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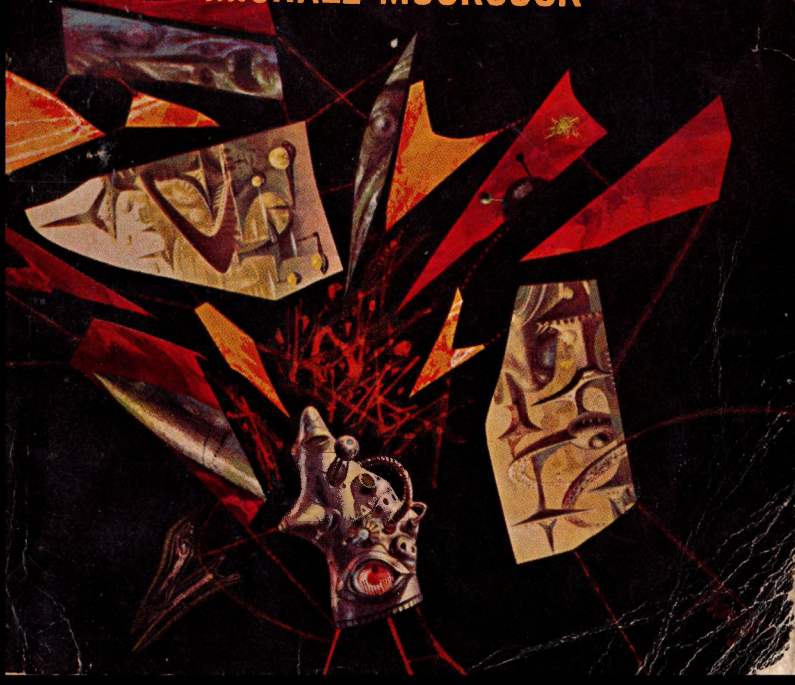
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Editor of
New Worlds
Science Fiction

LAMBDA I

and Other Stories

COLIN KAPP
BRIAN W. ALDISS
PHILIP E. HIGH
GEORGE WHITLEY
LEE HARDING
JOHN RACKHAM
MICHAEL MOORCOCK



THE WORLD OF TAU

It took a great effort of the imagination to visualize that only a few yards in front of him a great Tau vessel, with perhaps a thousand passengers on board, was waiting to be withdrawn into normal space. Occupying this square of emptiness was about twenty thousand tons of steel and humanity with its clever Rorsch generators carefully phasing every atom of its charge into syntonic harmony with the atoms of the air with which it was co-existent. *The very idea of it made the hair creep on his neck . . .*

LAMBDA I

AND OTHER STORIES

Edited by
John Carnell



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FOREWORD

ONE OF the most pleasureable aspects of a science fiction editor's work is the interesting and diversified correspondence which he exchanges with authors in all walks of life living in all parts of the world. In this respect, having edited Britain's *New Worlds Science Fiction* magazine since its inception 18 years ago, there are few international authors who have not contributed to my personal enjoyment—from A through Y, Asimov to Youd ("John Christopher") or, stretching a point to Z, Arthur Lea Zagat, who died in 1948.

Correspondence with such celebrities broadens an editor's mind and, because so many of them commenced writing s-f as amateurs or semi-professionals, they are always tolerant of new writers. Much of this tolerance rubs off onto an editor and helps him to build new writers in the genre, many of whom go on to international heights themselves. In this respect, *New Worlds Science Fiction* has contributed in no small measure to the international scene. Many British writers, now well-known, made their debut or contributed regularly to it in their early writing years—Arthur C. Clarke, John Wyndham, Brian W. Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, George Whitley, James White, John Brunner, E. C. Tubb, J. T. McIntosh, Kenneth Bulmer, John Christopher, have been followed by Colin Kapp, John Rackham, Lee Harding, Michael Moorcock and many others.

Most of the serials published in the past ten years have been published in book form on both sides of the Atlantic and translated into many European languages—yet only a few hundred American afficionados know of the magazine's existence, such are the exigencies of distribution barriers!

Berkley Books therefore thought that it was high time a representative collection of some of the more popular British stories appeared within the United States, to form a notable "first," as Groff Conklin recently pointed out to me in correspondence. This will be the first foreign s-f anthology of stories previously unpublished in the USA and edited by a foreign editor! Few purchasers of LAMBDA I AND OTHER STORIES will be able to complain that they "have read them all before."

When selecting material for this collection, I adopted a different policy from the one usually used by most anthologists, ignoring personal taste and listing stories which had created

overwhelming correspondence with the general readers of the magazine. The list was long, but many of the stories were not available, having already been selected for individual author collections or other anthologies. Of the final choice, however, one thing was very certain—it wasn't always the complex story, like Colin Kapp's LAMBDA I, which was necessarily voted high by the readers. Often the best-liked stories turned out to be very simple in plot or writing style, a factor which is becoming more and more evident as we enter the space age.

Phil High's ROUTINE EXERCISE, for instance, was nearly turned down when originally submitted, because I felt that the plot was too familiar—yet its publication brought in more enthusiastic correspondence than any other story or serial for months. No editor is completely infallible on the choice of stories, of course; Brian Aldiss's BASIS FOR NEGOTIATION was rejected by all the American s-f magazine editors (on the basis of theme only) yet, despite its Munich-type political theme, produced a veritable snowstorm of correspondence when published in England, with commendations even from British readers!

Simple in theme, too, is George Whitley's ALL LACED UP, which has already been reprinted in several British anthologies and journals, and, as George recently pointed out in a letter from Australia, "has already more than paid for all the iron lace we have outside our house."

Newer British writers are represented by Michael Moorcock (who will have his first book of fantasy stories published in the UK shortly) and John Rackham, whose name has often appeared in American s-f magazines. Unknown to most Americans is Australian writer Lee Harding, but all his recent short stories have been rated high by readers who say that he is capturing the old "sense of wonder" of the early days of science fiction.

Basically, then, this is a cross-section of recently popular British science fiction which has been well-liked by many thousands of readers in different countries of the world. By and large, it will be a little different from the general type and presentation of its American contemporaries—but not so different that it will be any the less enjoyable.

John Carnell

London, England

October, 1963

LAMBDA I

Colin Kapp

I

THE UNKEMPT SHRUBS obscured Porter's view from the window, but he knew instinctively that the vehicle which swept into the drive was not the one the years had trained his ears to recognize. As the sound of tyres quietened on the gravel he moved to the door automatically and without much interest. The knocker sounded a sharp rat-a-tat which keyed a memory all of ten years old.

"Damn!" said Porter to himself. "He's the last person I need."

Brevis' eyes were the remembered grey of steel, and the face, though older, had lost none of that unspoken authority. In their long association Brevis had always been the dominant character.

"Eric!" Porter offered a handshake meant to convey a warmth he did not feel. "Long time no see!"

"Hullo, Paul!" Brevis thrust a suitcase on the mat. "I'm taking you up on your open invitation. I've twenty-four hours to kill before I'm due at the East Coast MediCon. I could think of no better way of spending it than visiting Julie and Paul whom I've so long neglected. I say, I hope I'm not intruding?"

"Heavens, no! Very glad to see you." Porter pulled the suitcase into the hall, knowing sickly that Brevis would detect his insincerity. He looked up, to find Brevis' eyes scanning his face, and smiled wryly. "It's just that I'm afraid you've caught me completely unprepared. Julie is visiting her sister in New Mexico and I'm coping alone at the moment. The house—" he gestured uselessly "—is beginning to get out of hand. If you don't mind pigging it, though, you're very welcome."

Brevis grinned at his embarrassment. "Boy, compared with the mess we used to live in when we shared digs at Rhodes this is tidiness personified. Anyway, before you start opening cans and things let me remind you I still owe you an evening out. Grab your hat and let's go paint the town red."

"Sorry," said Porter. "Tomorrow I might take you up on that, but tonight I've got to stay within reach of the phone. I'm on emergency call at Tau Terminal. I don't expect anything will happen, but I have to be available just in case."

"I heard you were doing big things at Tau Corporation," Brevis said. "You'll have to explain Tau to me sometime. The more I learn of it the more confused I become."

"Sometimes," said Porter sourly, "I get like that myself."

When the meal was finished Brevis leaned back and eyed Porter shrewdly. "How's Julie keeping?"

"Well," said Porter. "She's keeping quite well. And yourself? What do you call your field? Deep psychology?"

"Something like that," said Brevis softly.

"We've had driblets of news about you from time to time. We even caught your book: *The Psychopathology of Illusion.* It's good stuff even though I don't confess to understand it all. I said to Julie: 'That's old Eric who used to say he couldn't abide anything abstract.' "

"When did you say that to Julie, Paul?"

"When the book came out, I guess. Why?"

"The book came out four months ago. You haven't seen Julie in about six months. She isn't even in New Mexico, is she?"

Porter looked away. "No, I don't suppose she is. I always was a rotten liar. She walked out of here about seven months back. I don't want to talk about it."

"I think you should," Brevis said. "I met her in London a while back. She was living under her maiden name and trying to forget she ever married a big slob like you. I don't think she was too successful at forgetting. As I was largely responsible for bringing you together I feel a personal responsibility at your drifting apart."

Porter felt a tide of indignation rising. "Is that how you just happened to be passing here tonight?"

"One of the reasons," Brevis said evenly. "There are others, but they don't matter here and now. I suggest you let me help you."

Porter shook his head. "Without wishing to be disrespectful to your professional status, Eric, I think this one is out of your province. What happened between Julie and me is not something that can be put right by a few tearful sessions with our father confessor. I'd rather we talked about something else."

The phone at his elbow rang shrilly. Porter picked it up,

listened gravely, then dropped the handset back into its cradle. For a moment he gazed speculatively at nothing in particular.

"That was Tau Terminal. They've got an emergency on down there. I'll have to go. Do you mind making your own bed?"

"If it's at all possible I'd rather come with you. I've travelled on Tau often enough but I've never yet managed to see behind the scenes. Can you fix it?"

"Sure," Porter nodded. "But I'll have to have your undertaking that anything you see remains strictly confidential. That's a corporation rule."

"Fair enough," Brevis said. "I'll put it in writing if you wish. We can use my car, it's still in the driveway."

"You're afraid of Tau, aren't you?" asked Brevis suddenly, setting the car sweeping round a bend on the dark mountain road. "Was it that fear which came between you and Julie?"

"I said I didn't want to talk about Julie," said Porter. "Let's change the subject."

"As you wish," said Brevis quietly. "Let's talk about Tau, then. As I understand the principle of Tau it concerns making a solid body resonate in such a way that its atoms can pass through the spaces in the atomic structure of other solid substances. Thus two pieces of matter can co-exist in the same space at the same time without interaction."

Porter both scowled and smiled in the darkness. "You have a very small part of the idea—only, we have to do it with ships and men." His voice was cynical. "We resonate ships of up to a hundred thousand tons deadweight and send them soaring through the solid earth. It's one of the greatest wonders of modern science—a triumph of human ingenuity. But you know, Eric, I know more about the practice and theory of Tau than most, and still it scares me stiff. There are implications in Tau theory which are quite beyond our comprehension. We don't understand one millionth of this thing we have the temerity to meddle with."

"Then why do it?"

"We have no choice," said Porter with sudden savagery. "One day Tau techniques are going to take us to the farthest galaxies. But in the meantime Tau research costs money—the type of money even national exchequers can't supply. So we take one aspect of Tau and forge it into a major transport system. That pays for the rest of the research—and even that is only a small fraction of what is needed. Tau physics

is a subject with more potential than the sum total of all the rest of human knowledge put together."

"I hadn't thought that Tau physics was anything more than an extension of normal physics."

"You would soon," said Porter, "if you worked with it. The regions found in inter-atomic space have little to do with any physical domains that we know. For a start, there is no concept corresponding to what we call Universe."

Brevis thought about this for a while. "I don't understand this," he said at last. "Tau transport is acknowledged to be the safest and most reliable transport system there is—the collapse of the railways and the shipping lines indicated that. That doesn't indicate to me any profound lack of understanding of Tau basics."

"Don't be misled," said Porter. "The collapse of shipping and railways was purely economic. Tau Corporation undercut them and forced all except local traffic out of business. Even the airlines had to go. It was just too easy to do. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and a Tau ship can travel in a straight line between almost any two points on earth. Also, there's no friction in Tau space. Apart from the power needed to maintain the Tau-spin field the only energy required is that necessary to overcome the static inertia of the craft, and even that is theoretically recoverable at the terminal point."

"The economics I can see," said Brevis, "but I've never yet heard of a major accident in Tau."

"By the grace of God and the efficiency of the public relations office there have been no accidents on our system which have caused a public outcry. Some of the other systems haven't been so lucky. But under certain types of government, news is what you print not what actually happens."

"What sort of accidents could happen to a vessel in Tau?"

"We don't know all the possibilities yet, but the primary worry is the mode of oscillation of the energy package which contains the ship. Even in a simple oscillatory system, such as a cavity magnetron, there is a possibility of the device slipping from the main mode of oscillation to some other mode. With the complex oscillatory possibilities offered by the Rorsch Tau-spin generators, mode slip is not only possible but not unusual."

"Is that bad?" Brevis halted the car at an intersection and waited impatiently for the signal to clear.

"It's not so good," Porter said. "There are four main

modes of Tau oscillation: Gamma, Delta, Epsilon and Zeta. The ships are usually phased into the Gamma mode before despatch and a little over ninety-eight per cent remain in that mode till they are withdrawn into normal space at the terminal point. The other two per cent suffer a mode slip and arrive at the terminal in one of the other modes. The mode has then to be identified and phase-matched by the withdrawal generator before the ship can be brought back into normality. The difficulty is in the design of a withdrawal generator which can be deliberately tripped into matching any one of the four modes. It can't be done."

"Are you saying that you lose two per cent of your Tau-space vessels?"

"Of course not. The point I wished to make is that you can't *design* a withdrawal generator with a controlled mode-slip. If a vessel comes to terminal point in anything but a Gamma mode you have to keep bucking the withdrawal generator until it slips into the required mode. It may take hours or even days to phase-in correctly."

"I hadn't heard of that before," said Brevis.

"No, you wouldn't. Tau Corporation couldn't bear the adverse publicity of admitting that the recovery of two per cent of its passengers and payload was largely a matter of luck. You should see how the control boys sweat when they're called to phase-in on a Zeta mode. A great many of Tau's terminal Controllers burn themselves out with sheer nervous tension before they're thirty-five."

"But that isn't your real worry, is it?"

"No, damn you!" Porter shot Brevis a wry smile in the light of the fleeting streetlamps. His voice dropped lower. "No, it isn't at all. Tau, like every other technology, gathers its own collection of superstitions. One of them is that there's yet another mode of Tau-spin which is possible. If it exists it's so damn complex that the computers can't handle it. Nobody can prove it exists, yet everyone who handles Tau generators believes that it does happen sometimes. I've seen it myself at dead of night on the withdrawal generator at Pasadena. I had it on the scopes as clear as Sunday, but before I could bring in the cameras it had decayed to a standard Delta mode. It never showed up on the tracker charts or on the computer, but..."

"But what?"

"I know it's damn silly, but the ship I was monitoring came in with a dead man aboard."

"Go on," said Brevis.

"The tech boys call this mystery mode Omega—the end. There's a legend that one day a Tau vessel is going to actually arrive at a terminal in the Omega mode, and when they do finally succeed in getting it out of Tau there'll be nothing but madmen and corpses on board. Like I said, it's a superstition, but every time you get an emergency call in the small hours you can't help wondering . . . if this is it."

"Just how possible is it?" asked Brevis.

"I don't care to make that calculation. Rumour has it that it's already happened on some other system, but the news was suppressed. What scares me is the logic behind the assumption. If a vessel should arrive at a terminal in the Omega mode the passengers are liable to be a hell of a lot older before we can figure a way to phase-in and recover them."

II

Brevis brought the car to a halt under the bright lights of the checkpoint at the terminal gates. A uniformed gatekeeper ran out and waved the car round a line of waiting trucks.

"Mr. Porter, will you go to Grid Four. The Night Controller's signalled a top-line emergency."

"Holy Moses!" Porter gave a hasty direction and Brevis let in the clutch. The car leaped between the long, dark lines of the Terminal buildings and screeched to a halt at its destination. Before the car had stopped rolling Porter was out of the door and away across the fairway, leaving Brevis to follow in his own time.

Inside the building raw lights blazed savagely over the scene. The Night Controller left the control consoles and hurried to meet Porter, as if anxious to unload the killing responsibility on to more experienced shoulders. His face was deeply lined, indicative of a prolonged period of nervous strain. Behind him men were grouped in the various control sectors staring resignedly at instruments which told an impossible story. Naked anxiety and fear clutched the air with a cold hand.

"Thank God you've come, Paul! There's a vessel on the grid but we can't phase-in for withdrawal. You'd better come and look at the scopes. There's something terribly wrong about the mode she's in."

Porter waved an arm to Brevis to indicate he could wander where he chose, then followed the Controller to the phasing panel. Brevis stood for a moment to gain his bearings, then

began to explore. As a frequent passenger on Tau he was familiar with the layout on the farther side of the building, but he had never before seen the grid and the control sectors. When he had fitted the pieces together the effect was a considerable psychological shock.

In front of him now was the vast convoluted 'grid' on which the vessels arrived and from which they departed on their journeys through Tau space. He knew from the conversation that there was a ship on the grid at the moment, but... the grid was as empty as any other empty space that he could recall.

It took a great effort of the imagination to visualize that only a few yards in front of him a great Tau vessel, with perhaps a thousand passengers on board, was waiting to be withdrawn into normal space. Occupying this square of emptiness was about twenty thousand tons of steel and humanity with its clever Rorsch generators carefully phasing every atom of its charge into syntonic harmony with the atoms of the air with which it was co-existent. The very idea of it made the hair creep on his neck. He had the feeling that if he looked very carefully out of the corners of his eyes he could actually see the vessel as a shadowy ghost against the background of lights and girders. He knew quite certainly that he could walk across the area of the Grid and encounter nothing at all, but the idea that he would be walking through steel and living people made him feel slightly sick, and he had no stomach to try the experiment.

Something in the concept of Tau clawed at his imagination. The world of inter-atom was vastly different from the one which the basic atoms of the normal world composed. It was an area of non-logic which only grudgingly conceded a place to man and his fallibilities. Standing in the lights and shadows of Tau Terminal Brevis was suddenly gripped by a sense of unease at the terrifying nearness of it all. He imagined he could feel the dark, unknowable pressures of Tau breaking against the grid, threatening to break through into the world and flood it throat-high with something unimaginable. He sensed here for the first time the unspoken fear of all who handled the mechanisms which opened the doors to Tau.

Almost hastily he returned to the phasing panel where Porter and a couple of technicians were watching scope traces with genuine horror. Porter looked up as Brevis approached.

"Look at this," he said helplessly. "It's the prettiest speci-

men you ever saw. A tight-locked stable mode which has the computer in hysterics."

"Omega?" asked Brevis.

"Omega," said Porter tonelessly. "It had to happen sooner or later, but why the hell did it have to happen to me?"

"What are you going to do?"

"What can we do? We can't hope to beat the withdrawal generator into the mode, and even if we could there'd be no certainty of being able to hold it until withdrawal was complete. The best we can hope for is that the ship's mode is unstable and will decay into something we can handle."

"And if it doesn't?" asked Brevis.

"We have then no option but to instruct the Captain to take his vessel to a point we shall give him, and to sit there and wait."

"Wait for what?"

"A Rorsch generator is an almost indestructible thing. Every possible care has been taken to ensure that it cannot possibly break down in service. Only one eventuality will inevitably stop its functions—the final failure of the stored power which drives it. Given time, a Rorsch must stop."

"So?"

"So the vessel automatically and by definition falls back into a normal atomic condition. You get two large aggregates of matter attempting to occupy the same space at the same time. With a bit of luck the resultant explosion shouldn't remove more than about half a continent."

"Dear God, are you serious?"

"Deadly serious." Porter mopped his brow. "This could become an international catastrophe of the first order. The most I can do is to issue co-ordinates to locate her spatially under the Atlantic Ocean when she falls out of Tau. That will minimize the damage, but I'd not give much for any shipping within a hundred-mile radius, and the flood damage in some coastal areas is going to be fantastic." He turned to the technician. "Harry, get the Director on the line. We've got to get some top level action on this and get it fast."

