had a fine comprehension of each other's philosophies. He had no fear for Simde. Perhaps he should have some for himself. Was stopping so very bad, coming, as it did, at the culmination of his life's work? For a man like him, it was a sound, logical conclusion. He had never maintained illusions about anything or anyone, except Irah. And even with her, after their first joining, he had felt briefly cheated. He had made a mistake and he would not compound it. Now the debt was due.

Noss completed his inspection and went back to where he'd left Simde.

'Everything's all right. Let's go home.'

A wavering glimpse of colour reached Simde's eyes. The planet was coming. Soon it would be at opposition and the venture would begin. He caught something of Noss's perspective. Everything *was* all right. Noss, himself, the others: no one mattered. The drama would sweep them all along.

THE Judgment had been made and the Sentence passed. Now was the time to carry it out. Irah and the four men who had joined with her, stood within a circle of Custodians. Outwardly, she was the calmest of the group. Only her green eyes betrayed her turmoil. She stared impassively at the small square machine, sitting on a table flanked by two Custodians. A bright light shone down on the machine, casting the rest of the area in darkness. Behind the machine sat the High Custodian.

The first man walked forward bravely. He was already as good as stopped, so what did this matter? He placed his hands in the slots in the machine and felt the clamps grip his wrists. The embrace was brief. When he was permitted to withdraw his hands, they looked no different. But the radiation had done its work of destroying the sensitive nerves of the sex and feeding digits. Before the Execution of Sentence, the five had been allowed to use a psycho-food plant. Now he knew that he had left to him thirty-one days, no more. The ultimate penalty had seldom been extracted, but no one had ever been known to last the full time. They always stopped themselves.

The next two men were as brave as the first one. All three had gone so far in degradation and perversion that what awaited them was strangely fascinating and desirable.

The fourth man was young, hardly more than a youth, without parents, and perhaps not as culpable as the others. At the Judgment, Irah had admitted freely that she had enticed him. The three older men agreed that they had persuaded and tricked the young man.

The High Custodian had listened to all the evidence, of the other accused and the youth's friends. He was still clean, untainted. However, the High Custodian, despite the stringent ethics of his position, had been determined from the outset to make an example of them all, without exception, and had sentenced them accordingly. There was no appeal. And there was only one way the Sentence of Execution could be commuted. Someone else had to offer himself, or herself, as a substitute.

No one had offered. So now he was here, in the Hall of Execution of Sentence, about to face the machine. His legs failed him and two Custodians had to support him. One took his hands and was about to force them into the slots, when a voice told him to release the youth.

Noss stepped past the Custodians. They didn't know what to do. The ceremony of Execution of Sentence had never before been disrupted. From the shadows beyond the machine, the High Custodian demanded, 'Why do you violate this ceremony, Noss Sidl?'

'I have come to offer myself as substitute for him.'

The intended victim had collapsed before the machine, too afraid to believe what he heard.

'But his crime was against you.'

Noss answered: 'The Judgment was unjust and should never have been given.'

The stopping of brain cells could have been detected in the Hall. There was nothing that the High Custodian could say. Noss's action precluded comment.

'He should not be here, awaiting Execution of Sentence. We are all guilty of what has become of our society, of which he is a product. We haven't cared enough about other people, what they did, or thought. Perhaps it is not too late for someone to start caring. I offer myself as his substitute. Have I your permission?'

It was a formality, and the High Custodian was reluctant to comply.

'Because of what he, and they, have done, you will soon stop. This gesture will cause you great pain and discomfort for the remainder of your time.'

'Thank you for your concern, High Custodian. It is my wish.'

'So be it. Release the prisoner. It is recorded that Noss Sidl is his substitute. Do you wish to bond?'

'I have no need of it, High Custodian.'

'Then let Execution of Sentence proceed.'

The young man tried to thank Noss, who said: 'Make good use of your life.'

Noss asked the High Custodian if he might talk to Irah and this was granted. She was a broken woman. When Noss appeared, she had hoped, in some twisted way, that he had

come to substitute for her. Noss read it in her eyes. He extended his right hand. She faltered, then put out hers and their digits touched.

'Had we been bound by hate, instead of love, I might have substituted for you, Irah, knowing what your life would have been, that of an outcast. But because I love you, I will not. I know that you understand. Come, we'll go forward together. Let me help you.'

She put her hand on his arm and they went to meet the machine.

Seven

Simde was anxious and angry when he heard of Noss's sacrifice. He was concerned for his friend. The last days should have been as easy as possible. His anger was selfish and he didn't try to hide it from himself. Although the first stage of the project was almost finished, and Noss had done all, and more, that was required of him, Simde thought of him as the essential spirit of the project, ensuring its success. It was irrational, but if Noss were to stop sooner because of what he had done – Simde didn't want to think about it.

There was a further complication, only in Simde's mind. After the Execution of Sentence, Noss and Irah had gone back to live together. It was a sensible arrangement, the only one. At first, Simde didn't want to concede that. He couldn't understand why Noss could do that, why he didn't hate Irah even a little. She had stopped him twice over.

Simde and Atira were out on the terrace, watching the sun westering amid a shoal of slow indigo and dull bronze clouds.

Atira said, 'Love is a much stronger and more destructive force than hate. Men can't see that. Women can. Noss still loves Irah, so he has to destroy her in order to protect her.'

She turned towards him. Lingering rays of sunlight enmeshed in her hair, framing with a halo her shadowed features, out of which her mauve eyes shone like twin stars.

'Could you stop loving me, despite anything I might do to you? Noss and you are very much alike, although neither of you realizes it.'

The sky was flushing with deep red and purple, shading

into black. It was one of the few remaining sunsets they'd see on Hasub. Patterings of cold wind played across the terrace, making Atira shiver. Going indoors, they went to see the cubs, then retired to their own room.

Deep in the soil, the food plant could feel the steady spread of the blight along its roots.

EIGHT

THE TIME of the launch was drawing near. The days passed quickly for Simde, who was responsible for the final preparations. The ship was ready and the engines had undergone their last tests and would not be used again until landfall was made on the planet, which was now predominantly bright in the night sky.

Simde and Noss were now almost constantly in each other's company during working time. Noss had insisted on carrying out his duties. Surprisingly, he showed only slight changes, physically. But then, he was one of those people who altered little after attaining adulthood. Simde was always alert for some sign that his friend was weakening. Noss never gave him one. He accepted Simde's attention in the spirit in which it was meant, and was tolerant. This was the one major part of Noss's life that he hadn't planned. It was very unfortunate that it was going to stop him, a much more painful stopping than he had anticipated. His agony was intense. And now that he had taken the youth's Execution of Sentence, nothing the healers could give him would alleviate the pain. It would overcome him ultimately. But he was determined that he would not stop until he saw the ship leave orbit. So he drew on his last stores of energy and courage and husbanded them. And Simde received no sign.

It was ironical to Noss that the time since he and Irah had taken the Execution of Sentence had been the happiest in their lives. After Noss returned from work, they spent the evenings together, discovering anew the pleasures of simple things. One day, Noss left the site and went home and took Irah to the lake. They walked along the beach, talking now and again, examining strange objects, letting their minds and bodies attune to the rhythms of nature.

Irah, like Noss, had found strength and courage from within herself. It was more difficult for her. She was young. In that moment after Execution of Sentence, she had stared at her hands and, for the first time in her life, acknowledged that she would not still be here when the stars went out. Almost, that truth had stopped her on the spot.

Then Noss had taken her hand and they had left the Hall and the High Custodian and the machine and gone home. Now, Irah lived every day as if it would be her last. Soon, one of them would be. Atira was always available if she was needed, although she had many preparations of her own to make. Irah was secretly pleased to discover that she didn't need Atira as a prop and it raised her stature in her own eyes.

Atira brought the cubs to see her and, while their visits recalled her own barrenness, she cherished the times she had with them. No one had told them about Irah. Simde and Atira had never even contemplated depriving them of their view of Irah and for that she was grateful. If only she and Noss—

Noss had been talking to her and, in her reveries, she hadn't heard him.

'Are you back from wherever you were?'

She smiled at him.

'I was saying that this is where we'll come on the day of the launch.'

She looked directly into his eyes.

'I know that already.'

He halted.

'How could you know, Irah? I've just thought of it.' Irah shook her head and her hair swirled in the slow air.

'No. Your mind has had this planned, perhaps for a long, long time. Now you've put it into words.'

'How well you know me.'

As they resumed their walk, neither voiced their thoughts on the outcome of their lives had they tried to know each other better.

NERI FALRAC, the psycho-botanist, had arranged one more bonding with the ship's food plant, three days before the launching. As on previous occasions, the travellers, after having been passed by the healers, were gathered aboard ship. Noss, who had come up on the shuttle with some of the people, was talking to Simde. He was going to the wheel for one of his inspections. Noss insisted that the regular inspections of everything associated with the project, as provided for in the original plan, be made. His insistence on preventive maintenance had saved the project a number of times.

Simde, with four others to be bonded before him, went with Noss to the lock and saw him off in a sled. He had just returned to the common room when Neri came in, obviously agitated. She signalled him to go outside.