"Check!"

"And get me full details of the vessel that's on the grid—cargo, passengers, crew, complete performance history, and any other relevant data you can lay your hands on. Tell Central Data I'm demanding instant priority."

"Check! Routine transmission sheets are already on the logging table."

"Good. Can we get T-radio contact through to the ship?"

"It's difficult, but we're working on it."

"And vision?"

"Not possible, I'm afraid. We can't lock frequencies with them while they're jumping backwards through inverse square loops."

Porter looked at the mode-trace ruefully. "I take your point," he said. "Anyway, do your best."

He turned to the logging table to pick up the routine transmission sheets still limp from the electronic printer, and to summarise them rapidly for Brevis' benefit.

"The *Mu Elektron*... out of Tau London bound for Tau Eastern Coastal, that's us. Departure time... um... ETA ... um... usual registration and certificates. Tech Records say she homed in Delta or Epsilon modes on the last three trips. They must have been mad to send her out with a Rorsch acting-up like that. Tests check out OK, but there's a hell of a difference between a test-bed static run and the stress patterns involved in a long Tau vector. The Captain is Phil Dantor... Hm... not so good! He used to be one of our best men until he found that liquor considerably eased the strain on his imagination. I can imagine the gentle art of becoming paralytic in a crisis might well become his main occupation for the next few days. If he does it'll be the last ship he'll ever command."

"I wonder you continue to employ an alcoholic."

"Dantor's not alcoholic, merely human. A Tau captain has to spend a fair part of his time in the instrument blister of the ship, where the shielding against Tau-environmental influences is only marginal. It takes a special type of oddball to stand that sort of punishment for more than a few vector trips. Dantor has nearly seven hundred vectors to his credit, so the Corporation makes some allowance for an idiosyncrasy which does not prove detrimental to the job."

"And drinking isn't detrimental?"

"Not compared to forms of release which other men have chosen. Have you ever seen the figures for suicide and drug addiction among Tau operational executives?"

Brevis frowned. "Does he know what the situation is yet?"

"I doubt it, until we get into radio contact. I expect his Tech. Officer will have guessed by now, but if he knows his Captain he'll keep the information to himself. What else have we got here? Despatch notes, waybill, passenger and crew lists... Harry, damn you, where's the rest of the information?"

"They're still correlating at Records. It'll be on the wire in a few minutes. There's some coming in now."

"What's she carrying?"

"Eleven hundred passengers and two thousand tons of psilomelane, plus the usual small mixed cargo."

Porter nodded, then stopped suddenly. "Psilomelane? What's that?"

The technician consulted his notes. "It's an ore of manganese."

"You have an idea there?" asked Brevis.

"I don't know," said Porter, "but there's something in the back of my mind. I have a needling suspicion that serious mode-slip phenomena are somehow connected with something carried on the ship. The trouble is I can't get a lead on it. The whole situation is too damn complex. Harry, I want a computer check on the mode slips of all vessels which have carried psilomelane."

"Sure, but if there was a simple relationship between the two the computers would have thrown it up years ago."

"Get it, all the same. We can't afford to pass anything which might be relevant."

"The Director's on the line now. Will you take it on screen two."

"Excuse me," said Porter, "but this conversation isn't going to be fit for innocent ears. Hell, Eric, you're not looking so good. Why don't you take the car and go back and get some sleep."

"Don't worry about me," said Brevis. "I'll be all right in a moment. It's just that I've remembered something I wish I hadn't known."

Porter rapped the face of the scope with agitated knuckles, as though the possibility of altering the trace could hope to alter the circumstance which it was reporting. For the hundredth time his eyes turned wearily upwards to the clock. "Thirty seconds," he said. "If they don't slip out of Omega in thirty seconds I'm going to have to direct them to the destruction area. Slip! Blast you, slip!"

The trace remained the same, as everyone knew in their hearts it would. Porter picked up the communications handset. The radio operator gave him the thumbs-up sign and switched in the recorders.

"Captain Dantor, this is Porter, Tau Eastern-Coastal Control. We are still unable to recover your ship from Tau. We are continuing our efforts but must advise you to remove your vessel to co-ordinate position nil-one-seven as

detailed in your Standing Emergency Orders. Please acknowledge and confirm."

The answer from the *Mu Elektron* was a stream of invective which made Brevis wince in spite of his worldliness. Porter waited patiently for the outburst to subside, remaining completely in control of the situation.

"Captain Dantor, kindly get control of yourself and proceed as instructed."

"You're going to abandon us, you swine!"

"Nothing of the sort, but while your vessel occupies the grid or its vicinity in its present condition it forms a grave potential danger to a considerable portion of the mainland. We are doing all in our power to recover your vessel, but in order to minimize the public danger it is imperative that you programme your course as directed."

"To hell with the public danger! What about our danger? No, Mr. Porter. While we occupy your precious grid you're going to have to do your damndest to get us out of Tau before our Rorsch stops and lands us all in hell. While we're on your grid, Mister, you're going to sweat blood but you're going to keep on looking because you haven't got time to do otherwise. On the grid we stand a chance—once out in a safe-destruction area it's no skin off your nose if we do go to hell like a hundred nuclear bombs."

"I'm giving you one more chance," said Porter dangerously. "A transcription of this conversation will be present at the Court of Inquiry."

"Mister Porter," said Dantor, his voice heavy with sarcasm, "from my posistion you have no idea just how damn silly that sounds. Eleven hundred souls at the edge of purgatory and you worry about the niceties of an enquiry we may neither of us live to see. Get back to your engineering, man, and start getting us out of here."

"All right," said Porter, "you've had your chance. Now get the hell off the air and let me speak to the First Officer."

"Damn your eyes! What do you think you're doing?"

"Having you placed under arrest. You're drunk and incapable of commanding a vessel of this Service, Captain. As Senior Controller I don't have any option but to have you removed."

There was a choking cough of rage and incredulity, but as the Captain's virulent comments began to rattle the loudspeaker, Porter's hand cut down on the override button.

"Attention! Attention!" said Porter sternly. "This is Tau

Eastern-Coastal Control calling the First Officer of *Mu Elektron.* Captain Dantor is hereby relieved of his command and should be placed in restrictive custody. The senior able officer is now instructed to assume control forthwith. This transmission constitutes complete, repeat complete, authorization for such an officer to assume command of the *Mu Elektron,* and such an action will be upheld in any court of law. It is imperative that the *Mu Elektron* be directed as soon as possible to co-ordinate position nil-one-seven as detailed in Standing Emergency Orders. Please acknowledge and confirm."

The loudspeaker stayed silent for several long seconds, then a voice broke through, was abruptly cut off, then came through again.

"Carling, Radio Operator, *Mu Elektron,* to Tau Eastern-Coastal. Message received and understood. First Officer will assume command when the Captain has been placed under arrest. There's a hell of a fight going on up in the blister right now. The engineers are already plotting co-ordinates for the safe-destruction area. For Christ's sake get us out of here quickly! Once the news gets around that we're headed for destruction the results in here won't be too pretty. Shades of Tau Mockba! We've a lot of women in here too . . ."

The connections broke abruptly. Porter began calling again, then dropped the handset in despair.

"Of course!" he said. "Of all the forsaken foul-ups! A ship in Omega is bad enough, but to have a drunken Captain as well is the worst possible luck that could have hit us. I don't know much about the First Officer, but he's going to need to be immortal and have a tireless trigger-finger if he's going to keep control."

"I don't understand," Brevis said. "What's all this about Tau Mockba?"

"It's a Tau-space legend," Porter said sourly. "You won't find it in the history books, but it has the uncomfortable ring of truth. It was during the establishment of the old Orient Tau lines. The story has it that they had a vessel which got trapped in Tau for a couple of weeks. They finally got it out, but—you're a psychologist, Eric—what do you think happens to the souls of men and women who are confined together knowing that escape or rescue is impossible and that death is inevitable and only weeks away? What happens to men in a position untouchable by law and unreachable by social opinion? Tell me what restrains a man from following his instincts, Eric, and then take all those factors away and add that life is sweet but only as long as a Rorsch generator

can last. Tau Mockba, my friend, was a classic orgy of rape, mutiny, murder and panic. The only survivors were detained as criminally insane."

"My Christ! Is this true?"

"True or false," said Porter, "is largely irrelevant. The point is, could it happen? You're the head-shrinker and you have all the facts of the case. Will the *Mu Elektron* become a shade of Tau Mockba?"

"My God!" Brevis was ashen. "Shall I tell you now or keep it to myself?"

"Tell me what?"

"Julie is on the *Elektron.* She was coming back from London. She'd asked me to be there when she arrived—to help affect a reconciliation."

Porter swung him by the shoulder savagely. "Are you sure? Julie? Why the hell didn't you mention it before?"

"She made me promise not to. She feels her desertion pretty keenly. She was coming to ask you to forgive her, and was bringing you a gift."

"What sort of a gift, you conniving idiot?"

"A child, Paul. She's bearing your unborn child."

III

"The radio carrier from the *Mu Elektron* has died, Sir. Looks as though their transmitter may have been put out of action."

"Then God have mercy on them," said Porter quietly. "We may never know what hells they are about to endure." His eyes played over the equipment racks, searchingly. "Christ! I feel so bloody helpless. Is she still on the grid, Harry?"

"I think she's swinging to establish co-ordinate bearings. Yes—now she's going out, clean as a whistle. Whoever's acting as pilot still has a sure hand."

"We must be thankful for small mercies! It can't be easy to hold a true plot when you're piloting a course straight into your own grave. Is the Director here yet?"

"He's on his way. He gave us a radio check when his car was twenty miles out. That was seven minutes ago."

"When he gets here give him the full story and play back the tapes. I'm going to get a cup of coffee and have a long, deep think. Eric, you're still naive enough to believe in miracles, come and use some of your psychology on me. There has to be an answer to this somewhere, and it may be so damn obvious that I'm looking right through it. If

you can inject one spark of hope into this morass of despair I'll love you like a brother."

"Save your love for Julie. She'll be greatly in need of it right now. I know nothing at all about Tau physics so I'll simply start asking some damn silly questions in the hope it may prod your mind into suggesting some course of action. Right?"

"Fire away, my old Head-shrinker."

"Paul, are all Tau vessels equally mode-stable?"

"By no means. The present fleet are as stable as we know how to make them, but some of the earlier craft were sheer murder. Rorsch's original experimental raft, the *Lambda I*, had a mode shift on average every eighty seconds, and how the hell he ever came back out of Tau is something we've been wondering ever since. He went into Tau with a survival probability of something less than half of one per cent."

"Wouldn't a less stable craft stand a greater chance of slipping into the Omega mode?"

"Statistically, yes, of course. It would also stand less of a risk of becoming trapped in the mode."

"Where is it now?"

"Where's what?"

"The *Lambda I*. Haven't I seen it in a museum somewhere?"

"Sure, right here in town. In the Tau-Hopkins museum. Hell, you're not suggesting . . ."

"Why not? If a surface ship is sinking you send out a lifeboat at least to try to bring in a few survivors. If you can't bring a relatively mode-stable Tau ship out of Omega then what about trying to send an unstable-mode craft in? Even the psychological effect of an outside craft reaching the *Mu Elektron* might help to ward off the worst of the panic until a more constructive rescue scheme is devised."

"But the odds of such an enterprise being successful are millions to one against. The *Lambda I* was a laboratory test rig—a wild experiment which cost Rorsch his sanity. It had almost no shielding against the psychological effects of Tau. That sort of exposure sends men mad."

"The human mind is capable of withstanding a lot more than most people allow," said Brevis. "I don't doubt that Rorsch was susceptible to what ever it was he found, before he even entered Tau. It isn't the effect of Tau but how the mind interprets the effect that does the damage."

"We don't even know if a transfer between two vessels in Tau is a physical possibility, to mention nothing of the odds against entering the Omega mode and staying there just when required."

"Think carefully, Paul. How nearly are your answers related to your own fear of the unknown? Is there no possibility of such a project succeeding?"

"It's so slight that... dammit, Eric, you ought to certify me on the spot for even listening to your crazy notions! In your ignorance you may have hit on the one plan which gives any conceivable line of action—however futile that action might be. There's a minute chance of getting through to the *Elektron* on the *Lambda I* and an even smaller chance that anything can be accomplished by so doing; but that chance, weighed against the complete certainty that the entire shipload is doomed, leaves me no alternative. If Rorsch's ship is still operative I'm going to have a try."

"I'm coming with you, Paul."

"Not on this trip, you aren't. The psychological effects of Tau in a craft as poorly shielded as the *Lambda I* aren't something you expose yourself to if you wish to stay sane to a ripe old thirty-five or so. You've got a keen brain, Eric, and it would be a pity to snarl it up so soon. This journey is strictly for somebody who has nothing to live for if he fails."

"Damn your self pity!" Brevis said. "And don't try to teach me about psychological effects. Did you ever see Rorsch after he made his Australasian-vector trip? I did. I was twelve at the time, but I shan't forget the look in his eyes even if I get to be a hundred and twelve. That's what made me take up psychology, Paul. I had to know what had got into a man whose eyes were haunted with that particular sort of dread. Today I have a chance to find out. I put it to you frankly, Paul, that without me alongside you're not liable to come back out of Tau any saner than did Rorsch."

* * *

"Hold yourself carefully," said Porter. "This is going to be grim."

Brevis looked around. The tiny craft was centred in the immense grid built to handle Tau craft many thousands of times the size. From the far side a group of technicians looked on apprehensively, and the Director, convinced that this was a suicide mission, paced the floor with agonizing exactness.

Porter was counting softly to himself and throwing switches in controlled sequence.

Then, with a wrench, they were gone. Miraculously, the grid of cold, black iron seemed to fade and run as though painted in water colours on a window flooded with water, and a crushing insubstantiality broke over their heads like the surf of some dry, inhuman sea. They were bathed in nausea, and the black wave as it rose and fell tripped every sensory nerve cell in their bodies with twisting spite. Then, after what seemed an eternity, they were through, and a new scene coalesced like droplets of rose-water condensing on the brain. Involuntarily Porter clutched at a stanchion and swayed, sick with dizziness and dismay. Brevis merely went a deathly white and stared ahead, his thoughts unknown.

The *Lambda I* appeared to be suspended in an illimitable space, a space tinged in some unfathomable way with a monochromatic pinkness which tainted every surface and made nonsense of visual perception. Below them was nothing, no end or limit or forseeable confine; neither was there anything above them or on any side. There was only the incredible aching feeling of sublime loneliness and bewilderment, the antithesis of security. In a pink waste more vast than space itself they were floating in a crude Tau craft which was as unlikely in its setting as was the void in which it was suspended.

"I feel humbled," said Porter in awe. "There should be clouds of candy-floss and gossamer, with cherubim and seraphim kneeling in praise and supplication. Surely this is the ante-chamber to Heaven!"

"Subjective impression," said Brevis quietly from behind. "Try not to imagine things about it. It could prove dangerous."

"How subjective can it be? Can't you see it too—the rose-pink of eternity?"

"Yes, I see it."

"But the subjective comes from within. Two men cannot share the same hallucination."

"Leave the psychology to me," said Brevis. "If you close your eyes you'll see what I mean. But don't let it throw you."

"Dear God!" Porter breathed heavily. "I close my eyes and nothing happens. I can see just as well with my eyes shut tight."

"Precisely. This is not ordinary vision. There must be some interaction between Tau-matter and the fabric of the brain itself. The centres of optical perception are being stim-

ulated from inside the skull. I suspect we are seeing only a half-truth . . . merely that portion of the stimuli which the brain can resolve in terms of imagery based on personal experience. I should hate to guess what the unseen portion is like. Psychologically it raises some very interesting speculations."

"But I can see my hands and the instruments and you," Porter protested. "By what means does the brain see without using the eyes?"

"I wish I knew the answer to that. But let me warn you, Paul, in Tau trust nothing but your sense of touch, and even of that be wary. Tau-psychic interactions would make a honey of a research problem."

"So you think that Tau visions aren't properties of Tau as much as properties of the human brain exposed to Tau?"

"Something like that," said Brevis. "Something in the mind only partially responds to Tau-spin. It accounts for the fact that on a well shielded ship these phenomena are absent."

Porter was staring at the pink vastness, struggling to absorb Brevis' theory and to reconcile it with what he was actually experiencing. Tentatively he tried to explore the implications, but his mind drew back in alarm. But in that moment of fear he had guessed what Brevis already knew—that each man's illusions would be bounded only by the limits of his own imagination. Brevis saw a pink abyss too, but he also saw something more—something which caused him to keep looking outward and upwards to a point where there was nothing to be seen.

Porter turned swiftly to look into Brevis' face, but the psychologist was a man of iron control. Porter decided not to investigate further something he did not want to know.

"I wish I had your clinical detachment," Porter said at last, and there was a quaver in his voice.

"Detachment, hell! This is a major interest with me. I told you I'd seen Rorsch after he'd made the first Australasian-vector trip . . . Paul, now I know what kind of experience could make a man enter Tau an atheist and come out with religious mania."

IV

Before Porter could answer, something hit them; something that left the impression of a cleavage through the

skull made with an illuminated meat chopper. Porter staggered, convinced he had been dealt a mortal blow, then remembered Brevis' warning, and explored his scalp with urgent fingers. He discovered no wounds.

"Moses! What was that?"

"Check your instruments," Brevis said urgently, and there was pain in his voice. "That was a form of synaptic discharge. I think you'll find we jumped a mode. The brain isn't built to handle sudden rebuilding like that."

"You're right. We've slipped to Epsilon mode and locked on it. So far the Rorsch has been pretty stable, but we're still only passing through low density material. As we start to reach the Mohorovicic discontinuity and the high density regions we can expect a mode slip every minute or so . . ."

He stopped suddenly, with the look of a man transfixed by a spear. Brevis had already seen the phenomena. He was staring at something beyond the screens with a look of unholy fear upon his face. The first impression was that they were floating in a bowl of mercury, trapped in a distorting, liquid mirror bubble. But it was not a mirror, nor anything like a mirror; yet which ever way they turned they saw their own faces looking in out of darkness. Only the faces were reflected, faces that peered through the wired-glass screens with eyes full of horror and dismay.

"Lord! This is awful!" Porter crossed the cabin and the faces turned to follow him, thereby proving themselves capable of independent motion. "Eric, what the hell are they?"

"Some sort of composite image, I think. Did I once hear somebody say the time component of Tau was a variable?"

"Yes, that's true. We don't understand it yet, but the time-velocity relationships in Tau don't necessarily accord with Einsteinian Relativity. The effect is subject to immense variations in magnitude which we have no means of predicting. I know of at least two occasions in which a ship was received at a Tau withdrawal point some microseconds before it had been despatched by its departure station."

"You're a brave man," said Brevis, "to continue working with Tau when you are aware of how little you know. But I think you've answered my question. The faces at the screens are probably a composite picture of something out of our own personal futures—though Heaven alone knows what horror we have to experience to evoke just that sort of expression."

"You want to go back?"

"What I want is of no consequence. That part of our future is already decided and immutable. We have a collection of living portraits as evidence of that."

"I don't see how you can take it so coolly," Porter said.

"In my profession," said Brevis quietly, "I spend my life among people who live in personal hells not one bit less strange than this. It's my job to help men live with themselves in regions where reason doesn't apply."

"Welcome aboard!" said Porter, with a weak attempt at smiling. "If this is a fair sample of what we are going to encounter I'm certainly glad you came."

"The time you should start worrying is when I send you my bill," said Brevis, without trace of humour.

Porter consulted his instruments with difficulty. "This is a straight Epsilon, but it isn't locked into synchronization. We're on the correct vector and our course is now on automatic. In about three hours subjective time we should arrive at the spatial co-ordinate position which was the intended destination of the *Mu Elektron*. Don't ask me if she'll be there or how long it may take us to slip into the Omega mode."

"How do you buck a Rorsch generator when you want to induce a mode slip?"

"Several ways: alter the outpout impedance, overload the input lines, reverse any two of the four-hundred and eighty seven phase-couplers, or tap on the casing with a spanner. None of these ploys actually work except when applied by accident. A good Rorsch, however, is extremely sensitive about being screamed at, and can be guaranteed to do precisely the wrong thing when being cursed."

"That's about what I figured," said Brevis. "And if you should happen to slip into the mode you require can you then lock into synchronization?"

"You can try. The synch condition only holds good when the density and composition of the Tau-normal strata through which you're passing remains constant—a condition which rarely applies for more than a few minutes unless the vessel is at rest in Tau space. The big ships have a stable Rorsch which automatically compensates for this effect. On the *Lambda I* we have no such luxury. If we strike a variation in Tau-normal parameters we have to hunt for a new synch point, and probably slip a few more modes in the process. Does that give you any ideas?"

"No," said Brevis. "Only a sense of irony. The *Elektron*

is locked in a mode she can't escape and we may have a devil of a job locking into that mode when we do find it."

There was a snap of energy from the Rosch generator, and Porter caught his breath. Pain was building up behind his eyes, which caused him to reel momentarily, and when his brain cleared he was almost sick with apprehension. It took him several seconds to grasp what the new transition meant.

Suddenly the cabin had become a scene in black and white, but painted with such alien wrongness that he had to explore its parameters with slow logic rather than attempt to accept it as a whole. The entire emphasis was wrong . . . light shone brightly where shadows ought to be . . . and in the ceiling, cones of greyness narrowed to a point where the pin lamps radiated shades of the darkest black. Brevis was seated in the chair staring at his hands, his normally dark hair now a block of gleaming snowy whiteness and his face an impassive transposition of shades like a living photographic negative.

"Interesting!" said Brevis after a while.

"For Christ's sake!" Porter felt his nerves getting the better of him. "Does nothing rattle you?"

Brevis grinned, showing a large expanse of coal-black teeth. "You look like something out of a very cheap cartoon film," he observed. "What mode are we in now?"

As if to emphasize the point the *Lambda I* slipped another mode. Stars blazed and blinded then turned into pinwheels and spinning orbs. The transition stunned Porter with a wave of confusion and disorientation. The austere lines of the raft began to waver and blur like reflections from a pool of water into which a stone is tossed. But this was not a mere distortion of an image but a gross distortion of fact and fabric. The raft itself lost its comforting rigidity, and wavered and broke and rejoined and bent with a paralysing loss of cohesion and solidarity. And so did the men.

In the grip of some unknowable tide, all stable geometry and reason was lost. The evil swell ceaselessly rippled and ran, and the matter which had been the *Lambda I* and its crew rippled and ran also with horrible plasticity. Eyes and walls, limbs and lines and racks of instruments, all were awash and wavering, all shorn of the dimension of orderliness and reduced to the viscosity of blobs of thick oil trapped beneath a restless sea.

No communication between the men was possible. Brevis

was apparently trying to rise from what had been his chair. Porter's one thought was to reach the Rorsch before their dissolution was complete and while he still had sufficient cohesion of mind to direct some purposeful action. His target was wavering strands which once were the phase-coupling leads on the generator, but his limbs were more useless than soft balloons, and his urgent fingers could exert no more pressure than if they had been made of rotting seaweed. Horror clouded his mind, and there was a fear within him such as he never knew was possible. Almost senselessly he toiled away in the nightmare of all nightmares, knowing that their one hope of survival lay in his being able to unbalance the Rorsch. Terror topped terror, and the compounded dismay of his inability to perform even a simple operation threw him into a state verging on insanity.

He only vaguely comprehended that Brevis came past and got between him and the Rorsch. The rest was a blur of confusion and anguished bewilderment coupled with a host of other emotions which he had not known of his capacity to experience. Before his useless eyes some nameless ritual was enacted which his mind would not accept.

Something gave. Solidarity reformed, but not stability. In a series of rapid mode slips, images changed and altered like the flickering of some kinematographic film when each successive frame is different. And each change imparted its own increment of disorientation to a mind which was already too shocked to follow what was happening. After a while the flickering stopped, but Porter had no knowledge of this. He had slipped down into a grey pit of unconsciousness from which he only gradually emerged.

When he came to he saw that Brevis was again in the chair, holding his forehead in his hands and looking at the screens beyond which nothing was visible but a grey, stained mist. With difficulty Porter staggered to his instruments and read them with disbelieving eyes.

"Omega," he said finally. "We're in Tau Omega and somewhere near where the *Elektron* should be. What happened back there? My God, Eric, what happened to your wrist?"

Brevis turned with unreadable eyes. From the handkerchiefs hastily contrived as bandage and tourniquet red blood was still dripping. "Whatever's on your mind, Paul," he said, "don't ask me to explain it just now. At this moment it's better that you don't know."

Porter was shocked by the pallor of his face, and decided

not to press the matter for a moment. He sensed something very wrong, but his partner's earnestness warned him that there were things better left unsaid. Instead he looked at the Rorsch. Two or three of the phase-coupling leads had been torn from the side of the generator; but more terribly, Brevis' blood had been showered in the area in sickening quantity. The open knife was ample evidence of how the wound had been inflicted but whether by accident or act of madness Porter did not even want to guess. In silence he broke out the first-aid kit and bound the psychologist's arm, not daring to consider the portent of the vicious cuts in the flesh.

"How do you feel?"

"Weak," said Brevis. "But not dangerously so." He started to say something more, then gestured uselessly and turned his face aside. Almost immediately something beyond the screens caught his attention and he was charged with new interest.

"Look, there she is—the *Elektron!*"

Porter had time only to verify that the huge black bulk visible through the mist was the *Mu Elektron,* before the kaleidoscope of rapid mode slips hit them again. Cursing wildly, Porter flung himself at the controls. For minutes, or perhaps hours, they fought against the bewildering shocks of a shattering succession of quasirealities, some of which were completely new and hinted at physical concepts which even Brevis' mind was unable to assimilate. Porter, in a state of half-conscious bewilderment, manipulated the synch lock like an automaton, locking now on one mode and then on another, then deliberately throwing back into chaos as he tried to refind the elusive Omega mode.

Brevis leaned back in the chair and stared at the ceiling, his pale face a passive mask of concentration on something which might have been death, seemingly oblivious to the hurtling transitions. The open knife was suggestively close to his fingers again.

Twice more they hit Omega and passed it before Porter could lock on. Then, after what seemed an eternity of suffering, synchronization was achieved, and the mad whirl quieted again to the chilling mists of Tau Omega.

"I can't see her now," said Brevis finally. "We were pretty close before we hit that last series of slips. Have we moved or have they?"

Porter consulted the panels. "We haven't moved, at any rate. We're still in the same co-ordinate position, but you'd

not need much of a drift to lose sight of a ship in this damn fog."

"Have we sufficient control of this craft to set up some sort of search pattern?"

"Yes, but only at the risk of breaking strata and precipitating another chain of mode slips. I don't know about you, Eric, but I don't think I could take much more of that. Every time we slip a mode I seem to lose something from inside of me."

Brevis ran unsteady fingers through his hair. "I know what you mean. It's like personality disintegration in discrete quanta. Hell! If we assume the *Mu Elektron* is still out there somewhere is there no way we can make contact? What about T-radio?"

"We don't have any such. There was no T-radio when Rorsch built the *Lambda I.*"

V

A screaming blast of sound shook the fabric of the craft and made Porter put his hands over his head protectively, preparing to meet the physical and mental shocks of another series of mode slips. When nothing further happened after a few seconds he looked up again, seriously afraid.

"What the hell was that?"

"It sounded like a siren—a big siren." Brevis had reacted differently, and stood with his face against the screens waiting for a repetition of the sound. When it came he was ready for it. This time there was no escaping the strong harmonics of a big ion siren.

"It's the *Elektron* all right," said Porter. "She must have seen us earlier. That's the takeoff siren she uses before she leaves the grid."

"And it means that whoever's in command is still capable of rational action," said Brevis. "How far away would you estimate she is?"

"Impossible to tell, since we know nothing of the sound propagation properties of the Omega environment. If Taunormal effects are applicable I'd say she was within one hundred yards."

"I can't see a thing," said Brevis. "I can't even tell from which direction the sound came."

The blast came again, a hellrousing shriek, solid with multiple harmonics and sub-harmonics. Brevis spun on his heel

trying to use the sound to establish the direction of its origin, but the effort yielded no information. He returned again to the screens to scan the blank wall of fog and to scowl at something nameless which troubled his mind. The next blast had him laying on the cabin floor with his ear pressed hard against the dirty cork flooring.

Porter was appalled. "Eric, for God's sake, don't crack up on me now!"

"I wasn't cracking," Brevis said. "I think I've solved the problem. I know where the *Elektron* is. She's directly underneath us."

"That can't be," said Porter.

"I tell you she is. I don't understand the physics of Tau but in this hell-fog world between the atoms is there any reason why she shouldn't sink? Is there no gravity out there?"

"No, it doesn't necessarily work like that. There's gravity in here because of the normalizing influence of the Rorsch field. But outside is a whole new set of physical postulates which we don't have the imagination even to classify. There is no gravity component necessary in a Tau vector equation and vessels arrive at their destination within inches of a predetermined position, therefore we assume there is no gravity in Tau space."

"But you could be wrong?"

A brittle, soaring crash shook the raft, and a sudden angular spin threw them cruelly against the equipment. The spin stopped with a wrench and a shock that brought the emergency lights on momentarily.

"Sure, I could be wrong," said Porter painfully. "We've no prior experience of the Omega mode. I think we've hit the *Elektron.*

"You're damn right we have," said Brevis. "We've landed on top of her." He rose from his knees and peered through the screens. Vaguely through the mists he could discern the outline of some of the nearer features of the *Mu Elektron's* superstructure. The complex T-aerial array stuck up like a hand with gigantic slotted fingers, and part of the dome of a heavy-cargo hatch was indentifiable from the shape of the clamps and pressure seals.

"So what's the next move?" asked Brevis, looking at the door.

"We stop and think," Porter said. "We may take it as axiomatic that what we see of Tau Omega through the screens bears little relationship to what it is actually like. The charge

on the screens functions as a physical and psychological protection against Tau environments; it modifies as well as attenuates Tau influences. We don't know if what is out there is compatible with human life, nor is it possible to guess. If we open that door we shall find out—but we may not live long enough or remain sane enough to appreciate what we find. Absolutely anything could be beyond that door."

"This must be one of the most elaborate and expensive suicide pacts ever devised," said Brevis wryly.

"True. That's why I wanted to come alone. If I can't get to Julie I don't much want to go back."

"That's why I couldn't let you go alone," said Brevis quietly. "Are you going to open that door, or shall I?"

"I don't understand you," said Porter. "You don't seem to care about anything."

"In my profession," said Brevis, "I deal in what remains of human minds after they've been subjected to the by-play of human interacting with humanity so-called. Sometimes I don't much want to go back either."

"My God! I never suspected you of such bitterness."

"Not bitterness, but an appreciation of reality. I see the personal hells and battlegrounds which inhabit the individual. In comparison I don't much fear anything that lies beyond that door."

Porter found the switch and threw it without further comment. Brevis was first to the door, and as the automatic slid aside the panel to reveal the scene beyond, his face grew hard and cold but unsurprised, as if so desperate a wasteland was not too unfamiliar.

The *Mu Elektron* was a helpless metal bulk, half submerged in a cruel, inky, surging sea. Overhead, clouds of brown and violet vapour scudded across an impossible sky, lashed and driven by the same winds that tormented the sea to distraught and vicious fury. Blood-red lightning bridged the savage space between the ocean and the firmament, spitting virulent arcs of flames which struck like the crack of a whiplash. To their right lay a terrible coastline of jet black rock, jagged razor edges of ink-washed spite, lifeless, murderous.

"My God!" said Porter. "Such are the seas of Hell. Is this place real?"

"Real enough that the sea could drown you or the rocks could crush your head." Brevis turned from the door and looked out through the screen again. From this view the mist of Tau Omega held steady in absolute contrast to the terrible panorama through the door. "Two realities," he said finally.

"I wonder how much of our own world we also miss just because we don't have a Tau screen to show us the alternatives."

"You give me the creeps," said Porter. "'Right now I want to know which of these is real, the mist or the hell-storm? Which of these is the real Omega environment—because if that sea is real I've just lost what little purpose I had in life."

"Neither of them is real," said Brevis, with a tight rein on his voice. "We don't have the senses necessary to interpret the whole gamut of Tau Omega influences. The mind does its best with what it can handle and imagination fills the gaps. Here you have two apparent realities, and the difference is produced by screening off some of the stimuli. I doubt if either of them are remotely near the truth."

"Attenuation I can understand," Porter said, his voice ragged, "but these are mutually contradictory. What does it mean physically?"

"You would feel whatever you could see, or, more precisely, whatever you believed you could see. The sea will drown you or leave you dry precisely according to what you perceive it to be. On what level are the *Elektron's* passenger hatches?"

"At the bottom, that's the hell of it. Don't you see, Eric, there's no way we can get in."

"What about the top hatches?"

"We can't open those without help from the inside, and that means we have first to establish communication. Frankly I don't think we stand any chance there if those aboard are following the Tau Mockba pattern. God! This is grim! Julie . . ."

"Don't think of Julie, think of something constructive. If your mind is strong enough, think over what I have said about Tau realities—and then follow me down."

"But we can't go down far enough. The passenger hatches are beneath the surface of the . . . sea."

"Precisely," said Brevis, unmoved. He glanced momentarily at his bandaged wrist. "Are you with me, or do I go down there alone?"

"Has Tau twisted your mind?"

"No, I was never saner in my life. I'm going to take a gamble on a theory. I'll either be right or I shan't be coming back."

Porter all but closed his eyes and concentrated his attention on the cold steel of the ladder, rung by rung, grateful for the reassuring sensation of solid metal under his feet and hands. He dared not look up or away lest the terrible image of the storm should intrude upon his consciousness. Instead he watched the ladder and the plating of the hull and counted even the solitary seams and rivets, forcing himself to ignore the reflections of the blood-red streams of lightning.

Despite his resolve he could feel the swell of the thundering sea rolling and tossing the *Mu Elektron's* mighty bulk, and the nausea of sea-sickness added to his distress. He could hear Brevis' feet below him striking the rungs with a more confident rhythm, and he marvelled at the psychologist's control of mind. Of the two realities of Tau Omega Brevis had chosen to accept the fog as factual, and, by a magnificent feat of auto-hypnosis, had succeeded in banishing for himself the storm environment.

Porter had not been so successful. Of the two realities the storm held by far the greater impact. Occasionally, when he fully concentrated his attention, he, too, could dispel the storm. The fury and the sound would die away; the ladder beneath him would cease to heave and twist, and the clammy hand of the mist would cool his cheek and brow. Then he would slip into panic at the thought of the black, rolling waters towards which he was descending, and the spiteful flare of reflected radiance would blaze from the hull, and the ladder would move under his feet and the waters murderously roar.

Finally he stole a look downwards. Brevis was nearing the water-line, and looked up encouragingly. Porter stopped and watched. Brevis, now moving with complete confidence, continued to descend, deliberately ignoring the screaming sea. A wave crest thundered and broke against the hull, and Porter screamed involuntarily, not believing that a man could hold on against such turbulent violence. Then as the wave receded, Brevis re-appeared, unwetted and unharmed. And with equal confidence he continued to descend beneath the surface of the sea.

Porter followed, believing yet unbelieving. The black spray was bitter in his nostrils and his clothing was saturated. The wind buffeted him against the ladder and threatened to tear him away from the vessel's side—yet Brevis had passed this way unharmed, protected by an acceptance only of what he chose to see and believe.

"Neither of them is real." Brevis had said that, and had

demonstrated his conviction in the most dramatic way. Therefore it *had* to be true. Porter clung to this tenuous line of reason and thrust himself down into the doom-black waters. And the waters were insubstantial, a shadowy masquerade which surged and broke around him without the pressure or the cold, dreadful weight of the sea. But as the sea closed over his shoulders panic born of fear shattered his resolution, and instantly the great waves slammed him against the ladder, and he was screaming and gasping for breath as the maelstrom closed down upon him.

Another wave smashed him sideways from the ladder and he floundered helplessly and was flung, half stupified, at the steel plates of the *Mu Elektron's* hull. Then he was drawn away and hurled back again and his head was beneath the surface and water was in his mouth and nose and he was fighting for breath with all the blind, urgent panic of a man drowning.

And it was over. His feet touched something solid and Brevis had him by the shoulder.

"Paul, damn you, think! For Heaven's sake, think!"

Porter was aware that he could breathe again, and opened his eyes in agony. Suddenly there was no sea, and he stood in a world of mists on the gallery which opened to the passenger hatches at the base of the ship. Glancing up, he had the momentary impression of great waves moving above his head, and for a second his body was caught in the cold grip of the moving tide. Then Brevis struck him a sharp blow on the face.

"For Heaven's sake, Paul don't think of the sea or you'll drown."

"Sorry!" Porter concentrated on the hurt in his cheek. "I don't have your single-mindedness. The whole idea of alternative realities throws me into complete confusion. I have to believe that what is real is real and that the unreal is always illusion."

"If only you were right," said Brevis, "how simple would be philosophy. Now how do we get into the *Elektron?* Those hatches were never designed to be opened from the outside."

"First I must know what's going on inside. We may not . . . want to go in. Help me up to that port. I have to know if hell is riding on this ship."

Brevis helped him up. For once it was Porter's face which remained impassive, as he gazed into the interior of the *Mu*

Elektro-. Finally he descended. His voice alone betrayed the full extent of his misery.

"They're either asleep or dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes. I tell you, Eric, I'm scared silly. Perhaps it's all for the best for . . . them, but what in hell can have happened apart from the fact that they're in the wrong mode?"

"Let me have a look," said Brevis. He climbed to the port on Porter's back and peered in, a frown of puzzlement on his brow.

"Whatever it was it came over them slowly and without panic," he said. "For that at least we must be thankful. They have lain down as though they grew suddenly tired. We're too far away to see if any of them still live. Fiends in Hell! When you get trouble in Tau you certainly make a thorough job of it!"

Porter examined the hatch dejectedly. He knew without trying, that even if they were able to unlock the clamps they still did not have the strength to move the hatch itself, and there was no way of reaching the servos.

"Let's get out of here," he said. The continuous strain was beginning to sap his strength and he could feel the clammy hand of the unreal sea beginning to snatch at his body. Faced with the final reality he knew now that he had no capacity for suicide. Julie or no Julie, somewhere ahead was a grey future, with work in which to lose himself trying to unravel the mysteries of Tau.

Brevis started towards the ladder, then turned suddenly. "I have an idea," he said. "Didn't you tell me that a mode tends to lose stability when the density and pressure of the Tau-normal strata changes?"

"Briefly, yes."

"Wouldn't that also tend to apply to changes in composition of Tau-space strata in modes intermediate between Omega and Tau-normal?"

"That depends which set of mathematics you're using. The general assumption is that matter and phenomena in different modes don't interact—that's what makes Tau possible. There is a Special Theory, however, which considers that the total mass of objects coincident at one point but in different modes must necessarily have an effect on the sub-atomic displacement of the Tau-normal atom. Alter conditions in one mode by inserting or withdrawing mass, and you affect the basic atom and to some extent modify the synch point at that co-ordinate in every other mode. It's an assumption that

hasn't yet been proven or disproven. Hell! You do choose the damdest times to ask for lectures on Tau theory."

"It wasn't idle curiosity," said Brevis. "Suppose we went back to the raft, slipped into another node, and then returned to the same co-ordinate point as the *Elektron?* Couldn't the effect of our mass possibly be of sufficient magnitude to cause the *Elektron* to kick out of Omega?"

"Ye gods and little fishes! Talk about 'out of the mouths of babes and sucklings!' Do you know that might even work." He gestured uselessly as a new thought struck him. "But it's such a damn risk and it's too late now to be of any use."

"No," said Brevis. "It's not too late. Don't you realize we've forgotten something? There's somebody still alive on board the *Elektron*—somebody still capable of rational action."

"Of course! The siren... somebody sounded the siren. We've got to give this a try. There may yet be a chance to save them from whatever it was got the others. Something's incredibly wrong aboard the *Elektron,* and we have to find out what it is."

VI

Returning back up the ladder on the *Mu Elektron's* side was easier than had been the descent. Porter was now able to retain the mist in clear focus, and so urgent was his anxiety to try out the new idea that he forgot even to think about the black, shadowy sea. Once over the guard rail he stopped and waited for Brevis to catch up. As Brevis' head came over the edge of the superstructure he saw the psychologist's face cloud in sudden puzzlement.