'Neri—'

She stared up at him, but she could have been looking into space.

'Lif Nerod has stopped.'

Black disbelief clouded Simde's mind. He gripped Neri's shoulder and she twisted away.

'During the bonding?'

'Yes.'

He recalled his own recent experience.

'You assured me that the plant was all right—'

He paused as two men came towards them.

'We can't discuss this here. Let's go to the plant room. Is he still there?'

He was striding along and Neri had difficulty in keeping up with him.

In the room, he looked at the cub, not much older than Rogdon, sagging in the harness. Simde stood gazing at the peaceful face, not knowing what to do. This could mean the end of the project, when it was so close to success in its initial phase. Noss, Irah, Lif. The project had begun to exact its sacrifices. What could save it, now? Lif's parents would certainly withdraw and their decision might influence some of the others. If the complement of the ship was depleted too

much, then the project could not go ahead. The soft sound of Neri's weeping brought him back to the present reality.

He said gently, 'Neri: have Lif put into a side room and laid out. I'll go and see Enomice and Nekk.'

First of all, he would have to talk to Atira. He badly needed her support. She saw him as soon as he entered the common room and, sensing that something was wrong, came at once to his side. He told her about Lif. She said nothing but he could feel her love encompass him and it gave him the courage for the task.

Enomice and Nekk were in a group by one of the ports. She had always been the more enthusiastic about the project and had carried Nekk along with her. As Simde started across the room, Enomice glanced over the shoulder of the woman she was speaking to, and saw him. She broke off in mid-sentence, the dawning knowledge in her eyes like acid, dissolving his resolution. He forced himself not to falter. By this time, conversation had ceased and he was the centre of attention.

'Nekk . . . Enomice . . . may I speak to you?'

Simde tried to avoid Enomice's look of pleading; but he couldn't.

She said, very, very quietly, 'Lif.'

Nekk and Atira helped her from the room.

In the corridor, Enomice said, 'Lif has stopped, hasn't he?'

Simde could only shuffle helplessly.

Atira said, 'Yes.'

'Take us to him.'

Nekk, suddenly, seemed to comprehend what was happening.

Snarling, he pushed Simde against a wall.

'This project of yours stopped Lif, just as it would have stopped us all, had we gone. You and your company, with mad schemes of reaching another star, no matter what the cost, in kind, in people. Lif, oh, Lif—'

Enomice held him briefly, then they went to see Lif. Neri and a healer were there. She had regained her composure. While Enomice and Nekk sat by their cub, Neri showed Simde three tiny black capsules.

'I found them in the plant room,' the healer whispered. 'I've never seen this type before. It – or they – stopped him

almost immediately. I'd say that they were his first drugs. And his last. He certainly took a dose after the check on Hasub. He must have taken it while he was in the plant room.'

'And the plant reacted.'

'Yes. But the plant didn't stop him. It *rejected* him.'

Simde was relieved. He looked at Enomice and Nekk. He had to tell them.

The healer said, 'I know what you're thinking, Simde Yorea. Let me tell them. You are too emotionally involved. Perhaps you'd better see the other crew members. Emphasize that the psycho-food plant was not to blame.'

'Yes. Thank you.' Simde's thoughts had been drifting away and there were visions in his mind about his own cubs.

'I'm going to bond with the plant,' Neri said and they went out together. 'I suggest that we suspend the remainder of the bonding for today?'

Simde agreed. Atira had remained with Enomice, and Simde had an uncomfortable meeting in the common room. No one was hostile; but their questions were incisive. Thankfully, he was able to get away and be alone. His belief in himself and the project was weakened. However, he knew that he would go on, as long as Atira and the others supported him. He wondered what influence the stopping of Lif would have, once the travellers had the opportunity really to think about the possible implications. He was beginning to reassemble his jumbled thoughts when an announcement came over the address system, saying that Noss wanted to speak to him.

Simde gave the room number to the video-communicator and Noss's image appeared on the screen.

'I'm in the radio room of the station, Simde. I want you to come as soon as you can.'

There were others present and Noss obviously did not want to discuss anything in public and he could glean nothing from his friend's expression.

'I'll come at once.'

He found Atira, told her where he was going, then commandeered a shuttle. It was arbitrary and wasteful; but necessary.

When they were together in a private office – Simde, Noss

and a crystallographer – Noss said bluntly: 'We think that the wheel's beginning to break up.'

Simde made a strangled noise and sat down abruptly, all the doubts and fears crowding in again.

The other man said: 'This has been a cumulative effect, over many years—'

Simde interrupted. 'All those inspections – what were they for, if this is happening?'

The expert took the outburst calmly. 'Until now, the crystal has been able to repair any cracks. However, the flare activity of the past year has been the most intense for at least a hundred years and the crystal can't withstand the hard radiation much longer.'

Simde slumped in the seat. He was going to be beaten. At the last malevolent flick of fate. His mind rebelled at the enormity of it. Long years of work and belief, started before he was separated, and now it was to be all for nothing. Coming on top of Lif's stopping, how could the project survive? At that moment, Simde would willingly have stopped.

'Simde—'

Noss was speaking, but Simde didn't look up.

'I've done some calculations. I'm sure that the wheel will hold together for the short period of rotation required, and attain the velocity you need.'

'Lif has stopped,' Simde said. 'For all I know, the project might be stopped, too.'

'Couldn't you—'

'No!' Simde flashed at the expert. 'I must tell the travellers. They have a right to know and a right to decide what they want to do. The launch is the beginning of a new phase of the project. Everything must be be based on trust.'

He stood up. 'I'm going to Hasub.'

They left in silence.

Ten

THE FIRST snow was falling like tiny rose-tinted flowers as Lif was taken to his final bonding. Many people followed as he was borne slowly along the tree-shadowed avenue to the ceremonial pool, which was the first stage in the conversion of a body into the nutrients that fed the growing psycho-

food plants. It was a perfect cycle of separation and stopping. The pool was on a hillside, overlooking the fields where the food plants were raised and nurtured.

The procession emerged from the avenue as the snow clouds passed on and the sun shone. Enomice and Nekk accompanied the bearers to the edge of the flower-scalloped pool. After they had looked upon his face for the last time, they stood aside. The bearers lowered the litter into the water and backed away.

A quiet current caught it and wafted it across the pool to a skilfully disguised culvert. Enomice and Nekk gazed after the litter until it disappeared. The cycle had begun again with Lif.

As they turned away from the pool, a youth stepped forward from the crowd. Simde did not recognize him. But Noss, standing beside him, did. It was the cub for whom he had taken the Execution of Sentence. Lezah Ewor.

He stood in the formal position, feet together, right hand extended. At a final bonding, it was traditional that, when parents had lost a cub, one who was parentless could ask to be adopted by them.

Simde was keenly interested in the outcome of the meeting. Enomice and Nekk had accepted the knowledge that Lif had stopped because he had taken drugs. Believing that was subtly different. Now they were confronted by Lezah Ewor, who had taken drugs, joined illicitly with Irah and been reprieved from Execution of Sentence.

'Enomice Nerod. Nekk Nerod. My name is Lezah Ewor. I am with you in your sorrow. My parents have taken the last bonding and I am alone. I have offended against the customs and the laws and was given the Judgment by the High Custodian. I was saved by Noss Sidl from taking the Execution of Sentence. All this I admit before you. I have been cleansed'.

This caused murmuring among the onlookers. The process of cleansing was painful and dangerous, almost as bad as the addiction of the drugs themselves. Few took the cleansing. Simde understood now the physical and mental strain that Lezah was enduring. The effects lingered long after the cure was done. Even Enomice and Nekk, who, despite the tradition, resented the intrusion and its meaning, felt more favourable towards the youth.

'By the traditional right, I ask you to adopt me as your cub.'

His right arm, still fully extended, was beginning to shake. If they did not decide soon—

Enomice came forward and placed her hand against his in the ritual, and was followed by Nekk who, as usual, seemed uncertain. But he was quick enough to answer, 'We, Enomice and Nekk, accept you, Lezah Ewor, as our cub and give you our name.'

Simde and Noss offered themselves as his nominators, when the adoption was submitted to the High Custodian for formal approval. The new family conferred, then went to where Simde, Noss and Atira were standing.

'Simde,' Nekk said, 'we shall go on the voyage.'

'Thank you. I had hoped for this. Lezah will have to go up to the ship today and begin bonding with our food plant. I'll arrange it with Neri.'

'He is Lif, now.' Smiling, they departed.

Noss said, 'Can anyone doubt that I was right to take his Execution of Sentence. He will be good for them, and they for him.'

Arm in arm, they followed after the others, Simde and Atira concealing their sadness.

Eleven

The day of the launch had come. Farewells were subdued. There was little to say. Simde's food plant had stopped just after the last bonding. Soon the pathfinders would be gone and life on Hasub would enter a new, more urgent phase.

Simde and Noss stood at the base of the shuttle, watching the restrained activity around them. Irah was saying goodbye to Atira and the cubs and she knew within herself that she was severing one of her last links with life. She had no cubs of her own. For her there was no immortality.