"Don't turn round," said Brevis. "Just answer my question. Paul, how many *Lambda* craft did they make?"

"Only one. What the devil's the matter?" Sudden alarm made Porter's voice run high, but he quashed the impulse to turn.

"The raft," said Brevis. "There's somebody in the *Lamba 1.*"

"God! That can't be!" He turned to follow the direction of Brevis' anguished gaze, and his face drained white with horror. There were two figures in the craft, at that moment turned away to face the control panel. Then the figures turned and looked directly at them, faces mirroring mounting disbelief and terror. Porter was almost sick with apprehension as he recognised the raft's occupants: they were none other than Brevis

and himself, absolute duplicates, laterally inverted mirror images, yet ones which moved with an independent life of their own.

Porter choked back a mounting tide of dread and despair. He knew at that moment just how foolhardy had been man's penetration into a region of physics he had so little chance to understand.

"Eric, this is unholy!"

Then, as if it were a wraith or mirage, the raft flickered and vanished leaving nothing but a swirl in the mists of Tau Omega. Something in Porter snapped, and he rushed into the vacant spot crying in a voice of wild despair, as though he hoped some pity or compassion in the elements might bring back their vanished link with the normal world.

He staggered as Brevis struck him.

"Paul, for Heaven's sake, listen to me! That was the wrong raft. It *has* to be the wrong one. Don't you see, that was the other half of the mirage when we saw ourselves outside as we hit the Epsilon mode. There has to be another raft here somewhere."

"I'm going crazy," said Porter, fighting the panic in his voice. "I tell you there was only one raft ever built, and that's just taken off with us in it. We're trapped in a bloody paradox."

"Let's consider this rationally," said Brevis. "The raft we just encountered was not ours but simply ours as it was at some previous point in time. Damned if I can see how these mode transpositions contain visual images as well as a time paradox, but we must accept the evidence as we find it. That doesn't alter the fact that the raft corresponding to here and now ought still to be in existence. Damn all Tau-space technicians for meddling with something they know so little about. I'm going to have a look around."

"Don't leave me," Porter said. "If we split up, anything could happen, and I do mean anything. I should hate to come face to face with myself wandering around in this blasted fog. I think I'd crack."

Brevis caught at his arm. "What's that over there? Isn't that another raft?"

They strained their eyes in the billowing mist. Perhaps it was imagination or perhaps the vapour was stained yellow by a cluster of lights like those of the *Lambda I*. They started towards it cautiously, their nerves still raw from the shock of their previous experience. It was a raft, and it was

empty. As far as they could determine this was the one in which they had arrived. The decision deepened to a certainty when they entered the raft and came under the normalizing effect of the Rorsch field. Porter keyed the instruments thankfully.

"I'm setting new co-ordinates for the position of the *Elektron,*" he said. "The next time we slip out of Omega into some alternative mode-stable condition, I'm going to move this craft to become co-existant with the *Elektron.* You'd better start praying, because if we slip into Omega whilst still in the same position as the *Elektron,* or if she slips into our mode before we can get clear, there'll be an explosion which will probably split the strata of Tau-space right down the middle."

"I'm ready," said Brevis. "After what I've been through so far I doubt if Tau has anything left that could really surprise me now."

Porter completed setting-up the instruments, then thumbed the final drive and gave the Rorsch a reassuring pat. "All set! This is a kill or cure method of beating Omega, and I'm not speaking figuratively. No wonder it needed a crazy, twisted, head-shrinker to dream up an approach like this. What is it about your profession that makes the death-wish contagious?"

"It's a way of looking at reality," said Brevis quietly.

Instantly they jumped a mode, and the candy-sweet pinkness of the Gamma region swam into existence. Porter held them there long enough to verify that they were synchronized as much as the unbalanced Rorsch would allow, then he applied the drive to force them into the co-ordinate position occupied by the *Mu Elektron.* As the plotting needles swung together he crossed his fingers, and his mouth moved in a prayer said too softly to be audible. Brevis, too, watched the swing of the needles, but he remained impassive except that his knuckles showed white from the pressure with which he gripped the table's edge.

The needles hit calibration point simultaneously and continued a little beyond. Porter, white faced now, began to sweat. For a moment the frustration of failure was written on his face, then hell closed around them.

The racking pain of a torrential series of mode slips stripped the senses from them, yet the alternating stimuli denied them the refuge of complete insensibility. Caught in a twilight world somewhere between death and the edge of life, they hung at the very fringes of endurance in a state of mental and physical chaos. Then after a while the flickering

pages of the book of alternate realities grew dark and drew them headlong into a vast, tenebrous blankness somehow as supporting and comforting as the womb.

Time lost its meaning then. There was no motion, no light and no sensation of any kind for a period completely without definition. It was with something of a shock that Porter realized later that not only was he still living but that he must have been partially awake for some time without knowing it, so complete had been his isolation from extraneous stimuli.

Slowly, sensations came back. There was a peculiar numbness in his limbs which, as it dissolved, accounted for the fact that only now could he feel his body hard on an inclined plane. There was no light whatsoever, and something heavy was across his legs, trapping them but without any actual hurt. Porter accepted these facts with a calm philosophy. After the initial shock of wakening, his mind refused to react in panic to the unknown environment. He felt curiosity and amazement but no fear.

Tactile sense was returning to his fingers, and he stretched out an exploratory hand. It crawled over the dark, slightly ductile plane and came to rest against a socket and part of an angled frame which memory told him was part of the foot of an equipment rack on the *Lambda I.*

Cohesion flashed into the picture which was forming in his mind. He was on the floor of the *Lambda I,* with the raft tilted at a crazy angle and not one instrument functioning. Even the Rorsch was dead.

Dead . . . dark . . . the Rorsch is dead! Alarm bells sounded in his brain yet he refused to respond with fear. His mind collected such a host of imponderables that he dared deal with them only superficially, seeking to place them first in an overall pattern. *Given time a Rorsch must stop . . . so the vessel automatically, and by definition, falls back into a normal atomic condition . . . shouldn't remove more than half a continent!*

But the Rorsch has stopped! Is this some hiatus in time; some subjective instant between cause and catastrophe? Are these atoms even now preparing to ride the tide of atomic conflagration high into the unsuspecting atmosphere? A moment's thought convinced him that this was not so. He put his hand inside his shirt and felt his heartbeat. *Heartbeats take time, objective not subjective time, but the collapse of a Tau-spin field is instantaneous.*

Immediately, the problem changed perspective. That the Rorsch had stopped and not yet terminated his existence presupposed one staggering condition—that he and the craft were not in Tau space at all. Yet—where in the normal universe could the *Lambda I* be suspended at so perilous an angle and in darkness so absolute? In a way the proposition was more unnerving than his previous assumption that they were still locked in some obscure Tau mode. This line of reasoning brought him to think of Brevis—and the dead weight on his legs. Experimentally he drew his feet up a little, and the reaction produced a grunt from the shifting body.

"Eric, are you all right? For Heaven's sake answer!"

There was a scuffling in the darkness, and the weight removed itself slowly.

"Where the devil are we?" asked Brevis' voice.

"We're still in the *Lambda,*" said Porter. "But we aren't in Tau any more—at least, the Rorsch isn't working, which is proof enough."

"Is it dark, or am I blind?"

"It's dark, darker than hell."

There were sounds that Brevis attempted to stand, but the angle of the floor was against the success of any such manoeuvre. The fall of his body was accompanied by a string of academic curses.

"All right," said Brevis at last, "let's deal with this coolly and logically. We were in Tau just before we hit the co-ordinates for the *Elektron.* That's about the last rational thing I can remember."

"Agreed," said Porter. "But we can't be in Tau now, nor yet can I think that we got back to the Terminal and they got us out and dropped us down the nearest coal-hole. It doesn't make sense. We can neither still be in Tau nor yet can we have got out of it."

"Is there no way a craft could come out of Tau without using a terminal point?"

"Not unless there happened to be a particularly good vacuum available in the right place at the right time."

"Then we don't have enough facts yet," said Brevis. "Let's try another angle. When I woke up my limbs were almost without feeling. This is significant of something. Also I fancy I smell a curious sweetness in the air. I think if you're careful you may almost taste it in your saliva."

"Yes, I can, now that you come to mention it."

"Good, because that's a telltale characteristic of a certain

class of organic compounds. It's one of a series of newly developed vapour-phrase anaesthetics and analgesics. It's a product of some pretty advanced metal-organosynthesis, and I'm quite certain that it never occurs free on nature."

"Where does that get us?"

"If used in sufficient concentration it puts people to sleep."

"So?"

"If you had about ten grams and the means to distribute it you could put a thousand people to sleep, Paul. I think we're on the *Mu Elektron.*"

"Oh Lord!" said Porter. "It fits beautifully—so beautifully it just has to be true! We moved to the *Elektron's* coordinate position and knocked her clean out of the Omega mode. The reaction must have kicked us through a series of mode slips but we finished up in the same mode as the *Elektron* . . . inside the *Elektron.* When our Rorsch gave up the ghost it didn't matter . . . don't you see . . . we were already inside the *Elektron's* field."

"I thought you said that if we were to occupy the same coordinate position and mode as the *Elektron* there'd be an explosion."

"Ordinarily, yes. But if by chance we located on an empty space in the *Elektron* there'd only be air molecules to contend with. I can't figure a way round that but it must have something to do with our rapid mode transitions pumping the air from the space before we fell into synchronization. I'd give you pretty good odds that we're now in the cargo hold halfway up a mountain of psilomelane."

"There are times, Paul, when you show unsuspected flashes of imagination."

"I'm only a technician. You're the brains expert. What gave you the idea?"

"When we were down at the base of the ship I figured somebody aboard the *Elektron* had had a stroke of genius. At the prospect of a Tau Mockba climax to the trip he'd released some gas or poison into the ventillation system in order to save the final blind orgy and bloodbath. I couldn't think what he'd have available for such a job, but if he had access to the medical stores . . . he must have anaesthetised the whole damn lot!"

"It all fits," said Porter. "Let's try and get out of here. If the air has cleared here in the hold it should also have cleared elsewhere in the ship."

"You realise what we might be getting into?" said Brevis. "This is a pretty serious situation. You can't pump an unspecified concentration of a powerful soporific like that around

a ship without damaging some if not all of the people who inhale it. Don't forget it was probably intended as an act of humane murder rather than a conscious attempt at salvation."

"I know," said Porter, "but there'll be plenty of spare oxygen in the tanks and if anyone can be saved only our hands can do it."

* * *

"How're things going upstairs?" asked Brevis.

"Encouraging," said Porter. "Most of the staterooms weren't too deeply affected, and recovery there is almost total. The ship's doctor will be down here as soon as he's checked the rest of the crew members."

"I'd guess he was the one who adminstered the anaesthetic?"

"He was, and he still can't figure out why he's still here instead of sweating it out in the nether regions. I must be very careful how I write up his actions when I make my report. What's the score down here?"

"Fair," said Brevis. "No fatalities so far, but I'd hate to think of the consequences if we hadn't arrived when we did. At a rough guess I'd say not more than about seventeen will need hospital treatment when we get back to the terminal."

"Then Julie . . .?"

". . . is all right. They're both all right."

"Both?"

"Lord! Do you mean to say nobody told you yet? You have a child, Paul. A fine boy. Here, come, let me show you."

"One minute." Porter caught at his sleeve. "I'd sooner see them alone if you don't mind. What you said about fear of Tau coming between Julie and me—well, it's true in many ways. I can't blame her for leaving, but it does make reunion rather . . . delicate."

"Sure, I understand." Brevis smiled briefly. "You'll find them in the private suite at the end of the corridor. I don't have to wish you good luck."

"Thanks," said Porter. "But will you answer me one thing before I go—something which has been troubling me since it happened. Eric, what the hell happened to your wrist back there in Tau when you came over to the Rorsch?"

Brevis looked away rapidly, and when he looked back the steel in his eyes was overlaid with a thin film of misery.

"There's no harm in your knowing now. You remember you had a hunch that serious mode-slip phenomena was in

some way connected with something carried on the ship itself. Well, it's true."

"I don't see the connection."

"The connection is in my point about Tau-psychic interaction. That's the key to the whole matter. It's a true two-way interaction, which I don't pretend to understand but which can and does happen. I made it happen. I forced the *Lambda I* out of that dissolving hell and into the Omega mode by an act of desperation."

"For God's sake come to the point."

"Paul, I tried to commit suicide out there in Tau. I deliberately slashed my arm so badly that I knew for certain that unless we came out of that hellish mode of dissolution I would have no chance to repair the wound. Either that ship had to jump to another mode or I had to die. I had reasoned that that alone was the gateway into the Omega mode."

"This is madness!"

"Not madness, Paul, but a demonstrable fact. The key to the Omega mode slip is an extremely desperate state of mind on the part of someone present on the vessel. Call it fear of death or what you will, but it's a phenomenon inextricably bound up with the will to live. Not all the mind responds to Tau-spin, and the part that doesn't apparently upsets the balance of the field when the sense of desperation is extreme. Here's the fact behind the legend that a vessel touching Omega will have a corpse aboard. The man who dies, Paul, is the cause not the effect of the vessel touching Omega."

"There are many fantastic things in Tau," said Porter dubiously, "but I'm not convinced that this is one of them. One thing alone explodes your theory—there were no dying men aboard the *Mu Elektron* when she went into Omega."

"Think," said Brevis. "Didn't I say the effect was inextricably bound up with the will to live? Do you know at what period in a whole lifetime that will is predominant? It's when one is being born, Paul. In the period of emergence from the womb that will is never stronger. You'll find your wife and child down there at the end of the corridor."

BASIS FOR NEGOTIATION

Brian W. Aldiss

THE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE of East Lincoln is a muddle of buildings. In the centre stands the theatrically baroque pile still called Gransby Manor, while round it lie the pencil boxes of glass and cedar and cement that are our century's contribution to the treasury of world architecture. John Haines-Roberts and I walked round the grounds in agonised discussion, viewing our conglomeration of a college from all its meaningless angles.

When I tell you the date was July 1st, 1971, you will know what was the subject under discussion.

"I tell you I cannot just stay here, John, idle, isolated, ignorant," I said. "I must go to London and find out what the devil the government is doing."

Most of the conversations that follow, I feel confident, are word for word what was said at the time. My memory is generally eidetic; in times of stress such as this, it records everything, so that I see John Haines-Roberts now, his head thrust forward from those heavy shoulders, as he replied, "I will offer you no platitudes about considering your reputation at such a grave time. Nevertheless, Simon, you are a public figure, and were before your knighthood. You have a foot in both worlds, the academic and the world of affairs. Your work on the Humanities Council and the Pilgrim Trust has not been forgotten. You stood as M.P. for Bedford. That has not been forgotten. At such a trying time, any untoward move by somebody of your stature may fatally prejudice the course of events, marring—"

"No, no, John, that's not it at all!" I stopped him with a curt movement of my hand. He talked that awful dead language of English newspaper leaders; with his evasions and euphemisms, his 'untoward moves' and 'trying times'. I could not bear to listen to him. He believed as I did on that one fundamental point, that the British Government has made the most fatal error any government could have done; but this apart we could have something in common. His woolly language only reflected the numbness of his intellect. At that

terrible moment, one more prop fell away. I began to hate John. The man who had been my friend since I took the specially created chair of Moral History two years before suddenly became just another enemy of my country, and of me.

"We cannot discuss the problem in these terms," I told him. He stopped, peering forward in that intense way of his. In the distance, I saw some undergraduates bunched together in the tepid sunshine and watching us with interest. "The British have turned basely against their dearest friends and allies. Either this wounds you to the heart or it doesn't—"

"But the Americans can manage alone perfectly well—" he began, with all the patience and reason in the world in his voice. John Haines-Roberts was a saint; nothing in the world could ruffle him in debate. I knew he would be standing reasoning in some quiet corner of University College when the H-bombs fell.

"I'm sorry, John, I'm not prepared to go into it all again. The sands have run out—right out of the bottom of the glass. This is no time for talk. You don't think the Communists are standing talking, do you? I'm going to London."

He saw I was making to go and laid a placatory hand on my sleeve.

"My dear fellow, you know I wish you well, but you have a reputation for being over-hasty. Never, never let action become a substitute for thought. You'll recall what that great and good man Wilberforce said when—"

"Damn Wilberforce!" I said. Turning away, I strode off. The undergraduates saw me coming and fanned out to intercept me on my way to Manor, pouring out questions.

"Is it true the Americans have cordonned off Holy Loch? Sir Simon, what do you think of the news about the International Brigade? Did you see C. P. Snow on TV, blasting poor old Minnie?" 'Minnie' was their nick-name for Sir Alfred Menhennick, the Prime Minister.

Behind my back, John was still calling "Simon, my dear fellow. . . ." To my audience, I said, "Gentlemen, from this week onwards, only shame attaches to the name of England. You know how I feel on this subject. Please let me pass."

Their faces were before me, troubled, angry, or smiling. They began bombarding me with preposterous questions— "Who do you think will win, America or China?", as if it were a boat race staged for their delight.

"Let me through!" I repeated.

"Why don't you join up, if you feel so strongly?" "We

don't owe the Americans anything." "We'll still be here when they're one big hole in the ground." And so on.

I said: "You had the police in here last night. Rowdyism will get you nowhere. Why don't you go somewhere quietly and consult your history books if you have no consciences to consult?" I hated them, though I knew they half-sided with me.

"Consult our history books!" one of them exclaimed. "He'll tell us to cultivate our gardens next!"

Angrily I pushed through them, making my way towards my rooms. That last remark echoed through my head; obviously many of them could not differentiate between my convictions and those of, say, Haines-Roberts'. In the final judgment, he and I would be lumped together as men who had sat by and let it happen—or, even worse, would be cheered as men who had not interfered.

With distaste I surveyed the comfortable room with Adam fireplace and panelling that I had chosen in preference to an office in Whitehall, asking myself as I took in—through what a scornfully fresh vision!—the untidy book cases and neat cocktail cabinet, if there was still time left to do something effective. How terribly often in the past must Englishmen have asked themselves that!

Momentarily I surveyed myself in the looking glass. Grey-haired, long in the nose, clear of eye, neat in appearance. Not a don, more a retired soldier. Certainly—oh yes, my God, that certainly—a gentleman! A product of Harrow and Balliol and a Wiltshire estate. With the international situation what it was, it sounded more like a heresy than a heritage. Nothing is more vile (or most eloquent of guilt) than to hate everything one has been: to see that you have contaminated the things that have contaminated you.

Taking a deep breath, I began to phone my wife at home. When her voice came over the line, I closed my eyes.

"Jean, I can't bear inaction any longer. I'm going up to London to try and get through to Tertis."

"Darling, we went over all this last night. You can't help by going to see Tertis—no, don't tell me you can't help by not going either. But it becomes more and more obvious each hour that public opinion here is with Minnie, and that your viewpoint. . . ."

By ceasing to listen to her meaning, I could concentrate on her voice. Her "all" was pronounced "arl", her "either" was an "eether"; her tone had a soft firmness totally unlike the harshness of so many Englishwomen!—no, comparisons were worthless. It was stupid to think in categories. She was Lady

Jean Challington, my beloved wife. When I had first met her in New York, one fine September day in 1942, she had been Jean Gersheim, daughter of a magazine publisher. At twenty-six, I was then playing my first useful role in affairs on the British Merchant Shipping Mission. Jean was the most anglophile, as well as the most lovely, of creatures; I was the most americanophile and adoring of men. That hasty wartime wedding at least was a success; no better Anglo-American agreement ever existed than our marriage.

This was the woman on whose breast I had wept the night before last, wept long and hard after the bleak TV announcement that in the interests of future world unity the British Government had declared its neutrality in the American-Chinese war. Last night I had wept again, when the U.S.S.R. had come in on the side of the People's Republic and Sir Alfred Menhennick himself had smiled to viewers under his straggling moustache and reaffirmed our neutrality.