The travellers began to board the shuttle, being checked as they passed into the ship. Irah came over.

'Simde. Safe journey.'

He embraced her briefly, as if the contact might suffuse her with life.

Noss took his hand. 'The wheel will do its job. Then you can do yours. Irah and I shall be watching the ship.'

The men held each other.

'I shall always remember you, Noss.'

'And I, you, Simde.'

He was the last to board the shuttle.

After it had taken off, Noss and Irah went to their airship and flew to the lake.

TWELVE

THE TRAVELLERS were all in their acceleration couches. When everything was ready, the signal was sent to the space station and in turn was relayed to the rocket motors on the crystal wheel. At first it maintained its somnolent rotation, then the rockets flared and it began to pick up speed, light flashing from its vast surfaces. Faster and faster it turned. The electro-magnets were activated in sequence, biting on the 500-mile long crystal cord and its cargo. In two minutes, the necessary escape velocity of eight miles a second would be reached – if the wheel did not break up. Second after second the velocity built up in the wheel.

Simde watched the numbers appear on the screen above his head. One minute. Acceleration was thrusting him against the couch. One minute, ten. Would the wheel hold? Our lives could be ticking away, Simde thought, but the numbers compelled his attention.

Aboard the station instruments monitored the condition of the wheel. Grimly, the commander studied the readings. The giant crystal wheel would disintegrate any second. When Noss had made his discovery, the station had been moved to a safe distance, in case segments came their way.

Noss and Irah were following the progress of the launch from the lake. The night was peaceful and the stars blazed messages of silence as if they might evoke a response in the watchers. The little boat rocked very gently.

Five seconds to terminal velocity. Pieces of the wheel began to fly off and some passed dangerously close to the cord. If that were cut, then the ship would be doomed. The

final numbers seemed to take forever to appear in the window.

One—!

The ship was slung free from orbit, even as the crystal wheel began to disintegrate, torn apart by irresistible forces. Glittering fragments sped out in all directions, but confined mostly to the plane of rotation, like a careless scattering of jewels. Some would fall to Hasub. Others would be lost in the interstellar spaces.

They watched until the ship disappeared from sight. Then they touched hands for the last time and, bound in love, Noss and Irah stopped.

And the ship was gone, between the tides.

YOUNG TOM

by

DAN MORGAN

If population control finally receives the force of law, we should not be too surprised at some of the side-effects whose black humour must enliven the Young Toms of the future.

YOUNG TOM

I MAY not have time to tell all of this, and apart from the microphone of the recorder I'm not really sure whom I'm telling it to. Mandy will probably play the tape over when she gets back, but I hope not really, because it might be bad for Young Tom, and in any case she knows the whole story already. If you are listening Mandy, I'd like to say that I still love you in spite of everything. Of course there could be someone else out there – maybe even Young Tom a number of years from now. That's a thought . . . Hallo, son. Take care of your mother. She's gone through a lot for your sake already, and I've no doubt she'll make other sacrifices in the future.

I called the police in right after Aunt Rebecca's murder. We were anxious to get the Life Credit through as soon as possible, and apart from that I didn't think it was good for someone in Mandy's condition to have dead bodies lying around the house. Not that there was anything particularly gruesome about Aunt Becky now that she'd 'passed over', as she used to call it. She looked more or less her old self, lying there at the bottom of the stairs grinning. Of course the grin didn't really mean anything, except that the same fall which had broken her neck had also dislodged her dentures.

The cops arrived about twenty minutes after my call, headed by a pleasantly grizzled, middle-aged sergeant with whom I was on nodding terms. Mandy was crying most of the time while he asked his questions. Women seem to need that kind of safety valve in such situations. I'm sure he understood that, because he cut the whole investigation down to an absolute minimum.

'Quite an age, wasn't she?' he said, as two of his assistants struggled to slide Aunt Rebecca's remains onto a stretcher. She was an ample woman, built rather on the lines of a feather bed.

'Sixty-five,' I said.

'Yes, I thought so. Most unfortunate accident . . .'

Mandy whimpered – not so much as an expression of grief, but to prompt me. Her elbow reinforced the message.

'Oh, by the way, sergeant – we'd like to register a formal claim to the Life Credit in this case. You see my wife is . . .'

'Really? Well I'd never have guessed.' The sergeant winked at me broadly. 'Let me be the first to congratulate you both. Now don't worry about a thing. I'll put a report through to BureauPop the minute I get back to the station.'

'Most co-operative of you, sergeant,' I said. Mandy made a sudden recovery, turning off the tap and treating him to her number one smile.

After the police had gone we opened a bottle of champagne. Mandy had decided that Young Tom wouldn't object too violently just this once. It was, after all, a rather special occasion. The bubbly helped dispel what remained of the atmosphere of tension that had hung over our house during the past month or so and we settled down quite happily to await the arrival of an envelope from BureauPop notifying us officially that Aunt Becky's Life Credit had been allocated to us.

Who wouldn't be happy with a girl like Mandy? That peaches and cream complexion and long, blonde hair in braids make her look like an Austrian doll. A big girl – not fat, you understand; but with plenty of people on the balcony, as the French so cutely put it. The kind of girl who always attracts a fair amount of attention from poolside ornithologists, even though she never would descend to the blatant exhibitionism of a bikini. I don't mean to imply that she's nothing more than a sexual object with big knockers and a peanut brain. As a matter of fact, she's quite brilliant in a number of ways, and very highly thought of down at Acme Algal Processing, where she is first assistant to the head of the Bio-Chemistry department.

But it's the other side of her nature which is more important to the present discourse. To tell the truth, I hadn't realized just how motherhood oriented she was until after we were married. It was only then that she explained that although she loved me dearly, she would never have gone through with it if our genotypes hadn't matched so perfectly. In fact she was so happy about the idea of producing

a Grade A child that she wanted to start out then and there, on our honeymoon, by going to a doctor and having her ContraCapsule removed.

I talked her out of it eventually, but not until several tears had been shed. Anyway, it was fun making up, and she did seem to understand that my argument was prompted by common sense rather than any anti-fatherhood feelings. As an accountant I'm perhaps excessively conscious of such matters, but I knew that although we had been entered as willing and able to produce a Grade A child at the time of our marriage the chances of our drawing a Life Credit in the BureauPop lottery during our first year were slightly lower than that one of us should be struck by lightning or fall under a rapitrans.

Even so, I couldn't help being aware of her disappointment each time the 10th of the month rolled round and went past without the arrival of any envelope from BureauPop. It was a shame, because Mandy was so obviously the kind of girl who back in the old days before negative population growth would have quite happily mothered at least half a dozen kids. Whether my fatherhood qualities would have stretched that far is another matter, but under the circumstances a quite academic one. She wanted a child, and because I loved her I wanted her to have that child. The difference between us was that whereas I was prepared to accept things as they were and await the dispensation of MAMA, the BureauPop computer which made random selections each month from among the eligible couples, after three years of fruitless waiting Mandy decided to take matters into her own hands.

The first thing she did was to forge my signature on an application for the removal of her ContraCapsule. The second was to wait until she was a good six weeks pregnant before telling me a darned thing about it. Naturally I was upset, even though I did appreciate her desperation, and I launched into yet another explanation of the statistical improbability of our drawing a Life Credit before the end of the crucial thirteenth week, by which time the pregnancy had to be either validated or terminated by Compulsory Abortion. It was obvious to me that the effects of a Comp Ab on a girl with Mandy's high motherhood orientation would be disastrous, and I was extremely worried about the

situation created by her impatient action. However, as I have explained before, Mandy is an intelligent girl and I should have realized that what I had interpreted as an emotional refusal to face facts was really part of a carefully thought out plan.

That was where Aunt Rebecca came in. Her husband, Uncle Alwyn, had taken the Euthanasia Option three years before, and since then she had been rootless, drifting around from one lot of relatives to another. At the moment she was staying with Cousin Netty, who lived in Vancouver, and Mandy had arranged for us to be her next hosts.

We're fortunate in having a pleasant three bedroomed house in the suburbs, and she settled in with us very comfortably. Too comfortably, in fact, because in no time at all she became part of the family. It would have made matters a lot easier if she had been more difficult to please, some querulous old biddy with a mean temper and a sharp tongue. But she wasn't. She was a big, jolly woman with a ready laugh and such human warmth that I couldn't help liking her from the start. Apart from that, she played darned good chess – one passion which Mandy and I had never shared.

She was delighted to hear about Mandy's pregnancy. We had to tell her about that, but not of course about the problem it presented. We let her assume that we had been selected in the BureauPop lottery.

'How marvellous!' she exclaimed. 'And after only three years! Poor Cousin Netty has been waiting for nearly ten, you know. Both she and Victor would make such ideal parents, but they've had no luck at all so far, poor things.'