Now, with the phone in my hand and Jean's voice in my ear, I could not but recall Menhennick's hatefully assured delivery as he said, "Let us in this darkest period of civilized history be the nation that stands firm and keeps its lamps alight. It is a difficult—perhaps you will agree that it is the most difficult—rôle that I and my government have elected to play. But we must never forget throughout the quarter century of the Cold War, Great Britain's path has been the exacting and unrewarding one of intermediary.

"We must remember, too, that the United States, in facing Communist China, faces an enemy of its own creating. One of the most fatal failures of this century was the failure of the U.S. to participate in world affairs during the twenties and thirties, when Britain and France strove almost singlehandedly to preserve the peace. Despite constant warnings, the U.S. at that time allowed their enemy Japan to grow strong on the spoils of an invaded China. As a consequence, the broken Chinese peoples had to restore their position as a world power by what means they could. It is not for us to condemn if in desperation they turned to Communism. That their experiment, their desperate experiment, worked must be its justification. At this fateful hour, it behooves us to think with every sympathy of the Chinese, embroiled yet again in another terrible conflict. . . ."

The hypocrisy! The sheer bloody wicked hypocrisy, the lies, the distortions, the twists of logic, the contortions of history! By God, I could shoot Menhennick!

"Darling, I hadn't mentioned Menhennick," Jean protested.

"Did I say that aloud?" I asked the phone.

"You weren't listening to a word I said."

"I'll bet you were telling me to pack a clean shirt!"

"Nothing of the sort. I was saying that here in Lincoln there are some demonstrations in progress."

"Tell me about them."

"If you'll listen, honey. The best-organized procession carries a large banner saying 'Boot the Traitors out of Whitehall'."

"Good for them."

"My, yes, good for them! The odd thing is, those boys look like exactly the same crowd we used to see marching from Aldermaston to Trafalgar Square shouting 'Ban the Bomb'."

"Probably they are. If you think with your emotions, slight glandular changes are sufficient to revise your entire outlook. In the Aldermaston days, they were afraid of being involved in war; now that Russia has come in on China's side, they're afraid that the U.S. will be defeated, leaving us to be picked off by Big Brother afterwards. Which is precisely what will happen unless we do something positive now. What else goes on in Lincoln?"

Jean's voice became more cautious. "Some anti-Americanism. The usual rabble with ill-printed posters saying 'Yanks Go Home' and 'Britain For the British'. One of them spells Britain 'B-R-I-T-I-A-N'. So much for the ten thousand million pounds spent on education last year.... It feels funny, Simon—to be an alien in what I thought was my own country."

"It's not my country either till this is all put right. You know that Jean. There's never been such a time of moral humiliation. I wish I'd been born anything but British."

"Don't be silly, Simon."

Foreseeing an argument, I changed the line of discussion.

"You've got Michael and Sheila and Adrian there with you?"

"Oh yes, and Mrs. B. And a platoon or so of sheepish English soldiers drilling opposite the Post Office."

"Fine. You won't be lonely. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Meaning just when?"

"Soonest possible, love. 'Bye. Be good."

I put the phone down. I looked distractedly round the room. I put pipe and tobacco into one jacket pocket, opened a drawer, selected three clean handkerchiefs, and put them into the other pocket. I wondered if I would ever see the room—or Jean—again, and strove at the same time not to dismiss such speculations as simply dramatic.

London, I knew, could turn into a real trouble centre at

any hour. Early news bulletins had spoken of rioting and arrests here and there, but these were mere five finger exercises for what was to come.

Until now, the sheer momentousness of world events had deadened reactions. After a month of mounting tension, war between the U.S. and China broke out. Then came Menhennick's unexpected tearing up of treaties and declaration of neutrality. Initially, his action came as a relief as well as a surprise; the great bulk of the electorate saw no further than the fact that an Armageddon of nuclear war had been avoided. The U.S.S.R.'s entry into hostilities was more a shock than a surprise, again postponing real thinking.

Now—as I foresaw the situation—a growing mass of people would come to see that if they were to have any hope for a tolerable future, it would be fulfilled only by throwing in our lot heart and soul with our allies, the Americans. We had behaved like vermin, deserting in an hour of need. Even Neville Chamberlain returning from Munich in 1938 to proclaim "Peace in our time" had not brought the country into such disgrace as Minnie with his "nation that keeps the lamps alight".

Soon the English would realise that; and I wanted to be there when trouble broke.

As I was heading for the door, David Woolf entered, quickly and without knocking. David was University Lecturer in Nuclear Physics, with a good but troubled record from Harwell. Three years back, he had run for Parliament, but an ill-timed tariff campaign had spoilt his chances. Though his politics were opposed to mine, his astute and often pungent thinking was undeniably attractive. Tall and very thin, with a crop of unbrushed hair, he was still in his thirties and looked what he undoubtedly was: the sort of man who managed always to be unhappy and spread unhappiness. Despite this—despite our radically different upbringings—his father had been a sagger-magger's bottomer in a Staffordshire pottery—David and I saw much of each other.

"What is it?" I asked. "I can't stop, David."

"You're in trouble," he said, clicking his fingers.

I had not seen him since the Chinese declaration of war forty-eight hours before. His face was drawn, his shirt dirty. If he had slept, clearly it had been in his clothes.

"What sort of trouble?" I asked. "Aren't we all in trouble?"

"The Dean has you marked down as a dangerous man, and at times like this the Dean's kind can cause a hell of a lot of grief."

"I know that."

Dean Burroughs was a cousin of Peter Dawkinson, the reactionary old editor of the "Arbiter", the newspaper as firmly entrenched behind out-dated attitudes as "The Times" had ever been at its worst period—and as powerful. Burroughs and I had been in opposition even before my first day at East Lincoln, back when I edited Garbitt's short-lived independent "Zonal".

"What you don't know is that the Dean has started vetting your phone calls," David said. "I was by the exchange just now. You made an outgoing call; Mrs. Ferguson had it plugged through to old Putters, the Dean's fair-haired boy."

"It was a private call to my wife," I said furiously.

"Are you leaving or something? Don't mind my asking."

"Yes, I'm leaving, though by God what you tell me makes me want to go and sort things out with Burroughs first. No, that luxury must wait; time's short. I must leave at once."

"Then I warn you, Simon, that they may try to stop you."

"Thanks for telling me."

He hesitated, knowing I wanted him to move away from the door. For a moment we stood confronting each other. Then he spoke.

"Simon—I want to come with you."

That did surprise me. The news about the phone did not; in the present tense atmosphere, it merely seemed in character, a small sample of a vast untrustworthiness. I accepted David's words as truth; David, though isolated from the rest of the teaching body by his political and sexual beliefs, had a way of knowing whatever was happening in the college before anyone else.

"Look, David, you don't know what I am doing."

"Let me guess then. You are going to drive to London. You have influential friends there. You are going to get in contact with someone like Lord Boulton or Tertis, and you are going to throw in your lot with the group trying to overthrow the government."

This was so good a guess that he read his answer in my face. I said, with some bitterness, "Your politics are no secret to me. For years you have preached that we should disarm, that we should cease to behave like a first-rate power, with all the assumptions of a first-rate power, when we are really a second-rate power—"

He seized my arm, only to release it at once. Behind his spectacles, his eyes brimmed with anger.

"Don't be a bloody fool, Simon! We *are* a second-rate power, but now the moment of truth is upon us, isn't it? The bastards who misgovern us would not climb off their

silly perches when they had a chance, when we were warning them. Now, *now*, they just *must* honour agreements. You know I've no time for America, but by God we owe it to them to stick by them: we owe it to ourselves! We mustn't behave like a fifth-rate power: that at least we're not."

"So we've both arrived on the same side?"

From his pocket he produced a revolver.

"You could have worse allies than me, Simon. I don't go to Bisley every year for nothing. I'm prepared to use this when needed."

"Put it away!"

Savagely he laughed.

"You're a gentleman, Simon! That's your trouble. It's the only really vital difference between us. You don't enjoy force! You're as like Minnie as makes no difference! In the ultimate analysis, his faults are yours—and it's a class fault."

I grabbed his jacket, clenching a fist in his face and choking with rage.

"You dare say that! Even you've not opposed Minnie as bitterly as I. I hate all he stands for, hate it."

"No you don't. You both belong to the same league of gentlemen—Balliol and all that. If it wasn't that your wife happened to be American, you'd feel as Minnie does. It's you blasted gentlemen putting the social order before the country that have got us into this bloody disgraceful muddle. . . ." With an effort, he broke off and pushed my hand roughly away, saying, "And I'm in danger of doing the same thing myself. Sir Simon, my apologies. Our country has disgraced us before the world. Please let me come to London with you. I'm prepared to do anything to boot out the Nationalist party. That's what I came here to say."

He put out his hand; I shook it.

We were round at the car port getting my Wolseley out when Spinks, the head porter, came thudding up at the double.

"Excuse me, Sir Simon, but the Dean wants you very urgently, sir. Matter of importance, sir."

"All right, Spinks. I'll just drive the car round to the front of Manor and go in that way. He's in his rooms, I take it?"

His round heavy face was troubled.

"You will go straight in to him *now*, sir, won't you? He did stress as it was urgent."

"Quite so, Spinks. Thank you for delivering the message."

I drove round to the front of Manor, accelerated, and in

next to no time we were speeding down the drive. David Woolf sat beside me, peering anxiously back at the huddle of buildings.

"Relax," I said, knowing it would anger him. "Nobody's going to shoot us."

"The war's forty-eight hours old—I wonder how many people have been shot already?"

Not answering, I switched on the car radio as we struck the main road. I tried the three channels, General, Popular, and Motorway. On the first, a theatre organ played "Roses of Picardy." On the second, a plummy woman's voice said, ".... when to my bitter disappointment I found that all the jars of strawberry jam had gone mouldy; however, this tragedy—" On the third, a disc jockey announced, "That was 'My Blue Heaven', and while we're on the subject of colour, here is Reggy Palmer and his Regiment in a colourful arrangement of another old favourite, 'Chinatown'."

"I wonder they didn't censor that one out for reasons of political expediency," David said sourly.

We stayed with the jocular jockey, hoping to catch a news bulletin, as I drove south. Avoiding Lincoln, we entered the newly opened M 13 at Hykeham and increased speed. Noticing the number of Army vehicles heading south with us, David started to comment when the news came through.

"This morning has been punctuated by disturbances and demonstrations in most of the larger towns throughout Britain. Some arrests have been made. In Norwich, a man was fined twenty pounds for defacing the Town Hall. The Sovereign's visit to Glasgow has been postponed until a later late."

"Royalty!" David grunted.

"Tautology!" I grunted.

"The Soviet Ambassador to Britain said today that the Soviet peoples greatly sympathised with the wisdom shown by the British in remaining neutral. They themselves had been drawn into the conflict with the deepest reluctance, and then only because vital interests were at stake. M. Kasinferov went on to say that he was sure that guided by our example the rest of Europe would remain neutral, thus saving itself from what could only be complete annihilation."

"Bloody flatterers," David growled.

"Concealed threats," I growled.

"In the United States of America, our neutrality has been generally condemned, although as one Washington correspondent points out, 'Had Britain not torn up her treaties with us, she might well have been obliterated by now.' Discus-

sions over the immediate evacuation of U.S. air, naval, and military bases in this country are taking place in Whitehall now. A government spokesman said they were proceeding in what he described as 'a fairly cordial atmosphere'."

"How English can you get?" David asked.

"They're probably tearing each other's throats out," I said, instinctively pressing my foot down on the accelerator. I looked at my watch; an idea had occurred to me. From the dashboard, the gentlemanly voice continued in the same tones it had used in happier years to describe the Chelsea Flower Show.

"Last night saw little aerial activity, though reliable U.S. sources report aerial reconnaisance from points as far apart as the Arctic Circle and Hawaii. Formosa is still under heavy bombardment from shore batteries. Units of the British Fleet stand ready to assume defensive action in Singapore harbour. The fighting between Chinese Airborne forces and units of the Indonesian army in Northern Central Sumatra and near Jakarta in Java still continues. Peking yesterday reported the evacuation of Medan in Sumatra, but Indonesian sources later denied this, whilst admitting that the city was "almost uninhabitable" by now. The landing of U.S. troops near Palembang continues. So far only conventional weapons are being used on all fronts."

"So far . . . so far," David said. "They're only limbering up yet."

That was where all the trouble had begun, in Sumatra, little more than a month ago. Peking had protested that the large population of overseas Chinese there were being victimised. Jakarta had denied it. A bunch of bandits shot a prominent Indonesian citizen in the Kesawan, Medan. President Molkaeto protested. Tempers flared. Fighting broke out. The U.N. were called in. The U.S.S.R. protested against this unwarranted interference in national affairs. A plane full of U.S. experts was shot down near Bali, possibly by accident. The slanging started. Three weeks later, the People's Republic declared 'a crusade of succour': war.

"David, we're going to London via Oxford," I said.

He looked curiously at me.

"What the hell for? It's a long way round. I thought you were in a hurry?"

"The motorway will take us as far as Bicester. The delay won't be too great. As you know, I'm a Fellow of Saints; I want to call in there and have a word with Norman, if possible."

His reaction was predictable. Among the less informed

on his side of the political arena, Saints had an undeserved reputation for being a sort of shadow Establishment from which the country was governed. This legend had been fostered by the fact that Saints, as a compromise between Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies and Oxford's own All Souls, naturally contained the influential among its members.

"Who is Norman?" David enquired. "Do you mean Norman Parmettio, the Contemporary Warfare chap?"

"If you like to put it like that, yes, 'the Contemporary Welfare chap'. He's in his eighties now, but still active, a sage and loveable man. He drafted the Cultural Agreement of '66 with Russia, you know. He's seen academic and public service, including working as an aide to old Sir Winston at Yalta in the forties."

"Too old! What do you want to see *him* for?"

"He's an absolutely trustworthy man, David. You forget how out of touch I am. We can't just drive into London knowing absolutely nothing of what is going on behind the scenes. Norman will put us in the picture as to what's happening in the Foreign Office and to who's changed sides in the last forty-eight hours."

"Touché. Carry on. You know I only came for the ride—but for God's sake let something happen. My stomach's turning over all the time; I have a presentiment of evil. I'm sick!"

"So's the whole confounded country."

We felt sicker before we reached Bicester. Another news bulletin gave us more details of local events. International news, as I had suspected, was being heavily censored; there was no mention of what was happening in Europe, or of what the Commonwealth was saying or doing.

Several members of the government had resigned—the predictable ones like Hand, Chapman, and Desmond Cooney, with a few unexpecteds such as poor old Vinton and Sep Greene. Martial law had been proclaimed in Liverpool and Glasgow. In the interests of public safety, a curfew would operate tonight and until further notice in the following cities: London, etc. . . . Airline services between Britain and the U.S and Britain and the U.S.S.R. were temporarily suspended. The L.C.C. were all out at Lords for 114.

At Fogmere Park, we ran into trouble. There was a big U.S.A.F. base at Fogmere. You could see the planes and runways from the road at one point. A knot of people perhaps a hundred strong—a fair number for such a country spot—filled the road. Several cars were parked on the verges,

some with men standing on top of them. Banners waved, many of them bearing the usual disarmament symbol. One florid individual was haranguing the crowd through a megaphone.

"This'll take your mind off your stomach," I told David, rolling forward at twenty m.p.h. and sounding my horn. I glanced sideways at him. He sat rigid with his fists clenched in his lap—presumably nursing his presentiment of evil.

The crowd that had been facing the other way turned to look at us, parting instinctively to clear the road. The fellow with the megaphone, a big man with a red face and black moustache, dressed in a loud tweedy suit—how often one saw his type about the country!—bore down on us and tried to open my door.

"It's locked, old fellow," I said, rolling down my window. "Looking for a lift to somewhere?"

He got his big fingers over the top of the window and poked the moustache in for me to inspect. His eyes went hotly from me to David and back to me.

"Where do you two think you are going?" he asked.

"Straight down this road. Kindly get your face out of the way. You are being obstructive."

He was running to keep up with us. I could hear the crowd shouting without being able to grasp what they were saying.

"Don't annoy him," David said anxiously.

"I want to talk to you," the heavy man said. "Slow down, will you. Where are you going? What's the ruddy hurry?"

His head was outside the car door. The window closed electrically, catching his fingers. He roared in anger, dropping the megaphone to clasp his bruised knuckles. As we surged forward, it became apparent why the crowd had gathered. Beyond them had been established a check-point with a black-and-white bar across the road and the legend: "UNITED STATES AIR COMMANDO . . . HALT." Behind sandbags were armed men and a couple of hefty tanks, besides several light vehicles, including a British Army Signals truck. It all appeared very efficient in the colourless sunshine.

As I halted at the barrier, two Americans in uniform stepped forward, a corporal and a sergeant, one on either side of the Wolseley. Again my window came down. The sergeant looked round and amiable. I thrust my face out before he could get his in.

"What's happening here, sergeant?"

"U.S. Air Commando check point. Just a formality to check for weapons. We have to stop all vehicles." This in an East Coast accent: Maine, I guessed.

"Have to? Whose orders?"

"Look, my orders, sir. It's only a formality. We don't want trouble."

"It's we English, unfortunately, who don't want trouble, sergeant, but I'm curious to know by whose authority you have closed a main British road."

The crowd behind, divided in loyalty as in understanding, called "Lock 'em up!" and "Let 'em go!" indiscriminately.

The corporal on David's side of the car, a yellow-complexioned fellow I had already marked as a trouble-maker, since his type was also prevalent in the British Army, said "You Limey bastards, you'd always argue rather than act."

"Simon, don't be difficult; tell him what he wants to know and let's get on," David implored. Turning to the corporal, he added, "Don't make any mistake, we're really on your side."

"Oh no you ain't, Mac. You're just a neutral. You ain't on anyone's side."

"A very apposite answer, if I may say so," I replied. "I still wish to know by whose orders you have erected this barrier across the highway."

"Let's not argue, mister. Let's just say it's necessary, or I wouldn't be here wasting my time," said the sergeant patiently. A British Army officer, a dapper captain, was coming from behind the barrier towards us. I beckoned to him and repeated my question.

Instinctively he summed me up, just as I summed him up the moment he spoke. Under the Sandhurst veneer I recognized the Birmingham middle class accent, just as I saw he had identified my Balliol honk, accentuated for the occasion. The moment would be lost on our American sergeant, a breed without such subtleties.

"There's been a spot of trouble, sir," the captain said, very politely. "A small private van passed along the road a couple of hours ago and machinegunned the American planes over on the runway. So we are just taking precautions to see that such a breach of neutrality doesn't happen again."

"Captain, I am a friend of Lord Waters, the Lord Lieutenant of the county. Who has sanctioned this road block?"

"We naturally have official permission, sir, which I could show you."

"Get 'em moving, captain, before we all die of boredom," urged the sergeant. Two other cars had arrived behind us and were hooting.

"Do you mind me asking, sir, have you any weapons in the car?"

"No, captain. No bombs, no machine guns."

"Splendid. Carry on to the next check point, sir, and try to keep moving all the time."

"I will try," I assured him earnestly, and we rolled under the barrier arm as it lifted. A mile down the road was the other point, stopping vehicles coming from Oxford; it let us through without comment.

"Rather a comic incident that, eh?" I said.

David's face was wooden.

"Your sort loves to make trouble and humiliate people, doesn't it?" he said.

"Not at all. You can't have every Tom, Dick and Harry blocking the roads, or where would we be? I just asked a question I was perfectly entitled to ask."

"It comes to the same thing in the end."

"It's people like you who fail to ask pertinent questions that get misled. Your party, for instance."

"You dare mention parties after the tragic mistakes *yours* has made this last week?" He was furious. Debate always made his temper rise.

Quietly I said, "You know I know my party has behaved indefensibly, David—quite indefensibly. But your party's unreal dreams of collective security without armament, of nuclear disarmament in a nuclear age, have hampered the country's striking power so effectively that our shame must also be yours. When you were the ones who pulled our teeth, how could you expect us to bite? What curb could we offer the Red powers? At least these traitors like Minnie and Northleech can plead they had no alternative but to act badly."

"Christ, you wriggle on the hook as deftly as they do! What about the torn-up treaties? What about the promises? What about the Anglo-American alliance? All hot air, I suppose?"

"Here's Oxford," I said, as we came onto the top of the Banbury Road.