If I'd had any sense I would have killed her on the first day, before she had time to become so much part of our lives. I don't really mean to criticize, but Mandy's conversation at the time had become rather dull and one track. She seemed to spend most of her waking hours dreaming about the future of Young Tom – as she had already christened the embryo – going around with a fulfilled half-smile on her face and knitting tiny garments with the mindless concentration of a bird building its nest.

Don't misunderstand me. I've no time for the immature type of father who has a tendency to look on his own child

as a rival for his wife's affections. But there are limits . . . and even at that stage I began to have a feeling that Mandy might go beyond them.

In the meantime there was Aunt Becky – a load of fun, the sort of person it's a real pleasure to have around, appreciative, cheerful, always willing to help unobtrusively about the house. Perhaps above all, so easy to entertain.

'I've had a good life on the whole, Tom,' she used to say with a smile. 'There'll be no regrets when my time comes to pass over. I can't think why everyone is so kind to me. Cousin Netty and Victor – and now you and Mandy. Despite what they say, it can't be such a bad old world when that kind of consideration and affection still exists.'

I must have missed at least a dozen opportunities during the first couple of weeks. Aunt Becky was pretty active for a woman of her age and size, and she seemed to take the most ridiculous chances, hanging over the parapets of tall buildings, jay-walking like a teenager and insisting on enjoying the view from the very edge of each cliff-top.

At nights, in the privacy of our bedroom, Mandy was becoming impatient. 'You're too soft! Why don't you get it over with? Think about Young Tom. You're not being fair to him.'

But it wasn't that easy for me. Young Tom wasn't real to me in the sense that he was to Mandy. Nowhere nearly as real as Aunt Becky, whom I regarded with increasing affection.

Thursday at the lake was the final straw for Mandy. Despite the fact that it was cold and windy, with a near-gale blowing, she insisted that I should take Aunt Becky out in our sailing dinghy, whilst she stayed on in the cabin to prepare lunch. Aunt Becky agreed, of course. The old girl was game for anything. So off we went, neither of us wearing life-jackets, despite the previously established fact that she couldn't swim a stroke. End of season and mid-week there were none of the usual crowd about. It should have been the easiest thing in the world, an unforeseen swing of the boom, whipped by the gale force wind, the old lady overboard before anything could be done . . .

Mandy had difficulty in concealing her fury when we both turned up to eat a hearty lunch.

'You realize how much time you've wasted?' she hissed at

me that night. Her face had a touch of the Lady Macbeth's in the pale moonlight. 'If we don't get that Life Credit by next Thursday Young Tom will be terminated. Don't you care about that?'

'Of course I care, darling,' I said. 'It's just ... Well, she's so darned nice and trusting.'

'And you are a weak-kneed fool!' she said, angrily flouncing off into the spare room, where she spent the rest of the night, the first time we had been separated since our marriage. It really upset me to think that this thing which should have been such a blessing to us was driving us apart. I blamed myself to a large extent. Mandy was right. I had been indecisive. Both she and Young Tom deserved better of me.

By the end of a sleepless and lonely night I had hardened my heart, determined not to allow any affection for Aunt Becky to stand in the way of doing my duty as a father and husband.

But Mandy was ahead of me. With time getting so short, she must have decided that the only thing for her to do was to take the matter into her own hands. Very capable hands too. She is, as I mentioned earlier, quite a big girl, easily capable of administering a hefty shove of the type that sent poor old Aunt Becky hurtling to her death down that ultra-modern, but rather dangerous, staircase.

I didn't actually see it happen, of course. I was in my study, checking through some work I'd brought home from the office when I heard the clattering rumble and that final dreadful thud which seemed to shake the very foundations of the house. By the time I arrived in the hallway Mandy was already standing over the silent body.

'There – you see how simple?' she said, and burst into tears.

That was when we called the police; and settled down afterwards to wait for the envelope from BureauPop. There were only three days to go before the thirteen week deadline, but we weren't really worried now. BureauPop have a reputation for swiftness in such matters, and even if there should be some delay it could be ironed out when Mandy went to the local office on Thursday for Young Tom's validation.

As it happened they were even more efficient than usual, and the envelope arrived before breakfast this morning. Mandy was full of smiles when she opened it up, but her face melted like a July snowfall as she read the letter. She passed the single sheet over to me without a word.

It seemed that dear old Aunt Becky – with her usual kind thoughtfulness – had pledged her Life Credit in advance to Cousin Netty in Vancouver. After all, we'd not told her that we were in need of it, whereas she knew that Netty and Victor had been waiting for ten long years. Young Tom's future looked very bleak at that point.

Naturally we were both upset, but there didn't seem a lot we could do at that stage other than go to our jobs as usual – Mandy to the laboratory, and me to my office. Anything was better than sitting at home brooding.

When I arrived back tonight I was delighted to find that Mandy was in a much brighter mood. She appeared to have accepted the inevitable and be determined to put a brave face on her disappointment. Poor darling! My heart went out to her, but I deliberately didn't say anything about Young Tom, and she made no mention of the subject.

She's always been a pretty good cook, but at dinner this evening she really excelled herself, and I guessed that she was probably sublimating her suffering. The prawn cocktail was just the way I love it, with lots of beautiful pink, piquant sauce. She's allergic to shellfish, but occasionally when she wants to make a real fuss of me she prepares something like that and watches me eat it. Afterwards we had a couple of charcoal broiled steaks, followed by fresh fruit and coffee.

It had been a meal fit for a king, and afterwards I relaxed contentedly on the sofa, listening to the sound of Mandy doing the dishes and thinking to myself that a really considerate husband would go in there and offer to help with the drying up at least. It was only when I finally tried to obey that virtuous urge that I found out I couldn't move my legs. Try as I might, they just lay there numb and unfeeling on the sofa ahead of me, as if they didn't belong to me at all.

Naturally I panicked, calling for Mandy. She came running in from the kitchen.

'Don't just stand there!' I howled. 'Call Doctor Meldrum. It must have been those damned prawns!'

'No, darling,' she said quietly. 'It was the sauce. I'm sorry, but you must see that there was nothing else I could do. Time is getting so short, and I had to protect Young Tom, didn't I? One thing I can promise you is that it won't hurt in the least. I was very careful to make absolutely sure of that.' She took her apron off and began to move towards the front hall.

'*Mandy*! – Where are you going?'

She turned to me with that gentle half-smile that had become so much a trademark of her pregnancy. 'I think it would be a good idea if I went out for an hour or so,' she said. 'I'd like to stay with you to the end, of course, but the sight of your dying might not be good for Young Tom.' She blew me a kiss and walked out of the room. A couple of minutes later I heard the front door close.

So here I am. The numbness has crept up to my neck now, and I'm finding it more and more difficult to speak. I can't turn off the recorder either, because my arms and hands have been useless for some time. I suppose when the numbness reaches my brain that will be the end. Curiously enough I don't feel too badly about dying. Maybe that's part of the effect of the drug, or maybe it's because I can see now what old Aunt Becky was getting at when she said that the future belongs to the children, not to us. There's something oddly satisfying in the idea that tomorrow Mandy will be able to go along to BureauPop and claim my Life Credit.

She'll miss me, of course, but Young Tom will be there to keep her company, and after all, that's what it's all about, isn't...

IN THE COMA CONDITION

by

CHARLES PARTINGTON

How fortunate for Massner that he happened to be in the underwater city of Tethys when all life on the surface of the Earth was destroyed! His work in Gestalt Behaviourism warned him that such a colossal disaster must find echoes within the enclosed world of the underwater complex, that no man is an island. What apocalypse might be found if human minds linked in the final investigation?

IN THE COMA CONDITION

One

MASSNER'S inability to register dismay over the corpse of a decimated humanity stemmed not from moral neglect but from an intense personal commitment.

Massner was haunted by a girl's face, tormented by an expression that found echoes in the shattered rhythms of his existence. His life had been revitalized in the complex ambiguities of her eyes. If there was meaning to existence, Massner would find it here in the Coma Colosseum in Tethys. This was where he had twice glimpsed the girl in television broadcasts. If not here it would be found nowhere else. There could be no alternative.

Massner and Lynda, his wife, had been in the ocean city of Tethys for slightly over six months now, Massner having secured a position as one of a visiting team of observational psychologists on the assumption it would facilitate his research into practical Gestalt Behaviourism, which only an enclosed and isolated community like Tethys could provide on sufficient scale.

He had been the first of the team to arrive at Tethys. The rest were scheduled to follow at the end of the month. They never made it. Within a week of Massner setting foot in the underwater complex the fungoidal infections had decimated the surface area of the planet. It was unbelievable; but final. As a viable species, mankind was finished. Unfortunately, he took the other mammals with him.

For hours Massner had listened in silence to playbacks of the deathsongs of the huge whales, their sighings echoing half-way round the oceans of the world. He experienced more sorrow in their extinction than in man's. Even in death the whales achieved nobility.

Obviously no-one could fail to be emotionally disturbed

on some level by the virtual extinction of the mammalian species. Massner attempted to study the anticipated culture shock of such a widespread disaster on so small a community with as much professional detachment as the situation would allow. But increasingly her face, the girl in the Coma Colosseum broadcasts, invaded his thoughts to distraction. His feelings towards her were beyond analysis at this stage, almost asexual; based more on a subconscious recognition of the chaos she threatened. Yet even though he was aware of the danger, Massner was fascinated.

He smiled, glancing at the signature on the letter of admission to the Coma Colosseum. His presence there went beyond that subtle invitation. There were other forces at work in Tethys.

Massner had accepted that he would be under surveillance from the moment he entered Tethys. His work in the area of Gestalt Behaviourism and psychology explored the limits allowed by the Church in the ocean city. His two recently published papers had been designed as critical vehicles, containing submerged, almost subliminal, indications of the doubts he entertained. That he had been granted permission to visit Tethys had come as a surprise, the opportunity was not one to be missed. Yet surely the unease he felt about Tethys was mirrored in other minds? But where were they? Public dissenters were apparently non-vocal in the undersea complex.

If his detention in the Coma Colosseum, if such it turned out to be, was an indication of a repressive back-lash instigated by the Church as it now existed within Tethys, Massner would not be surprised. After the recent fiasco of the Second Coming, the Church had almost been compelled to introduce protective measures.

Massner had first become aware of the rumours circulating amongst the twelve thousand inhabitants of Tethys concerning the reappearance of Christ less than two months ago. The growing wave of expectancy was frowned upon; but despite calls for restraint from the Church, speculation increased to the point where self-appointed leaders, latterday prophets emerging too rapidly and occupying positions too close to the public nervecentre to be removed, were predicting the actual date of Christ's advent in Tethys.

The prescribed day came and passed in a breathless hiatus. Towards evening a woman in one of the two hospitals had an emergency Caesarian. The child died. Their fervour and hopes unrealized, the reaction of Tethys' inhabitants transcended all extrapolated indications.

No riots; but a rapid sinking into apathy, a dreadful sense of rejection. There was an atmosphere of defeat in the city. The recurring crises had taken their inevitable toll.

Though, possibly, there were other surviving remnants of humanity scattered in isolated fragments across the surface – though no radio transmissions disturbed the ether to suggest this – the people of Tethys now felt utterly alone, physically and spiritually adrift. It seemed as if for the first time they were aware of the waters above Tethys, of the relentless crushing pressure waiting to engulf them. Existence had never seemed more precarious or pointless. It was a psychological horror which could not fail eventually to contaminate every mind in the city.

For Massner the state of mind of the inhabitants of Tethys under such conditions should have represented a challenge demanding total application of his knowledge. He reflected upon what Ostier and Kircher would have thought of the situation. They would have been fascinated with the dilemma it posed.

But Massner could not work. She was too much in his thoughts.

He walked over to the tiny window and looked down upon the almost empty walkways. Was it really for her that he had entered the Coma Colosseum? He had no answer. He stood at the window for what seemed hours.

When they came for him, Massner followed, vaguely frightened and perplexed; wholly intrigued. His eyes never rested. The girl was somewhere in this building.

The interior of the mysterious Coma Colosseum complex was as unknown to the majority of the inhabitants of Tethys as it had been to those on the surface before the fungoid infections struck. However, the surface area of the huge bowl with its seating capacity of fifteen thousand people, more than the total population of the ocean city, had been familiar to everyone, if only from the occasional television programmes concerning the enigmatic

Anglesomne. The actual details of what went on inside the vast building amounted to speculation and rumour which after almost forty years had begun to take on the elements of myth.

Yet Tethys still retained obvious attractions for those fortunate enough to secure a position there before the catastrophe. Population levels were strictly enforced, eliminating the frantic overcrowding that had reduced life on the surface to mere existence. Apart from the usual mental and physical requirements, the only other condition demanded of would-be inhabitants was a record of Christian observance. Even considering the presence of the Coma Colosseum, there had been more applications for citizenship than could ever be accepted.

The gently curving corridors following the periphery of the Coma Colosseum were mostly deserted; but occasionally white-coated figures were to be seen entering or appearing from doors on either side of the corridor. They took no notice of Massner and his silent custodians. Turning at right-angles along an intersection, he was escorted along an even wider radial corridor towards the hub of the complex where Anglesomne lay in Coma-death. Near the hub centre, Massner was shown into a circular room.

There were five people sitting around a solid oak table. One of them, a tall slim man, stood up and smiled at Massner.

'Welcome to the heart of Tethys,' he said.

Massner didn't hear. He was staring at the girl in the television broadcasts.

There is an infection totally beyond medical aid. An infection of the soul. It defies description or explanation. It has to be experienced.

Massner realized gradually that he was sitting at the table, listening to words without meaning, looking at a circle of faces while seeing only one. Inseparable, agony and exhilaration washed over him. The sensations of life when life is at its most intense.

In a dim confused corner of his mind, Massner listened while introductions were being made. The two men on his right were Robinson and Sharpe, doctors in parapsychology and the ecclesiarch respectively. The elderly woman sitting

next to them was a Miss McCormac. The angular bearded man handling the introductions was Perrers, 'John Perrers,' he said, smiling. 'And the lady on my left,' Perrers placed an affectionate hand on her, 'is Mrs. Lynda Sagar.'

Sagar! The name churned an area of once dead memories now made all the more bitter by the realization that this incredible girl with the same name as his wife had married Sagar. He stared at her, thinking of Sagar, a man Massner once believed he had exorcized from his life. Now he had returned to haunt him again.

'You will of course have anticipated why you were invited to the Coma Colosseum,' Perrers was saying. 'We are all aware of the problems facing Tethys. Not just the physical problems that confront us, those we can at least attempt to rectify, but the malaise of the mind and the spirit which threatens us all at a much deeper level. Purpose, even the belief in life itself, is deserting us.'

Perrers' hands had never rested. His expressive fingers fluttered nervously on the table like an impaled butterfly.

'We have to assume that Tethys is the last surviving fragment of humanity. It must be protected,' Perrers insisted. 'Massner you can help us. We need all the help we can get.'

Massner smiled inwardly, reflecting upon what Kircher would have made of that statement.

Dr. Robinson spoke for the first time. His voice was deep, with an inflection that suggested Australia. Beneath his horn-rimmed spectacles his eyes were bright and intelligent.

'I suggest ladies and gentlemen that this is an opportune moment to introduce Massner to the reason for his presence in the Coma Colosseum. As we agreed, it would be advisable for him to be familiarized with the programme before Sagar arrives. The sooner he is made aware of what we are trying to do the better.'

The assumption that Massner was willing and capable of helping them had evidently been decided before he entered the room.

'And Dr. Sagar?' Massner asked. 'Does he know? Is he aware that I shall be joining your – team?'

Perrers answered the question. 'It was he who insisted that your help would be invaluable to us. Now to save time and confusion, I suggest that only one of us should show

Massner around the project. Dr. Robinson, perhaps you would care to explain what we are doing?'

Robinson stood up. 'Yes, of course. I'd be delighted.' He left the table, and opening the door, stepped out into the corridor. 'Would you follow me, please?' he asked Massner.

Dr. Robinson talked animatedly as they walked along the radial corridor towards the hub, but Massner could not concentrate on his words. Though the situation he found himself in was puzzling, his thoughts were entirely on Lynda Sagar.

The suggestion of an emotional flux between them seemed incredible. She had hardly looked at him while Massner had been in the room; barely acknowledging his presence when introduced. Yet Massner had experienced a rapport, a subtle intangible exchange that caused his senses to swim and which rendered everything else secondary. Massner had suspected for days that Lynda Sagar was the focus of inexplicable forces. To have that assumption confirmed was beyond his present comprehension.

Two

THEY were standing in a small room in the exact centre of the Coma Colosseum. The room was a dodecahedron in shape, each of its twelve sides measuring approximately two metres. The twelve wall segments were transparent. Behind each segment was a further room; a dodecahedron beyond a dodecahedron. The odd design failed to register at first.

Massner's attention was attracted to the iron-framed beds, one in each of the outer rooms. Nine of the twelve beds contained occupants. The central room in which Massner and Dr. Robinson stood also had a bed. It was empty. Like the others, thick leather straps hung down from the metal frame.

Dr. Robinson's amused laughter echoed off the transparent walls. 'No, that's not intended for you, Massner. Though I agree that it must appear somewhat disconcerting when seen for the first time. We tend not to see that side of things now, only the end result.'

Massner turned to face him. 'And what might that be?'

'We are going to give back to what's left of mankind

something he forgot a long time ago.' Dr. Robinson answered. 'Something that will enable him to overcome the psychological as well as the physical horrors that threaten him now in Tethys.'

Massner stared at him. 'And what's that?'

'We are going to prove the existence of man's immortal soul.'

Suddenly the glare reflected from the dozens of strip-lights illuminating the double dodecahedron irritated Massner's eyes. He turned away, temporarily confused.

Massner spent the next half-hour listening in a cynical, distracted fashion while Dr. Robinson outlined in vague terms the mechanics of the operation.