We were stopped again, this time by an exotic crowd of R.A.F. Regiment, Army, Civil Defence, and police, with a couple of AA men for luck. Plus a cheerful bunch of civilians doing good business with an ice cream man.

"Sorry, sir, can't go through Oxford unless you've got a good reason for it." This was a well-scrubbed corporal with a tommy gun over his shoulder, ambling up to the car.

"Such as? I'm going to see an old friend at one of the colleges. Is that a good reason?" I asked.

"Better make it next week instead, sir. There's been a bit

of trouble in the town. A fire or two and some hooliganism. We're trying to keep the city centre clear. Try the by-pass, sir, if you were thinking of going through. Keep moving and you won't get into no trouble."

He wasn't to be budged.

"There's a phone box over there," David pointed. "Try phoning Norman."

"Good idea. Thanks, corporal."

"Thank you, sir. Nice day, anyhow, isn't it?"

"Yes, lovely. Except for the L.C.C., eh?"

"What, sir? Oh yes, quite sir. They didn't put up much of a show, did they?"

We left him beaming as I drove over to the side of the road. David laughed with an angry face.

"You love playing the decent chap and you love playing the cad, Simon. Which are you really?"

"The common man, David, *l'homme moyen sensual.* In other words, a bit of both. Buy yourself an ice cream while I'm phoning."

I got through to Saints straight away and recognized the head porter's voice at once, strained as it was through thickets of phlegm. Legend has it they built the college round him.

"That you, Dibbs? Challington here. Would you put me through to Professor Norman Parmettio."

"Hello, sir, nice to hear your voice. We haven't seen you here for months. You used to be so frequent."

"Pressure of work, I fear. Is the Professor there?"

"Well we had a bit of trouble last night, sir."

"Trouble? What sort of trouble?"

"Well, sir, we had to have the fire brigade round, sir. Some young hooligans threw petrol bombs over the East Wall, sir. Terrible it was, sir. Fortunately I was all right in here. I phoned the police and the fire brigade and anyone I could think of. Proper scaring it was. I've never seen nothing like it."

"Indeed. Anyone killed?"

"Not to speak of, sir. But the East Wing's a ruin. Your old room gone, sir, and part of the chapel. By a miracle of good fortune my lodge was preserved, but—"

"It seems impossible such things could happen in Oxford, Dibbs. The time is out of joint. Where's Professor Parmettio?"

"Those are my feelings exactly, sir. There you have it. Terrible it was. As for the Professor, bless his soul, he committed suicide the day before yesterday an hour or so after the

Prime Minister spoke about us British being neutral and keeping the lamps alight. At least he missed the fire and all the fuss—"

"Parmettio dead? Do you say he's dead?"

"No, he committed suicide, sir, up in his bedroom. Left a note to say his country had dishonoured him and that he was taking the only possible course open to him. A fine old fellow he was, sir . . ."

As I climbed back into the car, David dropped a newspaper he was scanning.

"You're as pale as a ghost, Simon. What's the matter?"

"How's your presentiment of evil, David? Norman's dead. Committed suicide—couldn't bear the dishonour. Poor dear old Norman! The porter told me and put me onto the Warden."

"Onto Richards? He's a true blue government man. What did he have to say?"

"He's not so true blue as we thought; frankly I feel sorry for him. He sounded like a sick man over the phone. He told me that several of the clearer-thinking younger Fellows, Thorn-Davis, Shell, Geoffrey Alderton, and one or two more, tried to charter a private plane to fly to America. Foolish, I suppose, but quite understandable. They were apparently arrested at the aerodrome and haven't been heard of since. Richards went round and saw the local Superintendant of Police in person but couldn't get a word out of the man. He was almost weeping as he told me. And then—"

"Then?"

"Richards was cut off."

We sat in silence.

At last David said, "I'm sorry if I sounded stupid before. It's all a bit nastier than we thought."

"No nastier than we had a right to expect. We'd better get to London while we still have the chance."

"You think all potential trouble-makers are being arrested?"

"What else? And I'd hazard that by now you and I are on the list. Got that gun of yours ready?"

He had bought a local paper from a vendor while I was phoning. As we drove off I caught sight if its headlines: RUSSIAN NUCLEAR SATELLITE IN ORBIT: Ultimate Weapon, Moscow Claims: For Emergency Only.

At one point, David leant over and switched the radio on, but they were playing 'Roses of Picardy' again.

We drove into and through the outskirts of London without being stopped. By noon we were creeping through Hammersmith, moving in fits and starts through dense traffic.

"How about stopping for a drink and some sandwiches?" David asked. "We don't really know when we'll eat again, do we?"

"Good idea. There's a pub over there that looks likely."

London was far from normal. In the centre of town we would see processions and meetings. Here were only people in small groups, hanging about or strolling. Some of the smaller shops were closed. Never had I seen such a large percentage of the population with their eyes buried in newspapers, not even at the time of the Suez Crisis, back in '56—when the Americans had failed to support us, came the treacherous thought to my brain. Momentarily irritated with myself, I ushered David into the pub.

As I ordered drinks, I saw him cast his eye over the men present. One of them next to him, a man in voluble conversation with his mate, mistaking the intent of David's look, leant towards him and said, "You agree, don't you, mate?"

I could not be sure what David replied in the general hubbub, but I heard the other fellow say, "Why should we go to war for a lot of black men in Sumatra? I'd never even heard of Sumatra till last week! I reckon the government did right. Old Minnie has my vote every time. Let the blighters fight their own battles."

At last I got served. Carrying a tray with a Guinness and a pale ale and expensive chicken sandwiches over to David's table, I was in time to hear David say, "I can't see that neutrality *is* a way of saving our skins."

The two men, who worked, or so I surmised, at the big cake factory nearby, were on him with glee.

"You mean you think it would be *safer* to have declared war on the Chinks and Ruskies?"

"I mean that once global war breaks out, safety axiomatically disappears."

"Never mind axiomatically, mate! As long as we aren't in it, it's not global, is it? 'Ere, Bill, there's a bloke here thinks we ought to be fighting for the bloody Yanks!" They motioned to a couple of their mates, and soon there was a ring of them round our table. David's nervousness increased.

"If they wants a war, let them have it, I say," Bill opined. His cheeks were heavy with woe and drink fat. "It's none of our business."

"But that's precisely what it is, Bill," I said. "You've heard

of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, I expect?"

Howls of derision greeted this. The first speaker—Harry, I believe he was—leant over our table and said, "Are you honestly going to sit there and tell me that you want to see this country blown to bits just because the Americans have come a cropper in Sumatra?"

"That's not a proper question. But if you are trying to ask me whether I support the democratic way of life, then I must answer yes—"

"Democracy! Wrap up!"

"—because I believe, like many another Englishman, that it is better to die fighting than die under Communist bombs or whips."

"That's all bloody propaganda!"

"Who's he think he is?"

"Go and join the Army!"

"You're a right one," Bill said to me. "What have the Yanks done for you to make you so fond of them?"

"You ought to ask yourself that," David said angrily. "You're old enough to remember the last war—yes, and the war before that! How do you think we'd have managed without American aid then?"

"Okay then," Bill said in gloomy triumph. "Then we'll hang on for three years and *then* we'll come in to help them, the way they did with us before!"

This sally drew a howl of laughter, and they turned away from us, losing interest and going back to a game of shove ha'penny.

"Bill certainly averted a nasty moment," David said with rancour. He drank deeply into his Guinness. "Thank God for the poisonous British ability to laugh at themselves."

"And at others."

We drank up, ate our sandwiches, and rose to go.

"See you on the Russian steppes—scrubbing them!" Harry called. Their laughter followed us into the sunshine.

We drove down the Mall and so to the Foriegn Office, where I hoped to see Tertis. We had passed the marchers and the speakers, the ragged and the angry; but the prevalent mood was distastefully light-hearted. Although many of the shops were closed, cafés and pubs were open, and people were treating the whole thing as a grand unplanned holiday, lying in the Parks caressing each other or buying each other ice cream.

All this angered David much more than it did me; he had always been the one with faith in the masses.

I thought of the cities I knew thousands of miles away, their grandeurs and their shortcomings: Washington, New York, San Francisco (my favourite American city), Chicago, Kansas City, and others I had never had the opportunity to visit. Yes, and I thought of Moscow and Leningrad, Baku and Tiflis, each of which I had visited on trade missions in the fifties; and of the teeming cities of the Orient, Canton, Shanghai, Peking with its factories and Ming tombs, Amoy, all cities I had not visited and now never would visit.

What was happening in them now? Were they being crushed to the ground even while London lazed in the sun? I looked up to the sky, half expecting to see—I knew not what.

"Not yet," David said grimly, interpreting my look. "But it will come."

We parked the car with difficulty and made our way to the F.O.

On the drive down from Oxford, after hearing of Norman Parmettio's death, my mind had become clear. If it were possible to help overthrow Minnie's government, I would help. If I were needed to take part in a new government, in whatsoever capacity, again I would help. Throughout the fifties and the early sixties, when the Cold War had shown signs of thawing, (largely because of the then Russian leader Khrushchev's love-hate affair with the West, I had remained convinced that Communism was a declared enemy. Nothing I had written or spoken publicly had wavered from that belief. My record was clean. There were not so very many like me left in Britain. If I were needed, I would serve.

Although I did not know if Tertis was accessible, he was my best line of approach. I had worked with him often; we knew and trusted each other. If he were not available, I would try elsewhere, probably with the Athenaeum as first call.

At the doors of the F.O., David and I were stopped. We had to give our names, after which I was allowed to write a note for a messenger to take up to Tertis. The messenger was gone for a long while; only when fifteen minutes had elasped did he return and request us to follow him.

Leo Tertis was assistant head of the Military Relations Department formed in the sixties and lately of growing importance. We walked down a corridor I remembered well,

with messengers lounging by doorways and chandeliers hanging overhead. Nobody knocks on doors in the F.O., the assumption, I suppose, being that anyone admitted to the building in the first place will be birds of a feather. When our messenger indicated the Second Room of the Department, I walked straight in.

Tertis was there, five years my junior and at fifty a curiously youthful figure with plump pale cheeks, almost white hair and dark eyebrows. He looked, not unexpectedly, exceedingly grave and very tired. A vacuum flask of coffee stood on his desk; though the window was open, a smell of stale cigarette smoke pervaded the room.

He had been sitting talking to a short plump man. As David and I entered, he broke off, rose, and came round the desk to shake my hand. I introduced David; Tertis eyed him appraisingly.

"David Woolf; I remember the name. You stood for Fleetwood in the by-election, didn't you?" he asked.

"I did."

"Then you're a unilateralist. What are you doing here with Sir Simon?"

Give David his due, he hardly hesitated before replying, "I've seen the error of my ways."

"You're too late, my boy," Tertis said grimly, turning away to add, "I won't pretend I'm particularly glad to meet either of you just now, but while you're here you'd better be introduced to the Minister of Economic Affairs, Mr. Edgar Northleech."

I had already recognised the plump man as Northleech. For me he represented one of the country's worst enemies, a crony of Menhennick's, and one of the prime movers for increased appeasement towards the U.S.S.R. since the retirement of Macmillan had allowed his sort to get into power. Northleech moved heavily towards us now, his white hair flowing round his head, paunch well out, beaming through his spectacles as he extended his hand. David took it; I did not.

Moving round to Tertis, I said, "We don't have to tell each other where we stand. What can I do to help, Leon?"

"I'll give you the true picture in a moment; it's bad. Friend Northleech, like your friend Woolf here, is busy changing sides. These are men of straw, Simon, blowing with the wind. I would rather ditch them than use them."

Northleech came into the conversation saying, in the rambling manner he maintained even when angry, "The ability to change should not be despised. I can help you, Tertis. I can get you to Menhennick; he's ready to discuss anything; pres-

sure of events makes him feel he may have been misled."

"Misled!" David exclaimed. "We don't want to *talk* to you and Minnie. We want to shoot you. Don't you realise that revolution or civil war are brewing up and down the country? Misled, be damned!"

"Enough of that talk, Mr. Woolf," said Northleech. "We have the situation in hand, you know. Anybody can be misled."

"It's the duty of men in office not to be misled. You've failed in your duty—abyssmally. The Communist block's intentions have been clear since the forties."

Red in the face, Northleech pointed a fat and shaking finger at David and said, "That comes well from a unilateralist and a homosexual!"

"Leave personalities out of this! At least I and my party acted from our convictions. We advocated national disarmament as a first step towards general international disarmament. We advocated neutrality because as a neutral power Britain could weld other neutrals into a powerful enough group to break the deadly status quo of Big Two power ideologies that have frozen the world since the close of World War II. But your people, Northleech—yes, and I include you in this, Simon, and you, Mr. Tertis—what were you up to all the time?"

Tertis banged furiously on his desk.

"That's enough," he said. "If you wish to remain in here, hold your tongue."

But David went straight on, levelling one finger like a firearm at the three of us.

"Your sort had no real thought for world peace, or even for the country. You were after preserving the social structure to which you belonged, just as Halifax, Baldwin, Chamberlain, and the other hangers-on did in the thirties. You're the damned middle class powermongers with no knowledge of Russian or Chinese language and culture, or of what goes on in their dangerous skulls. It's your unspoken assumptions that have ruined Britain, not Communism or Socialism or all the other isms put together—your assumption that the best thing that can happen to anyone is that he can become a conformist and a gentleman, your assumption that your own narrow way of life is the only fit way of life. What happened to the workers? Once they got an education—*your* type of education, with a smattering of Shakespeare and a veneer of BBC accent—then they too were hell-bent on becoming gentlemen, poor carbon copy gentleman."

"Paranoia!" I exclaimed.

"Why?" he demanded explosively, turning on me. "Because

I don't subscribe to your conventions? Don't worry, you had nearly everyone else subscribing. You fools, you've ended by deluding yourselves. That's why we're all on the brink of disaster: you said to yourselves, "Oh the Chinese leaders are gentlemen. Treat them like gentlemen and they'll behave like gentlemen! Look where it's got you."

"You're a very foolish young man," Northleech said. "There is no historical basis for your remarks. If we have in this country a rule by gentlemen, as you claim, then it is simply because the hoi polloi have proved themselves unfit to rule. Besides, there is no conspiracy. Sir Simon and I went to the same public school, but we never had one opinion in common, then or since."

"Except the unspoken assumption that you were both of leader material!"

"Bringing you to the F.O. has gone to your head, David," I said. "Your speech would have been more effective delivered to rabble in Trafalgar Square."

"It may be yet. I'd still like to know why Northleech should be here, rather than with Minnie, palling up to the Chinese."

With a brow of thunder, Tertis said, "If you'd had the courtesy to keep quiet when you came in here, you would have heard why the Minister is here. It's too late for your type of speechifying, Mr. Woolf, just as it's too late for a lot else. Edgar, you'd better tell them why you came."

Northleech cleared his throat, glanced anxiously at Tertis, removed his spectacles to polish them furiously as he said, "It is no longer possible to keep peace with the People's Republic. Three hours ago—probably at about the time you were leaving your university—the first nuclear weapon of World War III was detonated. A 'clean' one-megaton bomb was dropped on Hong Kong. It fell at about six in the evening, local time, when the maximum number of people was about in the streets. We are as yet unable to obtain coherent accounts of the extent of the destruction."

In the silence that followed, Tertis's internal phone rang. He picked it up, listened, said, "Bring him in."

Looking up at us, he said wearily, "Our country is fatally split, gentlemen, That's the curse of it: when we come to discuss any detail, the opinions on it are infinite, and one man's vote is as good as another's. Perhaps it's the democratic system itself that has brought us to this humiliating position; I don't know. But I must ask you now to put personal considerations aside if you wish to remain here. We are about to be visited by General Schuller, Deputy Supreme Commander of NATO."

This I scracely heard. I was still overwhelmed by the news of the Hong Kong catastrophe and trying to assess its meaning. As a result, I had one of the briefest and most significant exchanges that ever passed between two men.

I asked Northleech, "Then I suppose we are now actually at war with Cummunist China?"

Northleech said, "No. Their Ambassador has apologised. He claims the bomb was dropped by accident."

There seemed to me no possible reply ever to this, but David asked, "And you believed him?"

"It seemed politic to do so," Northleech said stonily.

"Politic! My gods alive, there's a term being used appositely for once!" David broke into ragged laughter.

Hopelessness came up and overwhelmed me. The terrible betrayal all round was at last revealing itself, and not a man in the country was innocent. Faintly, I said to Tertis, "You were going to put us in the picture. What of the countries of the Commonwealth?"

A deep voice from the door said, "Canada declared war on the common enemy two hours after the U.S. did so. It was expedient for the defence of the North American countinent. Australia entered the war as soon as Sydney got news of the Hong Kong disaster. Your government promptly tore up the SEATO agreement. Seems the one thing it is efficient at is the gagging of news."

General Schuller did not introduce himself. He marched into the room and planted himself by Tertis. He was brusque and angry and had cut himself shaving with an old-fashioned razor that morning. His German-American accent was thick and nasal. Dark, handsome, very neat and be-medalled, he dominated the room with compressed fury.

"Well, Tertis, here I am. Who are these men? We were to be alone, as I understood it."

Tertis stood up, listing us without introducing us. I felt like an undergraduate again under that black stare. The General made no comment, save for a snort when Northleech's identity was made known to him. Plainly he dismissed David and me from his calculations. David, with his sensitive nature, would not stand for this. Stepping forward, he produced his revolver and said, "I am an enemy of your enemies. I'm prepared to shoot any traitors, sir."

Schuller never paused.

"Shoot Northleech," he ordered.

As my body seemed to freeze, so the tableau did. Even Northleech only cringed without moving from where he stood. David Woolf remained absolutely immobile. Then

he returned the gun to his pocket and spoke contemptuously, in perfect command of himself.

"I kill from conviction, not to pass a personality quiz."

Schuller grunted again, outwardly unmoved, but from that moment the first impact of his personality was weakened.

"I won't mince matters," he said, swinging his head so that he spoke directly to Tertis. "Britain has never added anything to the power of America. Rather, its been a liability, a weak partner to be helped along, mind without muscle. Get it?"

"There to aid your muscle without mind," I interposed tartly, but he continued without condescending to notice the interruption.

"We could have done without Britain as a partner once. But because she needed us, we've got bases and personnel and war material over here to defend our friends. Now at the eleventh hour—no, by Jesus, nearer half past midnight —your Prime Minister announces that Britain is to be neutral. Egged on by Red threats and encouragement, he says America must withdraw from these Isles. Right?

"It so happens it is no longer strategy for us to withdraw. We cannot withdraw. We are not going to withdraw. What's going to happen now, Tertis?"

Without hesitation, Tertis said, "As things are now, with the present government, we shall fight you to turn you out."

"Get in the picture, man. You *are* fighting us. Norfolk's a battleground right now. Outside Glasgow, the R.A.F. is bombing our installations."

"I don't believe it!" I said.

"You'd bloody better believe it, *Sir* Simon, because it's happening right enough."

"I believe it, General," Northleech said. "You presumably want to know what can be done to change the situation?"

"No, I'm going to tell *you* what can be done."

"You need our help, General. Don't interfere with our offering it to you. What are the alternatives as you see them?"

"The alternatives are brutal. Either you get Minnie Menhennick and his boys out of the way and replace him by a reliable anti-Red government, or—or London is going to be destroyed and this island will become an American forward base. You've got till sundown to act. We can't let you have any further time."

Put the way he put it, it sounded all wrong. Without American interference, we would have set our house in or-

der anyway. Made to do it under threats, we would become inglorious traitors. After all, what future was there for Britain in a nuclear war? Suddenly before my eyes rose a picture of our cities all in ruins, women and children dying, even as they were dying now in Hong Kong . . . and it could happen within five minutes of our declaration of war. All the same, Schuller's view was understandable, inevitable even. I just wished it could have been put by someone less obviously a gun man.

Dismissing that hopeless argument ad hominem, I asked Northleech, "Where is Minnie? Can you get us to him? Is he at Chequers, or No. 10 or where?"

"He's in London, in an underground HQ. I could get us there in twenty minutes in my car, if you're sure it's the right thing. . . ."

"It's too late to *talk*. We have to act," General Schuller said. "Yes, let's for God's sake go in your car. My Thunderbird might be a little kind of conspicuous."

"I'm staying here," Tertis said. He was the least ruffled of any of us. "Though I'm under suspicion, I can be more use by keeping in touch at this end. My boss feels as I do, and there are plenty more in responsible positions who will back a change of government. You're comparatively unknown, Simon, but they'd accept you for P.M. in the emergency. You go with the Minister."

As the others moved towards the door, I shook Tertis by the hand and said, "I'll do whatever I can."

"One word of warning," he said. "The country is now under martial law. Conscription for Civil Defence starts tomorrow, and you, Simon, have been officially declared an agitator—by the Dean of your college, so I hear. There's a warrant out for your arrest, so mind how you go."

"It should improve my reputation if I stand for office," I said. "And David?"

Tertis nodded.

"They want him too."

I turned round just too late to see what happened then. David had evidently gone first into the corridor. Northleech was frozen in the threshold with General Schuller close behind. Shouts came from along the corridor, shouts and the sound of running feet.

David pulled out that wretched revolver and fired twice, backing into the room as he did so. Someone screamed and the running stopped. Belatedly, one shot was fired in reply. It splintered through the door, which David had shut by then.

Gasping, he looked round at me and said, "They're after us, Simon. Now what the hell do we do?"

"Rubbish," Schuller growled. "They're after me: who else? What is this, a trap or something? Northleech, Tertis, get that desk across the door before they rush us."

He strode across the room as Tertis and Northleech went into action. He wrenched open the side door leading into the Third Room of Tertis's department. This was the secretaries' room. There were three of them, nice fresh young fellows all looking rather identical with identical suits and their hands raised above their heads. The General had brought two majors and a signalman with him, to wait for him in this outer office. The majors had already attended to the secretaries, while the signalman worked at his walkie talkie, speaking into it in unhurried code.

"Nice fast work, Farnes and Able," General Schuller said, striding into the Third Room and adding to the secretaries, "Sorry about this, boys, but if I'm in a trap you'll have to play hostage."

"They're after Woolf and Sir Simon, General, not you," Tertis said, following the general. "Let me go out into the corridor and explain to them."

"You'll stay where you are. I'm sorry not to trust you, Tertis, but right now the British aren't my favourite nation. I'm taking no chances with anyone. Farnes and Able, bring those three hostages into the other room. Get the desk in too and barricade the side door with it. Look slippy. Operator, get Green Devil One on the air."

"Right to hand, sir," the operator said, looking up and handing a scramblerphone to Schuller.

Both the majors had light machine guns. The one addressed as Farnes covered Tertis, David, Northleech and me, while Able directed the three secretaries. The latter worked efficiently, dragging in the desk, even smiling as they did so; for them this seemed just a break in F.O. routine. I wondered whether they were displaying British nonchalance or if they genuinely did not grasp the seriousness of the situation.

For myself, I expected a grenade to come through the door at any moment, until it occurred to me that the guards outside were holding their fire in case they injured the General. Everything happened in such rapid succession that it was difficult to think clearly. Although I did not know in what tone Dean Burroughs had reported my hurried exit from East Lincoln, it seemed likely that he would have exaggerated enough for the group in the corridor to regard me as a potential killer.

The General handed the scramblerphone back to his operator, informing the majors as he did so, "They're going to have a whirleybird at this window in two minutes minus."

Instinctively we all glanced over at Tertis's long windows with the balcony looking out across Horseguards' Parade.

Later it occurred to me that here was a moment for clear thought—the first since the General had entered the room. He filled it by striding from one desk to the other with his jaw forward, saying with heavy sarcasm, "And now, my friend Tertis, we'll test out your theory that the guards outside aren't gunning for me at all. Farnes, throw this guy David Woolf out into the corridor."

You understand there were ten of us in the room. The place was comparatively crowded. I saw David's face shift as he ducked and moved. He looked rat-like; both frightened and frightening.

"You can't do this, Schuller. I'm on your side. Take me in the helicopter with you!"

He dodged behind Northleech, who whinnied with fright, and behind Schuller, pulling out his gun as he went. The crazy scheme no doubt was to hold Schuller at pistol point until we were all safe in the copter. Doubtless David fell between self-preservation and patriotism and saw this idea as offering more hope than being pushed out into the corridor.

"Hold still, General, I won't harm—," he began, his voice shrill. But Farnes moved too. He sprang two paces across the room, dropped to one knee, and fired an automatic, one short and deafening burst.

The long window splintered and fell in. Northleech dropped next—through sheer panic reaction. For a second, dazed, I thought David had not been hit. Then dark blood gouted out of three holes in his shirt, spreading fast.

General Schuller swung round on him. David closed his eyes and fired one shot. Schuller blundered forward onto him. The two men fell together, breaking a chair as they went. Appalled, the two majors ran forward.

In moments of extreme crisis, a governing mechanism seems to take over from the rational centres of the brain. Without reflecting at all on what I was doing, I went to the outer door, pushed aside the desk that barricaded it, and threw it open.

Behind an open doorway opposite, armed men watched from cover. I saw their weapons come up. Down the corridor one way, another group had gathered, dark suits mingling with khaki.

"General Schuller has been assassinated! Help!" I called.

Framed in the doorway with smoke drifting past me, I must have looked a wild enough figure. But it was that pregnant cry "Assassination," echoing down the corridors of the Foreign Office, that brought them all running. As they came, I turned and beckoned Northleech.

In the exictement, the two of us left unnoticed. My last glimpse into the room caught a sudden shadow falling over it. Schuller's helicopter was arriving—on time, but too late. We ran down the corridor, Northleech puffing hard. As we descended the Grand Staircase, more shots rang out. Another fool had gone trigger-happy. Long bursts of automatic fire indicated that the helicopter was returning as good as it got.

We met several people. To all of them I uttered my formula and they scattered. Even at the door, where a no-nonsense captain in the South Wales Borderers moved to block our escape, I said, "Captain, General Schuller has been assassinated and you people will have to answer for it. See you get reinforcements and surround the building. Nobody whatsoever must leave until further orders. Clear?"

"I'm not in charge here, sir—"

"Then consider yourself so immediately. Get half a dozen men up on the second floor at once."

He jumped to it and we were through.

"My car!" Northleech puffed. "It's got a radio link. I must speak to Whitehall as we go. Over this way."

He headed towards the Chiefs' Park and I followed, blinking in the sunshine.

"We're going to Menhennick?" I asked.

"Yes."

His car was one of the new JC wagons, with a chauffeur lounging near who threw open the rear door smartly as we approached.

"The Tower, James—fast," Northleech ordered.

We climbed in and I asked, "You mean to say Menhennick's in the Tower of London? How singularly appropriate."

"Underneath it."

Northleech was just recovering his breath. As we rolled forward, he opaqued the bullet-proof glass so that we could see out and not be seen. At the press of a button, a small bar slid out at knee level. At the press of another, his radiophone opened before him. We were of course completely sound-proofed off from the driver.

The screen before the Minister lit. A severe matron appeared, with behind her a crowded Whitehall room where people came and went.

"Give me Bawtrey, General Intelligence," Northleech said, still puffing slightly.

"There may be a moment's delay, Minister. Routine is a little disturbed at present."

"Fast as you can, miss. Emergency."

She turned away. Northleech stabbed a finger at the screen.

"I'll give her 'routine disturbed'. Look, there's some bugger walking round that room with a cup of tea in his hand. Do you wonder the country's going to the dogs!"

I bit off the obvious answer that it was people like him who helped it go. He poured us some drinks, looked more cheerful, and began to grumble, all the while tapping one knee impatiently and staring at the screen before him.

"Sorry we had to leave Leo Tertis with his hands full like that.... Expedient, however. Look, Simon, I don't want you to feel disappointed, but Tertis was flannelling you in there."

"In what way?"

"This incredible stuff about the possibility of your becoming P.M. No offence, but it just shows how far poor old Tertis's judgement is awry. I urged the Foreign Secretary to get him into something safe like Housing years ago.... I mean, for P.M. we need a man of experience, a young man, a man in the public eye, a man who knows the ropes, knows where to turn for guidance."

"To you for instance?"

"I'll serve as long as the public needs me, Simon. I'm an old warhorse."

"You're a bloody pacifist, Edgar. Appeasement's the be-all and end-all of your philosophy."

He looked broodingly at me, entirely without taking offence.

"You don't really want to see this grand little country blown to bits just to gratify your ambition, do you?"

"My record—"

"Bugger your record. You can't help being what you are, I know. You've never held office and you can't see the reason for being guided by necessity occasionally. There's none of the sticker about you, Simon, that's what's lacking. In my young days, I had the fortune to be guided by the great Lord Halifax—"

"You know what I think of Halifax!"

"I don't care what you think. You don't think enough. That's the world's trouble. Look at Schuller: the action school, as much brain power as a bull. Need never have been killed

if he'd spent thirty seconds cogitating instead of emoting. Non cogitavit ergo fuit. Same with Woolf—an anarchist and subversive like all his kind. He had no idea he was shooting Schuller; it was simple father-hatred squeezed the trigger."

"Package reasoning! There was a lifetime's conviction behind that bullet of David's. He had a reasoned hatred of big noisy men who used their office to make more noise—"

"Putting you through," said the panel. Simultaneously, a bearded man in shirt sleeves with a cup at his elbow and a pile of flimsies in his fist blinked into being on the screen.

"Hello, Bawtrey," Northleech said, with a parade of affability. "What's happening since I called you last?"

"Everything," Bawtrey said, taking a swig from his cup. "What do you want to know, Minister?"

"Relevant events of the last two hours. Hong Kong?"

"Nothing fresh. No new H-bombs dropped. First casualty estimate, one hundred fifty thousand dead, wounded, and missing. Singapore on general alert, Aussie fleet engaging Chinese warships off New Guinea. Three Russian nuclear subs detected and destroyed off Alaska coast—"

"What else? Washington?"

"Contact with America is just about defunct," Bawtrey said, looking up under his eyebrows at us. "They're tearing their hair here, Minister. Not a peep from Washington, New York, Ottawa, Toronto—the whole blessed continent might just as well have disappeared. All cables are reported temporarily out of order, and all wavelengths blanketted with unusually strong interference."

Northleech and I looked at each other.

"How long has this been the case?" Northleech asked.

Bawtrey glanced at his watch.

"I've been on shift two hours. Two and a half hours, at a guess. There may be something through in a few minutes. Meanwhile, hang on, here's something else of interest."

As he was speaking. Bawtrey leafed through his flimsies. "The first space battle is now in progress. U.S. Orbitters attacking the Red nuclear satellite, meeting opposition from Tsiolkos and Chinabugs."

"Europe?"

"Mobilisation in France, Italy, and the Scandinavian countries. Every man in Western Germany at the frontier, Reuter reports. Same in Turkey, Greece. Main impression seems to be that they're waiting to see what Great Britain decides."

As the man talked, I stared out of the window. We moved with unconscionable slowness, though Northleech's

driver took short cuts when he could. Trafalgar Square was crowded, and not only with soap box orators. A figure in a white cassock was holding a service on the steps of St. Martins-in-the-Fields. Down the Strand, traffic was entirely at a standstill. We detoured round Covent Garden, to squeeze into a Fleet Street almost as crowded.

In contrast to the sightseers round the Park, people here looked grave. Outside a Civil Defence recruitment booth, both men and women queued. The military was out in strength; a column of light tanks added to the traffic congestion. I thought of the other grey old capitals of Europe, members of the same dying yet grand order, all teetering on the brink of annihilation.

Bawtrey shuffled up another piece of paper as we approached Ludgate Circus.

"Dame reaffirms Sark's neutrality," he read disgustedly, screwing it up. "And here's one more in your line, Minister. Deputy Supreme Commander of NATO, General Gavin T. Schuller, was assassinated within the last twenty-five minutes by David Woolf, described as a member of the British Communist Party. Members of the Special Police shot Woolf before he could escape. Fighting is still—"

He paused. Someone visible to us only as a torso tapped Bawtrey's shoulder and handed him a fresh communiqué. He read it out slowly, squinting now and again at Northleech as he did so.

"Here's one for the general circuits. Sounds like big stuff. Seems they finally got through to Washington and Ottawa. This one's datelined Washington and reads: 'Mr. Martin Mumford, President of the United States, will make a special address to the world at 1500 hours, British Summer Time, today.' That's in about twenty-eight minutes time. 'This address will transcend in importance any previous statement ever made by a U.S. President.' Hm, some billing. 'It is of the utmost importance that the largest possible audience in all countries sees and hears the President speak.' Sounds as if the Martians have stepped in, doesn't it?"

"That will be all, thank you, Bawtrey," Northleech said, obviously disapproving such facetiousness. As he switched off, the bearded man picked up his cup, swigged it and faded into nothing. The set folded neatly back into its compartment.

The traffic thinned; we accelerated along the last stretch of the way, and the Tower swung into sight ahead. The bright dress uniforms had gone. Light tanks replaced the sentry boxes. Everything was handled efficiently. Northleech produced a pass for the guard officer, which was okayed.

Nevertheless, we and the driver had to climb out and be searched for firearms, while two plain clothes men simultaneously examined our vehicle.

They gave us clearance in about forty five seconds, saluting us as we drove on under Byward Tower with a guard riding beside the driver.

We drove over to the Queen's House and climbed out. I followed Northleech inside. Another guard stationed by a wooden staircase was replacing the receiver on a handphone as we entered; the main gate had warned him we were about to arrive. He flicked over a switch normally concealed behind oak panelling.

The wooden staircase hinged at the sixth step, yawning open to revel a flight of carpetted stone stairs descending underground. Motioning to me, Northleech started down them, his untidy white hair fluttering round his head in the warm updraught of air.

I recognised that smell of canned air, sweet with disinfectant. It reminded me of the underground HQ of my Department in Hyde Park during World War II. This was a much more elaborate and larger subterranean system. At the bottom of the stairs was a chain of three airlocks giving one onto each other, their indicators all at a neutral green. They opened onto a large circular space, well-lit but almost deserted. Here stood a magazine and paper stall, a tobacconist's, and a café, all open. Piped music played softly. I noticed other stairs leading down into this foyer.

Without hesitation, Northleech led over to a central block of lifts, a row of perhaps a dozen of varying sizes, each with an ancient male attendant waiting by the doors. We entered the nearest.

"Level, X" Northleech said crisply.

Glancing at me with a sly humour, he remarked, "You see the government hasn't been entirely unprepared for emergencies."

"Every man for himself," I replied.

It was an express lift. I climbed out at the bottom feeling slightly sick. For a second we had been in free fall.

Here was a maze of corridors, with many people moving fast with set faces. After some slight confusion and a word or two of barked argument, Northleech got us into an anteroom, where a smartly formidable secretary left us, returning in two minutes.

While he was out of the room, Northleech said, "I know this man, this secretary. Obviously Menhennick is still in full con-

trol. We'll have to watch our step until we see how the land lies. Agreed?"

"It seems inevitable."

"Keep it that way. We don't want trouble if it can be avoided."

"Spoken in character, Minister."

"Don't be a bloody fool, Simon. You're out of your depth and you know it."

The secretary, returning, said, "The P.M.'s with the Indian Premier and other Commonwealth gentlemen. You may go in, but don't intrude."

We went in.

We did not intrude.

The room was impressive. Some fifty men were gathered there, many of them leading diplomats. Waiters with trays unobstrusively served drinks. On the surface it appeared incongruously peaceful. I recognised Mr. Turdilal, the Indian Premier, at once. He stood on a raised platform with Minnie slightly behind him. Minnie looked worn and shrunken; his face reminded me of the ill look I had seen on the face of Sir Anthony Eden at the time of Suez.

Turdilal seemed incongruously cheerful. He was in full spate as we entered, waving a relaxed right hand in time with his phrases.

"....and furthermore, gentlemen, you need no reminding from me that India has always stood for the peace of the world. We are an old nation and we have always stood for peace. That is why we are standing now at this terribly black hour of international conflict solidly behind the British government and most of the other members of the Commonwealth for neutrality. We—"

"What about the invasion of Indonesia?" a voice called.

Turdilal smiled a charming smile.

"What about the invasion, indeed, my South American friend? Carnage added to carnage does not equal peace, my friend. We are not Gardarene swines, may I remind you. Your country is also on friendly terms with Indonesia, but you are not hurrying to bear arms on their behalf. No. You are wise. Instead you are stepping up armament production to sell to China, I guess."

Ugly murmurs greeted this, but Turdilal flowed on.

"South America must remain neutral. And that is what I am saying also about Britain and the Commonwealth. Someone must rebuild out of the ashes. That is a harder task than creating the ashes. So I for one applaud Mr. Menhennick's stand against the pressure of power politics."

A hubbub arose as he finished, angry cries mingling with cheers and the odd handclap.

Minnie came forward, clapped Turdilal weakly on the back, and held up his hand for silence. When it came, he rubbed the hand over his moustache and said, "Thank you for your support, gentlemen. I realise our country is in an invidious position, I realise it only too well. But we have been in an invidious position for a quarter of a century now, ever since the perfection of this deadly nuclear power and the emergence of the two great powers. Rest assured, I have done all in my power to keep our beloved country safe. Rest assured, I shall not stand down—"

"Shame!" I cried.

"—until I feel the nation has no more need for me. . . ."

"Go, in God's name, go!" I shouted.

Two Ghana ministers looked angrily round and said, "Keep silence while he speaks," and a waiter pressed a large whisky into my hand.

"I will say no more now," Minnie continued, looking at his watch. "In two minutes, the American President, Mr. Mumford, is speaking to the world via Telestar II. We can see it on the wall screen here. I do not know what he is to say, but doubtless it will be of grave import. Just at present our contacts with Washington are disturbed; however, I have been reliably informed that a very few hours ago the American continent was subjected to intense nuclear bombardment on both her seaboards."

A ripple of amusement that grew with the beginning of his last sentence was killed stone dead by the end of it. A terrible silence, a chill, settled over everyone present—myself, of course, included. Everyone present had their differences with the United States, yet in that moment friction died and love came uppermost. Many faces were wrapped in a look of shame. We all stood motionless.

Not a word was spoken until the big wall screen lit. The time was three o'clock.

The Global Viewing sign came on, a spinning world with the illuminated orbits of the TV reflection stations surrounding it. How long, I wondered, before they were shot down and TV shrank again into a petty national plaything instead of the transnational communication it had become?

A voice said, "Here is the President of the United States of America, Mr. Martin Wainwright Mumford."

He sat composedly at a desk bare of everything bar one sheet of paper. He wore a neat suit. Behind him hung the American flag. He looked young, determined, and under

enormous strain. He launched into what he had to say without preliminaries; he spoke without rhetoric.

"I invited everyone in the world to see and hear me because what I have to say is of personal importance to you all.

"Only a few hours ago, the enemies of the United States launched their mightiest weapons upon us. Intercontinental ballistic missiles carrying nuclear warheads descended on all our major cities almost simultaneously. Their destructive forces when unleashed on their targets were so great that no nation could have survived the blow.

"Happily, all those missiles were checked some miles up in the atmosphere.

"The United States of America now possesses a sure defence against the hideous and hitherto all-conquering weapon of nuclear bombing.

"This defence is of such a nature that it could only be given thorough trial under actual test conditions. We have had to undergo that test, and we have survived. Had the defence failed, I should not be here talking to you now.

"The defence takes the form of a shield, which we call the geogravitic flux. In theory, this form of defence has been known for some time, but its consumption of energy seemed so vast as to render it impracticable. However, our scientists and technologists have perfected a way whereby the shield—which now covers all of North America, our Canadian allies as well as ourselves—the shield draws its power from the nuclear powers it destroys. The greater the force exerted against it, the more greatly the shield is able to resist.

"You will see that we are in consequence impregnable. What is more, we shall remain impregnable for a long time. We have this new defence. Our enemies have new weapons. We were subjected not only to nuclear attack; we were bombarded by a type of anti-matter bomb infinitely more terrible than the nuclear bomb, which must now be regarded as old-fashioned. Our shield effectively repelled all comers."

Almost furtively, I glanced about me. Every face was fixed in fascination on that grave face looming on the screen. An immense pressure of triumph was building up as the President continued his address.

"I confess that this nation has—as yet—no anti-matter bomb. We have been concentrating on methods of defence rather than offence. But we have literally at our fingertips the mighty power of the atom. So far we have unleashed no

retaliatory bombs in reply to the brutal attack of our enemies.