His interest was minimal, and that was alarming, for the concept was as dangerous as it appeared absurd. But for Massner, Lynda Sagar was the only reality. Everything else seemed irrelevant. There was a contrariety about her, a paradoxical personal intenseness that denied identity. She seemed almost disparate; a person of many reflections. And Massner's professional insight only emphasized the error of his unavoidable infatuation.

Dr. Robinson penetrated Massner's distraction only with his parting words.

'Oh, we've arranged a room for Lynda and yourself while you're in the Coma Colosseum.'

'Lynda?' Massner asked, stunned.

'Yes, we thought it would be better if your wife was near you. You won't worry about her then, will you?'

Massner sat at the foot of his wife's bed in the tiny room they had been allocated. Around the bed were the ever alert machines watching over her physical condition. Any change would instantly be reported to a central monitoring area which not only scanned the Coma Colosseum complex, but the entire city. In an undersea environment such a system was more than desirable; it was essential. One slowly learned to live with it.

Massner looked at his wife. It was the blankness that unnerved him. Anything else he could eventually have come to terms with. The removal of the malignant tumour had also eradicated her personality.

There had been moments, soon after the operation, when Massner believed he had detected hopeful signs; a vague response to his promptings, a half-smile or a suggestion of tears. Yet slowly, his detestation had grown, despite all his attempts to control it.

His worst fears were always that somehow his wife could detect on some subconscious level the direction of his thoughts. He studied her face. The intellectual arrogance that had once attracted him was now dissolved in the relaxed and flacid contours of near imbecility.

How many billions, he wondered, had there been on Earth before the infection struck? How many survived? In Tethys there were less than thirteen thousand. Outside Tethys, how many? Fifty thousand? Fifty? Or one?

Massner looked down at his wife. Was she a survivor? He thought of Dr. Robinson's words and shuddered. Did she still have a soul?

His sense of peripheral insularity heightened during a second meeting of the committee presided over by Perrers. Massner was disturbed but intrigued by that delitescent yet exotic atmosphere of disassociation growing within him. It should have been a cause for concern; but strangely Massner welcomed it. There was a madness spreading within Tethys, and no one could remain untouched.

Perrers seemed tense, even excitable. As the room began to fill up, his mood was sensed and intensified by the newcomers. Several of them stared openly at Massner, but for the most part he was ignored. Conversations sprang up consisting of angry strained voices; but Massner hardly registered them. He watched the door for Lynda Sagar.

The murmur of voices died when Perrers stood up and called for attention. People were still drifting in.

'As most of you will be aware,' he began, 'it has now been found necessary to bring forward the date of the programme in an attempt to offset the increasing unease and depression spreading throughout Tethys.

'This accelerating deterioration must be reversed soon or the city and its inhabitants will begin to die from irreversible internal disorders; disorders affecting both our critical life-support systems and the psychological condition of everyone in the city.

'The inhabitants of Tethys, all of us, have to regain faith in our capacity for survival, in mankind's ultimate purpose in this life and beyond. The blight which has decimated the surface of our earth is a shadow here in Tethys which threatens us all.'

Dr. Sharpe, a slim intense young man whom Massner recalled meeting earlier, stood up. 'Mr. Perrers, we are all well aware of the situation and how it affects us. What we need to know is when the demonstration is now scheduled to take place.' Dr. Sharpe's inquiry was taken up by a number of questioning voices demanding an answer.

Perrers raised his expressive hands in an attempt to placate the meeting.

'Gentlemen, the decision to advance the programme came from Dr. Sagar after a detailed analysis of current disturbing trends amongst the population. The demonstration will take place forty-eight hours from now.'

The rest of Perrers' words were immediately drowned out by the loud objections of nearly everyone in the room. From the uncertainties voiced, and the currents of unease circulating the gathering, it seemed that not everybody was as convinced as Perrers and Dr. Sagar of the desirability of such a drastic rescheduling.

Massner stared at the faces around him. At least, he reflected, it removed one problem. Dr. Robinson had remarked that Massner's knowledge and practical experience in the area of Gestalt Behaviourism would prove invaluable in suggesting the most effective method of presenting the project to the inhabitants of Tethys. There was little he could accomplish in forty-eight hours. It would be impossible to do more than indicate superficial response areas. Now he was reduced to the role of observer. A role that suited his present vague uncertainties.

Lynda Sagar had entered the room. Massner knew it without turning his head. He was aware of her presence as if she had been standing directly before him. The sensation was incredible.

Somehow, Dr. Robinson had disentangled himself from the arguments. He approached, waving a greeting. 'You heard of course?' Massner nodded. Dr. Robinson shrugged apologetically.

'I'm afraid the rearranged programme will prevent you

from contributing anything tangible. You won't even have sufficient time to familiarize yourself properly with every aspect of our work here.'

'Unfortunate,' Massner commented.

'You don't sound too disappointed.'

'Don't I?'

At Dr. Robinson's suggestion, they left the confusion of the committee room and made their way towards the polyhedral centre of the Coma Colosseum. Massner had needed little encouragement. For a reason not yet apparent, Lynda Sagar had joined them.

This time, before they were allowed to enter, Dr. Robinson insisted that they put on white gowns, face-masks and plastic gloves similar to those worn in operating theatres.

In the central dodecahedron, Massner noticed technicians connecting a series of transparent tubes of an extremely narrow diameter to clamps around the unoccupied bed. They all wore the germ-resistant clothing. Massner studied the transparent tubing. It snaked out across the floor, one length leading from each of the beds in the twelve surrounding segments to the central room.

Sliding back one of the transparent dividing walls, Massner, Dr. Robinson and Lynda Sagar entered the cell beyond.

The room was occupied. A naked man, apparently asleep, lay on the single bed. Massner stared at the hyaline tube clamped several inches away from his narrow chest. Robinson and Lynda Sagar seemed to share none of Massner's initial anxiety that their presence might awaken the sleeping man.

Though much of it was beyond his limited experience, Massner recognized some of the intricate medical equipment surrounding the sleeping man. That it was instrumental in keeping the patient alive, Massner did not doubt for one minute.

Lynda Sagar remained silent. Inside, Massner was shivering.

'We really could have used your knowledge, you know,' Dr. Robinson said again, staring thoughtfully at the sleeping man. 'We needed your grasp of the psychology of the mass mind, your understanding of manipulation and protreptic motivation. That would have been invaluable to us.'

Massner began to protest; but Dr. Robinson would not listen.'Of course, we did not expect you to believe in what we are doing here, that would have come later, after the demonstration. But I'm sure you understand better than anyone the urgent need for the revitalization of belief in personal and racial identity here in Tethys. How we achieved it, I suspect, would not have concerned you. Only after would you have realized the import of our demonstration.'

Again Massner attempted to speak, but Dr. Robinson refused to be interrupted. 'Think Massner, what if it is possible for a man's soul to continue its existence after the death of the body! That's what we shall prove. Imagine the consequences for everyone when we demonstrate that to be fact!'

Massner turned away. The Australian parapsychologist's eyes had become unnaturally bright.

'Who is he?' Massner asked at last, indicating the patient lying on the bed.

'A man called Butterworth. Ian Butterworth. The eleventh donor.'

'Donor?'

'An operative term. He's the eleventh person who has agreed to donate his soul towards the programme.'

'He's dying then?' Massner studied Butterworth's fleshless mask.

'Yes. Cancer. He has at the most two months to live.'

'Two months?' Massner stared at the patient's summary chart hanging at the foot of the bed. 'But Perrers spoke of rescheduling the programme to take place in forty-eight hours.'

'Precisely.'

Massner could ignore the obvious no longer. 'What exactly do you intend to do?'

'Kill him,' Dr. Robinson replied.

'And the others? Those too?'

'Yes.'

THREE

DR. ROBINSON'S gaze wandered from the patient on the bed before them, to the others seen through the transparent walls of the cells beyond.

'Paraplegics, terminal disease cases, patients condemned to minimal mental or physical activity,' he explained. 'Two of them suffer from irreparable brain damage. Three have to be drugged to such high levels that their lives are meaningless. Like Butterworth here, the others are kept alive by total reliance upon machines. Those aware enough to take the decision themselves have welcomed the opportunity extended by Dr. Sagar.'

'Murder,' Massner said.

'A release,' Dr. Robinson corrected, 'in exchange for the highest form of existence.'

It was a situation which would once have appalled Massner. Once he would have stormed angrily out of the room. Now the thought of leaving never entered his head. He was standing in the same room as Lynda Sagar, and that meant more to him than personal values or ethics in these strange times.

Still she hadn't spoken to him. More important, she had never yet looked directly into his eyes. Even though they were standing just a few feet apart, Lynda Sagar seemed to be avoiding him. Why? That thought carried fascinating implications. All the time Robinson was talking, Massner's eyes never left her face.

Oblivious of the tension between Lynda Sagar and Massner, Dr. Robinson went on to describe how the approaching demonstration revolved around Anglesomne's incredible capacity for projecting intense emotion over a limited area. The Coma Colosseum had been designed with this fact in mind, its seating capacity limited to exactly the area of Anglesomne's psychic broadcasts. Like everyone else previously excluded from the secrets of the Coma Colosseum, Massner's knowledge of Anglesomne's powers was vague.

Less than a hundred years ago, Empaths had emerged within the human race, individuals with extraordinarily acute sensitivity. Not telepathy as it had once been envisioned. The Empaths could not read thoughts. But they could sense to an exquisite degree personal character attitudes. They could penetrate everyday façades and sense the intrinsic instincts and reactions boiling below the surface. There had been drawbacks for those born with empathic powers. Taste and smell, even a certain degree of tactile sensibility, had been lost to the Empaths. It was as though reduced

organic perceptivity had been a prerequisite in achieving empathic awareness.

There was an even greater blight on their lives. The Comatose Condition. It struck Empaths at random without warning. Death followed within hours. No cure had been found for the condition which affected every Empath indiscriminately.

Anglesomne had contracted the Comatose Condition late in his life. An intensely powerful Empath, Anglesomne had emerged as a natural leader amongst both Empaths and non-Empaths alike. Because of his unique internal power, Anglesomne survived in the Coma Condition, his mind and body beyond conscious control, while his empathic capacity continued to function without caution or restraint.

Free of the shackles of consciousness, the empathic area of his mind gained in strength, broadcasting into the minds of others the images and sensations of people standing near to him regardless of their personal wishes. Anglesomne had become the only true telepath. And because no control existed over his reflections of exterior mental processes, he had become a potentially dangerous element in almost every facet of political, military and media life.

There could be no secrets for anyone exposed to Anglesomne. Deceptions were impossible. It became evident that Anglesomne either had to be destroyed, or removed to a location beyond his ability to influence private or public affairs.

Pressure was exerted and the alternatives clearly explained. They were: colonization of one of the abandoned scientific research bases on the moon; or Tethys, the experimental undersea city off the coast of South America. It had to be one of these, or Anglesomne's death. The Empaths, those who wished to go, including a large number of Anglesomne's non-empathic followers, had taken over Tethys and built the Coma Colosseum. Installed inside this mysterious structure, Anglesomne had rapidly faded into obscurity and legend.

This knowledge had of course always been available to anyone interested enough to research the facts. Anglesomne's potential for aiding research into psychiatric disorders had always been recognized by Massner's colleagues, but the governing body in Tethys refused to expose

Anglesomne to the dangers inherent in any such investigation. Ostier and Kircher in particular had been annoyed by this lack of co-operation. Massner himself, though interested in the possibilities, had always believed that improvements in the treatment of disorders of the mind lay in other directions.

Occasional television programmes concerning Anglesomne and the Coma Colosseum had been networked across the European continent. It had been during one of these transmissions that Massner had first seen Lynda Sagar. From that moment he had lost the ability to alter the course of events in his life.

Dr. Robinson was now explaining how the twelve donors in the rooms surrounding the central dodecahedron were each to be connected, through a series of artificial blood vessels and pumps introduced to a main artery close to the heart, to Anglesomne's body. When all the link-ups were completed and the system was operating perfectly, the first of the donors would be deprived of the machines which up to that point had kept him alive. Anglesomne would react empathically to the situation, broadcasting to everyone assembled in the Coma Colosseum the sensation of death, the experience of a mind at the point of release. The other donors would die almost immediately, in twos and threes, boosting Anglesomne's reception, increasing the sensations to such a pitch that everyone in the Coma Colosseum, the entire population of Tethys, would participate mentally in acknowledging the indisputable evidence of life after death.

Dr. Robinson stopped talking suddenly, and Massner realized how loud his voice had been. He had the look of a fanatic and his eyes were brighter than ever.

Lynda Sagar seemed unaffected by Dr. Robinson's vision.

'But what if you fail to achieve the results you desire?' Massner said. 'Have you considered what would happen if Sagar is wrong? Think of the impact of failure on the inhabitants of Tethys at this crucial moment!'

Dr. Robinson stared suspiciously at Massner for a second. He seemed unsure how to react to Massner's uncertainty. Then he took him by the shoulder, laughing.

'Failure?' he cried. 'How can we fail? You believe in God, don't you?'

Massner turned to Lynda Sagar, a sense of helpless anger sweeping over him; but her thoughts were masked.

'Dr. Robinson,' he said, 'why not test the programme first, before exposing the population to further uncertainty? What harm can it do?'

Robinson's face seemed to seize up in disbelief at Massner's question. 'Test the programme?' His hands trembled. 'Do you know what you're asking us to do? You're suggesting that we test God, Massner; God!'

Fortunately it was at that point that Dr. Robinson had been called away, after receiving urgent instructions from his personal communicator. With one hand on the door, he turned to face Massner. 'I'll leave you in the hands of Mrs. Sagar. If you have any further questions, I'm sure she can answer them for you. I'll see you both later, at dinner.'

The door closed behind him, and even though the walls of the dodecahedron cell were transparent, Massner was alone with Lynda Sagar for the first time.

She was laughing quietly to herself even before Dr. Robinson slid the door shut behind him. Her laughter was low and melodious, but there was a hint of suppressed frenzy in it. She turned towards Massner and for the first time looked directly into his eyes. The sensation was indescribable.

'You found that amusing?' he asked, remembering her laughter.

'Amusing?' Lynda Sagar sighed. 'Alarming might be more accurate.' She removed her face mask, disregarding Dr. Robinson's example. There was a slight flush on her cheeks. 'You know my husband, don't you?'

Massner nodded. 'I studied under him in Stockholm several years ago.'

'You know him well then?'

Massner wanted to talk about anything but Sagar. Lynda was the most intense woman he had ever met. 'I don't think anybody at the university would have made that claim. He wasn't a man to encourage friendship.'

Lynda Sagar laughed again; this time it was tinged with bitterness. 'He's my husband, and I don't know him.'

'You shouldn't blame yourself for that.' Massner searched for the right words, not wanting to offend her, yet desperately trying to continue the conversation. 'He was always

difficult to communicate with, except when he was lecturing. Perhaps . . .'

Lynda Sagar's eyes blazed. 'You don't understand, do you? All this . . .' She indicated the central dodecahedron and the cells beyond. 'He doesn't care about all this. He doesn't care what happens to Tethys. But they can't see that. Nobody understands. He's planning something, Massner, I'm sure of it. But they're too involved with this mad scheme he's concocted to realize it. Massner, I'm worried. I'm frightened!'

A technician approached from the central area. Lynda Sagar grabbed Massner's hand and an electric shock went through him. 'Tonight. I'll call you tonight. I must talk to you.' She left before the technician entered.

Bewildered, Massner watched her leave.

Four

Massner lay on the couch in his tiny room, drifting between sleep and waking, his thoughts splintered and confused. During his absence, a nurse had visited his wife and attended to her needs, even tidied her hair up. Massner looked at his wife and thought of Lynda Sagar. How could he think rationally about all he had seen and heard this day?

His attempts to consider the various issues on an objective level continually dissolved into complex and unanswerable aspects of conscience and morality. Massner was certain that Sagar did not believe in the possibility of life after death, in the existence of man's eternal soul. Lynda Sagar, the one person who should have been closest to him, also had doubts. But how could he convince people like Perrers and Dr. Robinson of this without facts? Life in Tethys was geared towards religious observance. It permeated every aspect of society in the undersea city. It *was* society.

To accuse Sagar of heresy without producing solid evidence to substantiate his claims would only bring suspicion and possibly similar accusations down on his own head. Sagar was planning something, but what it was or how he intended to carry it out was at the moment completely beyond him. Massner realized that he would just have to wait and watch.

Still sleep eluded him. He tossed and turned endlessly. To

add to Massner's confusion, a man's face persistently penetrated the twisting morass of his dreams, to stare at him with a hauntingly familiar face. The face belonged to Sagar. For no obvious reason he seemed to be laughing.

He was roused from a light sleep by an insistent knocking on the door. It was Lynda Sagar. She entered the room and stood for a moment, looking at his wife.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

Still bemused by sleep, Massner wasn't sure what she meant by that.

She turned towards him. 'I didn't want to use the telephone,' she said, suddenly. 'I hope you don't mind my coming here to see you?' Her long black hair was combed back off her face. It accentuated her eyes even more. She sat down on the edge of the couch, her fingers intertwining nervously. Massner realized that she desperately wanted to talk, but didn't know where to begin. He offered her coffee but she shook her head mutely.

'What is it about Dr. Sagar that worries you?' he asked, quietly, pouring a cup out for himself.

She stared at him. 'It's just a feeling I've got. I'm sure there's something wrong, that's all.'

Massner sipped the hot liquid cautiously. 'Have you anything specific in mind?'

'No. Not really.'

'Are you sure?'

'There's a woman I know, a close friend, she contracted multiple sclerosis. She's dying.' Lynda Sagar's dark eyes revealed her agony. 'She desperately wanted to be included in the programme. She offered herself as one of the twelve donors. When my husband found out, I thought he was going to go mad with rage. I'd only been trying to help. He'd found only six people he considered suitable at the time.'

'Suitable?' Massner asked. 'In what way?'

She shook her head. 'I don't know.'

'Later, did he ever give a reason for the outburst?'

'No. He refused to discuss it.'

Her answers only strengthened Massner's suspicions. But still there was nothing definite. 'How much control does

your husband have over the programme and over the choice of donors?'

'He is responsible for everything,' Lynda Sagar answered simply. 'He has total control.'

These nebulous doubts were not enough, Massner realized. He needed evidence, something that would persuade people like Dr. Robinson and Perrers to postpone the programme for a few days. 'What if we exposed Sagar to Anglesomne's mind?' Massner said. 'Anglesomne would be able to determine the truth wouldn't he?' he asked, excitedly.

Lynda Sagar shook her head. 'Impossible. Anglesomne's mind is damped down with drugs for most of the time – to save him from unnecessary suffering.'

'Suffering? What do you mean?'

'There's always pain involved in empathic transference. Denied conscious control, Anglesomne's psyche would suffer unending agony. The drugs reduce his awareness. When his empathic ability is needed, the drugs are withheld. But without the proper authority . . .' She gestured helplessly with pale hands.

'Well, couldn't an ordinary Empath determine the truth about Sagar?'

'No,' she answered. 'His mind is too . . . strong. Impenetrable. There are such individuals.'

Massner noticed that Lynda Sagar had a strange expression on her face.

'What are you going to do?' she asked as Massner picked up the telephone.

'Talk to Dr. Robinson. There's a couple of questions I'd like to ask him.' Massner sensed her uncertainty. 'It's all right,' he insisted, 'I'm supposed to be helping the programme anyway.'

The automatic switchboard eventually connected him. Dr. Robinson was just going to bed.

'I've found something that I think can be exploited to the benefit of the programme,' Massner lied. 'But I need answers to several questions.'

Robinson sounded tired. 'Look, Massner, I've been on my feet for over eighteen hours. Can't this wait until morning?'

'There isn't enough time. I need the information now.'

'What do you want?' Robinson said, after a moment's silence.

'Complete details of the programme. Case histories of all the donors. A run-down on Dr. Sagar.'

Robinson was ominously silent again. Then: 'I can't give you all that now, over the telephone. Look, are you sure this will help us?'

'Positive,' Massner lied.

'Right. You can use my office. I'll tell you how to get there. If there's something you need to know that's not in my records, there's a computer terminal in there. You should get everything you need from the memory bank.'

Dr. Robinson instructed Massner on how to reach his office, promised that he would inform security, then rang off.

Massner wasted no time. He dragged Lynda Sagar to her feet and practically ran out of the room.

Tiredly, Massner pushed the files away from him. He sighed and stared blankly around the tiny office. He was worried. Something was scratching away at his nerve ends with an uneasy persistence.

Only one common factor repeated itself in each of the eleven case histories. Each donor had a record of a heart condition at some stage in life. All of them had received treatment which had proved satisfactory. There appeared to be no cause for concern. As for Sagar, his record was exemplary. Officially at least.

'I can't find anything wrong here, Lynda.' Massner slumped back in Dr. Robinson's swivel chair. 'I've been through them all at least twice, there's nothing.'

The office was small but tastefully decorated, and with a large hand-carved wooden desk and oak panelled walls. Lynda was sitting on a reproduction chaise longue, her feet drawn up beneath her. There was a distracted look on her face.

Massner stared at the reports scattered across the desk top. 'Where is he now?' he wondered out loud. 'What's he doing? I've never seen him all the time I've been in Tethys.'

'He spends most of his time in either of the two hospitals, caring for his personal patients.' Lynda said. 'There or in the Coma Colosseum Chapel.'

'Where?' Massner asked, not sure that he had heard right.

'Yes, I did say Chapel.'

'What does he do there?'

Lynda shook her head. Her hair fell across her shoulders in a wave. 'I don't know. It puzzles me. I know he's not religious, not in that sense.'

'Then why . . .?' Massner looked at her. He felt defeated. Not because he really cared about the programme, but because he desperately wanted to help Lynda Sagar.

He was finding it increasingly difficult to think straight. She had released emotions within him he had successfully subdued for years. The sensation was intolerable.

'Lynda . . .' he began. Suddenly he realized there was no need to explain. She was looking directly at him, her eyes wider and deeper than he could ever have imagined. That strange and subtle emotional flux washing between them became a force too intense, too insistent to be denied.

Just once, he tried to hold back. 'Lynda, is there enough time?' he asked, realizing how little time remained before the programme started.

He already knew the answer.

'If not for us, then for nothing,' she whispered.

Massner awoke with a premonition of fear. Lynda was still lying next to him. Her breathing came very regularly. He could feel its slow warmth on his cheek. He sat up, wondering what time it was.

'Lynda,' he whispered, 'wake up. It's late.'

There was no reaction. He shook her, gently at first, then harder and harder with increasing horror. He slapped her hands and face without result. Whisky from a decanter brought coughing but no return to consciousness. A numbness began to grip Massner's mind. The truth grew inside him like a malignant cancer. 'No!' he thought, 'It can't be! Not that; it has to be something else!'

He ran out of the office, searching for Sagar, for Robinson, for anyone who would tell him it wasn't true.

Almost blindly he ran into the centre of the Coma Colosseum, into the dodecahedron-shaped room. Anglesomne was being placed on the bed in the middle of the room. Television cameras, relaying the scene to the giant screens located around the bowl of the Coma Colosseum, focused their electronic eyes on his impressive age-seamed face.

The machines which would stimulate the sub-cortical recesses of his dormant mind were being placed in position around the bed.

'Robinson!' Massner screamed. A dozen anxious faces turned towards him. Hands gripped him from behind. 'Robinson!' he screamed again.

'Here, Massner; be quiet!' the parapsychologist said.

'Now, what is it? What's wrong?' Dr. Robinson stared at Massner's agitated face with concern.

'Lynda Sagar,' Massner gasped, 'Who is she, what is she?'

Robinson read what had happened in Massner's wild and distraught eyes. 'Coma?'

Massner nodded.

'She's Anglesomme's daughter,' Robinson said helplessly. 'An Empath.'

Pain washed the strength from Massner's body. His knees buckled. Coma-death! Only the arms gripping his shoulders prevented him from collapsing altogether. 'Not her too!' he moaned, 'Not her!'

Savagely he thrust the hands away from him. 'Where's Sagar?' he screamed. 'I've got to find him!'

Dr. Robinson looked helplessly first around the polyhedral room, then into the twelve surrounding segments. The medical teams were beginning their work; incisions were being made, the artificial blood vessels were being attached to exposed arteries. 'I don't know,' Robinson said. 'He was here several minutes ago. Perhaps the chapel?'

'The chapel?' Massner repeated. Of course, the chapel!

From somewhere not far above came the echoing wash of the announcer's amplified commentary to the visuals flickering across the sixty-foot screens in the Coma Colosseum bowl.

The chapel door was locked.

No response came to his hammerings. Savagely, thankful for the physical pain that however briefly masked the torment inside him, Massner smashed the heavy door open with a shoulder charge that stunned and winded him.

At the far end of the chapel stood a huge wooden cross. Sagar stood before it on a raised dais. He was naked. As Massner crashed through the chapel door, Sagar turned to

face him. There was an expression of intense excitement on his face.

As Massner began running desperately down the central aisle, Sagar levelled an automatic pistol, took aim, and fired. The bullet smashed into Massner's thigh, throwing him sideways into a tangle of collapsing pews.

Numbly, he realized that the bullet had shattered his leg. Almost fainting with the pain, Massner dragged himself upright.

'Sagar!' he screamed. 'What have you done?'

'You're too late, Massner.' Sagar laughed, his words echoing off the empty walls, 'Too late!'

He turned his back to the great wooden cross and extended his arms along the horizontal. There was a series of shattering staccato reports as exploding bolts, ripping through his flesh from inside the cross, pinioned him at the wrists and at the ankles in the attitude of crucifixion. Blood streamed from the wounds.

'For God's sake, Sagar, what have you done?' Massner cried.

'For God's sake, Massner?' Sagar gasped. 'Not for him – surely you of all people realized that?'

Slowly the cross began to inch upwards on humming gears towards the brilliant light of the Coma Colosseum bowl. Sagar stared down at him, moaning slightly as the agony of his wounds penetrated the rapidly weakening painkillers.

'Tethys is finished. Our world's come to an end. Massner, we can accept that even if they can't.'

'You bastard!' Massner raged, 'Answer me, what have you done?'

'The donors,' Sagar smiled, blood flecking his rictic lips, 'they're all suffering acute toxic psychosis induced by five-thousand micrograms of Lysergic Acid-Psilocybin administered within the last ten minutes. And a final irony; they're all recipients of surgically transplanted simian hearts!

'Can you predict what's going on in their psychotic minds, Massner? Can you imagine what Anglesomne's protected ego will make of it? Insanity, Massner. Mass insanity!' His crazed laughter echoed hideously in Massner's unbelieving ears.

The great wooden cross emerged into view as the first empathic responses of the approaching psychic storm began to flood over the Coma Colosseum . . .

THE END

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