"It is my hope that retaliation will not be necessary. America and Canada cannot be conquered; but we could bring our enemies to their knees two hours from now. We could destroy them utterly, as they well know. We do not desire to take this ultimate step. The collapse of the two vast Communist countries would involve the rest of the free world in decades of rehabilitation too costly to be visualized. So we are stepping forward, laying our cards on the table, and inviting our enemies to make peace with the Free World at once.

"This is an unprecedented step to take. We live in unprecedented times; God grant us unprecedented courage to meet it.

"Such a step would not have been possible had not our friends the British, and the other North Atlantic countries who look to them for leadership, decided to remain neutral. Had they not so decided, then beyond doubt they would have suffered the same terrible bombardment inflicted on us. Without the geo gravitic shield, they would never have survived, and we should have been forced to carry out total war to avenge their destruction.

"So I say again, we whole-heartedly and unreservedly offer a fresh chance to make peace. On behalf of my government and people, I invite the leaders of the Communist block to met me personally on neutral ground in London. I give them forty-eight hours to make a just peace. After that time, if they have not shown themselves more than willing to build a lasting agreement—they know what the consequences will have to be.

"They will be shown no mercy then, as they have shown us no mercy. But United America offers them more than mercy now."

Mumford's image disappeared. At once a subdued uproar broke out in the hall. Like many of the others, I was weeping with an un-british lack of restraint.

Next to the hall was a canteen. As I was eating there a few minutes later, Northleech approached, talking to a secretary. By his manner, I saw he bubbled with excitement. No doubt he was, in his own phrase, being guided by necessity. He broke off his conversation to speak to me.

"Look here, Sir Simon, this wonderful gesture of Mumford's has put a different complexion on matters. I will see

to it personally that the warrant for your arrest is cancelled straightaway."

"Thank you. Then I can get back to East Lincoln to see how my wife is. Though I shall have to tender my resignation to the Dean."

"Understandable, quite. Well, that must remain your worry; I can't interfere there, naturally."

"Naturally."

"Though the Dean may not accept it. His anti-American views were always too clear. Since you'll no doubt return there as something of a hero, he may feel that by keeping you on he will gain popularity for himself. I'm sure I should feel like that, in his boots."

I looked down at my plate to conceal my distaste.

"I'm sure you would," I said. "But I'm sick of appeasement in all its forms. A new breeze is blowing from now on, and I'm coming back into politics."

A spark of anger fired in the old boy. He rapped on my table, making my spoon rattle against the plate.

"Before you do that, you'd better learn to distinguish between negotiation and appeasement."

"I can already. You're a great appeaser, Minister; Mumford is a great negotiator. The difference is in the position from which you talk: a position of weakness or a position of strength. Mumford's is one of strength, yours and Minnie's one of weakness—and chiefly moral weakness."

He cleared his throat. His wattle had turned a dusky red. In a low voice he said, "Stop kicking a man when he's down. You saw yourself how shaken poor old Alfred Menhennick was. He can't resign quickly enough."

There had never been better news. I only wished Jean—and David Woolf—could have shared it with me. Then, sobering my excitement, came the thought that we would have to turn out all of Minnie's sympathisers before the peace contingent arrived from America. When I spoke, the secretary flinched at the poison in my voice.

"Your own position is none too happy, Edgar. Mumford may have granted Britain a face-saver for general consumption, but you well know how Washington must really be feeling about us. Aren't we revealed, every one of us, as a set of cowardly turncoats—not only to the U.S. but to the world? You might alleviate the situation slightly by resigning with Minnie, as quickly and publicly as possible—preferably by falling on your sword."

He gripped the back of his chair.

"I remember this sort of holier-than-thou cant from you

in the Sixth," he said. "I'm a politician, not a Roman. I've no time for your sort of dramatics. It's true the world, and the Americans in particular, are going to need a lot of explanations, but I'm not going to quit now—I'm going to give them those explanations. Now more than ever the country needs experienced leaders."

Only for a moment did his face grow ugly; then he smiled with his mouth alone. The secretary aped the gesture of ill-omen.

QUEST

Lee Harding

BEHIND THE DESK sat the Divisional Controller. Tall, gaunt, expressionless, the skin stretched tightly across the unyielding bones of his face, his lips moving with mechanical precision.

"And what exactly is it that you want, Mr. Johnston?"

Before him, on the other side of the wide desk, sat a small, pale, insignificant little man with his hands tied nervously together. His eyes were troubled, his manner uneasy.

"Something *real*," he said. "Something that hasn't been made by man. Something that isn't synthetic. That's all. Not to keep. Only to see. So that I will at least know that it is there. Where can I find such a thing?"

The Controller looked perplexed. It was the first time he had come across such a request. "Something . . . *real?*" His lips formed the word as if it was alien to his vocabulary. "What are the grounds for your request, Mr. Johnston?"

The little man's hopes dwindled. How could he possibly explain this inexplicable desire that had swollen into an obsession, in words capable of being comprehended by the sombre individual seated opposite him?

Behind the Controller a wide window gaped at the world. Mr. Johnston saw the city stretching away from him like the carapace of some gigantic crustacean. He stared bleakly at the towering confections of steel and plastic contesting dominance of the horizon, and shuddered.

"All around me I see a world made by man," he began, hesitantly. "The city we live in, the air we breathe, the clothes we wear and even the food we eat are products of our marvellous technology. Everywhere I see evidence of mankind's incredible skill—but where do I find the heart? And how can I find my own when there is only this grim, awful world of gaunt buildings and unsmiling people to relate my feelings to? Surely, there must be some tiny place that has not been swallowed by the relentless maw of human progress?"

He gave a restless sigh, and slumped back in his chair. "It

wasn't always like this. Even I know that. I must have been born in the twilight of the old world and the beginning of the new. I can remember trees and flowers and the sounds of birds. Wide streams of water passing by my feet. And clouds and rains and cold winds. Today I ask myself—what is a bird? What is a cloud? Is there no longer room for them on this earth we have *made?* Have they gone forever, never to return? Have our machines finally glutted themselves on the great banquet of our planet and left nothing but a barren core sheathed in metal, wandering aimlessly through space with no winter or summer to mark its passage?"

Emotion, a dark stain newly risen to colour the little man's wan cheeks a fiery crimson, now faded. He stared emptily out through the window at the terrifying landscape.

The Controller was silent. Behind his shrewd, calculating eyes a razor-sharp intellect was busy digesting the information Johnston had spread before him, and was already preparing a carefully studied reply.

"But you haven't told me *why* you feel that you must have this something real."

Why? Mr. Johnston didn't really know. "I must have it, that's all," he answered, a note of near-desperation in his outburst. "Something I can touch with my own two hands and know that it is real, that it hasn't been made by man, but by . . ."

"By *whom,* Mr. Johnston?"

The little man looked into the eyes of the Controller. He imagined that he caught a faint flicker of cynicism in their icy dispassion. He swallowed quickly. "By . . . by . . ." *By whom?* "I . . . I don't know, really. Only . . . only that it will not have been made by man. Don't you understand? Something *real."*

The Controller permitted himself the luxury of a smile. "But Mr. Johnston, surely you realise . . ."

At that precise moment his inquisitor's facial muscles seemed to suddenly freeze. A blank, rigid expression leapt into the cold eyes and they seemed to be fixed on a point in the air somewhere behind Mr. Johnston. From a hidden place somewhere between the Controller's shoulder blades a thin wisp of smoke curled lazily towards the ceiling.

"You must . . . pardon me," he stammered. "I fear that a . . . sudden adverse . . . overload has . . . *has* . . ." On the desk in front of him were two hands curled into tight fists of impotence. "Overwork . . . you understand. Undue . . . stress. I . . . if you would be . . . so kind . . . as to . . . go along to . . .

room twelve you will be . . . attended to. I . . . I . . . please forgive this . . . this . . . *this* delay. I . . ."

He said no more. His mouth froze into a vacant oval. There was a brief scatter of sparks within depths of his eyes. The curl of smoke thickened momentarily and then dispersed.

Johnston stared at the immobile figure for another moment or two. There was a bleak hopeless expression on his face. Then he sighed, and got up and left the room.

Whatever was happening to the world, he wondered. Machines that looked like people and people who looked like machines. Each day it became more difficult to tell one from the other.

He took the elevator to the ground floor and hurried outside. There was no sense in going to Room 12 and having to sit through yet another fruitless interview with yet another humanoid extension of some master computer. And besides, he had begun to realize that the concept of something real was beyond the programming of the city cybers.

And not only the machines, he thought, as he turned to watch the people moving silently around him. Their blank, purposeless manner seemed more appropriate to a machine than a creature of flesh and blood. There was something in their blank incomprehension when he had asked them about his problem that had frightened him, and sent him to his Divisional Controller for assistance.

It had been rather a nasty shock to discover that his friendly inquisitor was a robot. Under the circumstances he should have expected it, for there were not many jobs of administration these days that were not entrusted to the widely dispersed cyber units. Robotics had become so incredibly complex that Johnston wouldn't have been at all surprised to find out that more than half of the city's population was robotic, no matter how cleverly they were disguised.

He started walking. In no particular direction. Overhead wan sunlight from a bald sky drove a wedge between the towering ramparts of the city and sought the pavements below.

Johnston looked up at the dizzying cliffs of steel rising around him and marvelled at the way they clambered drunkenly towards the sky. Incredible blocks of artificiality marching doggedly towards infinity.

Was there really an end to his city?

He had travelled all the surface and subterranean com-

muters in the hope of finding the perimeters where the monstrous canyons called streets gave way to more level circumstances, and where he might begin to feel the weight of sunlight upon his body.

He must have travelled miles in every direction, but always the city remained unchanged, and the furthest he could travel was to arrive back at his point of departure.

So had Johnston's nightmare begun. This terrible vision of a world encompassed by a solitary city that stretched from east to west and from pole to pole, covering the old world with the fused magma of man's work.

Was that the legacy of the Gods?

He didn't want to believe that. He *couldn't* believe that the past had been obliterated. Something must remain. If only he could find it.

Perhaps it would give him courage to face his bleak tomorrows.

Had he really explored all the avenues? What other means of transport were there? Air-cars, elevators.

Elevators!

But of course! There were more dimensions than one. He had searched *around* him, but he had never looked either down or up.

Excited, he made directly for one of the largest Administration buildings.

The elevator door slid open as he approached.

"Where to?" asked an impersonal voice from nowhere.

"Down," said Mr. Johnston.

"How far?"

"As far as I can go."

The machine clucked to itself. The door slid shut. Then Johnston was being whisked into the bowels of the earth.

The lift fell at an incredible speed. He could sense that mile after mile of city was collecting above him and yet there was no sensation of moving. The lift was carefully balanced on a shaft of null-grav. He felt as light as the air within the cube.

The elevator finally came to a rest. The door slid back and Johnston stepped out.

And was dismayed. Before him stretched a long, empty corridor. A uniformed figure stood waiting.

"Sir," he said. "Your name?"

"Johnston. Harry Johnston. I . . . I was just having a look around."

"Ah, I see. I will be your guide, then. I trust you will find that the lower depths are interesting."

Johnston didn't. He followed the silent guide for some time, but found little to bolster his disappointment. Narrow corridors and glossy panelling had replaced the wide streets and towering edifices of ground level—but it remained the city, even here. He had nursed the tiny hope that perhaps in the depths of the world he might discover rock and earth and soil in their natural condition. But there was nothing. Only the ever-present product of man's industrial genius. And behind the walls thrummed the energy of the mighty machines that made possible the existence of the miles of city overhead.

He turned around, defeated. "I think I'll go back."

"Very good, sir."

A sudden thought occurred to Johnston. "How far down are we?"

"Twenty-seven miles."

He repeated the figure to himself. "Is this the lowest level?"

"If you mean, does the city extend below us, no, it does not, sir."

Mr. Johnson stopped and tapped the floor with the toe of one shoe.

"Then what's down *there?*"

"Several miles of insulatory material."

"And after that."

"Hell, sir."

"Hell?"

"An archaic term that describes the inner core of the planet. That is all. There is . . . nothing more."

Mr. Johnston stared down at the floor, trying to picture the elemental fury of the molten core of the raped planet. And he smiled. Ever so faintly.

It was something to know that man had never been clever enough or proud enough to master the molten fury of the world's core.

The guide saw him aboard the elevator and waited for the door to slide shut. When he saw the lift was safely ascending he crossed the passageway and wedged himself upright in a narrow niche carved into the wall. As soon as his shoulders made contact with a particular strip of metal a beam of ions lashed through his chest and deactivated him.

His eyes glazed over and he stared emptily into a soulless darkness.

Johnston's first thought upon reaching the surface was to

hire an air-car and sweep the air above the city until he found what he was looking for. Perhaps from such a high vantage point he might yet see where the city ended and what lay beyond. But what if the city was interminable? That would mean that anything real could only exist in tiny, hidden places that could easily be overlooked in his haste. He had no idea what he was looking for or what he might find. It might be something as tremendous as a ragged mountain range or something as fragile as a single flower blossoming between the towering cliffs of the city's blocks.

He would have to walk. Scour the city on foot. Journey to the limits of the megapolis and beyond. He had plenty of time, so what matter if it took him months or years to find what he was looking for? It was something he *had* to have. Against that tremendous desire time ceased to have relevance.

He began his quest the following morning.

He travelled light. There was no need to burden himself with anything other than the clothes he wore. The city would take care of him. That was what it was there for.

He strode out when the early light of morning was jesting with the almost invisible ramparts of the city and the pavements at street level were deserted and still lit by the ghostly neons. The sullen walls regarded his progress with disdain and then stared glumly towards the eternally bare sky.

He wore a compass strapped around one wrist. That was to enable him to keep a constant northwards course. He had no wish to revolve in circles. And his eyes were bright with the fires of adventure.

By mid-day his enthusiasm had diminished. His legs ached and he felt peculiarly light-headed. He sat down on the edge of the pavement and let the frantic bustle of the city move around him. Overhead, air-cars whispered silently through their lanes. People and robots made meagre use of the pavements; most of them preferred the speed and hygiene of the subterranean commuters to actual physical movement along the once crowded streets.

A while later he got up and resumed his journey. The eagerness had faded from his step and now he looked forward resolutely to a long, painful ordeal for the next few days. After that he hoped his legs would become accustomed to the unfamiliar exercise.

By dusk he had covered a distance of perhaps nine miles. The city remained unchanged. The gaunt ramparts still glared dispassionately down upon his insignificant figure.

He was again alone on a deserted street. The blank-faced people of the earth had descended to their burrows.

Where he must soon follow. His body was one fiery, intolerable ache. More than anything else in the world he needed rest.

He found a hostelry and booked in for the evening.

In the morning he arose, refreshed, and resumed his patient journey.

So the days passed. Five of them. In that time he lost count of the miles he had journeyed northwards and still there was no sign of a break in the stifling atmosphere of the megapolis. He had explored a hundred different streets and by-ways, only to be rewarded with the familiar featureless walls of interminable buildings. There did seem no end to his prison.

He began stopping people in the streets and asking them a question.

"Excuse me, but have you seen anything *real*?"

Blank, sad-happy eyes would stare back at him. Some would say, "Seen *what*?"

And Mr. Johnston would explain, excitedly, "I thought you might know of a place somewhere in the city where there are things that are real and not . . . you know, *made*. Trees and flowers and that sort of thing."

Many times only incredulous disbelief would be his answer.

"What are you talking about, you there? Something that hasn't been *made*? No make sense, man. Better see your psych . . ."

And they would hurry off.

Ohers didn't even bother to answer him but shook their heads and went on their way, embarrassed by his question.

What was the use, he wondered. If human beings had forgotten the concept of what something real was, then how would he ever find what he was looking for?

So he didn't ask any more, but continued northwards, wandering aimlessly and disillusioned towards he knew not what.

When dusk came that evening he continued walking. He resented the night and the fatigue it brought. He wanted to make use of every possible hour in the hope that each step was bringing him a little closer to his precious goal.

But he pushed his weary body too much. The world around him dissolved into a whirling blur and he flung out his hands suddenly to keep from toppling over.

In vain. He collapsed into an unconscious heap upon the pavement. Night buried him and the neons bathed his body gently with a friendly radiance.

A while later an air-car came cruising along and hovered beside him. A door opened and two men stepped out on to the concrete. Together they lifted Johnston into their vehicle.

Their handling brought him back to a semi-conscious state. He looked up into two curious, intelligent eyes.

"Your name?" The question was brisk and to the point.

"Johnston," he said. "Harry Johnston."

"Are you a resident of this district or a transient?"

He thought the matter over for a moment. "Transient, I suppose. Traveller, really. You see, I'm looking for something real."

The eyes didn't even flicker. "How far are you going?"

"As far as I can. But it's so . . . slow. So slow . . ."

The face before him frowned. "You've been . . . *walking*?"

Mr. Johnston nodded. He was wide awake now.

"Then I suggest you hire an air-car. There's an agency in Block 10789. You can go there first thing in the morning In the meantime, we're taking you to a hostelry for the evening. I think you'll find it more comfortable than the sidewalk."

The following morning he took the patrolman's advice and hired an air-car. There was no harm in trying, he figured. And besides—six days of fruitless walking had all but beaten him. An ascent skywards might at least provide him with the widest possible view of his environment.

But he feared the discovery it might bring. Perhaps that was the real reason why he had kept putting it off for so long.

As the car shot skywards his fears took substance. He looked down at the miles of city unwinding beneath him and felt a great shaft of despair sink deep into his heart. There did indeed seem to be no end to it. It stretched out all around him and swept up against the horizon in ragged, bitter ramparts.

The maximum altitude of the air-car was only a few thousand feet. There was nothing for him to do but proceed morosely northwards across the unfriendly mantle of the megapolis.

The hours accumulated like drops of sweat upon his forehead and then, miraculously, he perceived a gradual tapering off of the city's rooftops. The great monster was gradually lowering the height of its mantle. Towering blocks gave

way to smaller units. He followed the pattern further until the buildings ceased to grasp at his little vehicle and contended themselves by slumbering closer to the surface of the world.

The air-car sped out across the incredible diminished city. Behind him rose the central nucleus, forming a gigantic barrier against the sunlight.

It was almost as if he had travelled through some immense mountain range and was now wandering, a little dazed, through the rolling foothills. The intense concentration of buildings and roadways had given way to wide, almost deserted avenues of glass and concrete. Johnston stared down happily and pushed his carriage to maximum speed. This was the first time he had found any alteration in the apparently inevitable pattern of the city. The thought of what lay ahead of him sent his heart thumping excitedly.

Too soon. Another hour saw a grotesque shape lumbering up from the horizon, until the familiar shape of yet *another* city began to grow before him. His elation was swallowed by the ever present despair. And dimly, or was it only in his imagination, he perceived beyond it the ghostly shape of still another city. And beyond it another and another and another. Erupting from the metal sheath that encompassed the planet like monstrous boils.

He punched a button on the dash. "Maximum altitude," he snapped.

The car hesitated and then shot skywards.

At fifteen thousand feet he looked down at the world spread beneath him and cursed angrily at the voracious little biped that had made it so. For now, indeed, there did seem no end to it. A world encased by a succession of gigantic cities, each one connected by the slumbering suburbs that spread between them like a mottled table-cloth. And nowhere was there a break in the terrible carapace. No lakes, no rivers, no trees, no birds. Nor was there a cloud in all the sterile sky.

He let the car spiral towards the rooftops, idling through an atmosphere where every season was but a mild summer and every current of air predictable, until the brilliance of an unclouded sunset brought the filters automatically across the windows.

From a spot far to the west a sudden difference became apparent. A colour jumped up from the horizon and beguiled his memory.

While the air-car continued his descent he puzzled over the strange hue. There was something *different* about it.

How different?

Why, because it was *green*. And not a shade he was accustomed to. Not at all like the drab and harsh colours that infected the cities. Much more subtle. As if it was a composite of many varied but similiar hues. The colour one expected to find in, oh, trees and gardens, where each growth possessed its own personal variation of the general shade, and where . . .

He swung the air-car in a sharp turn and accelerated towards the west. Swept across the motionless ocean of steel. And gradually the almost imperceptible smudge of impossible green blossomed and grew across his range of view, until he was staring with unbelieving eyes at the grandeur swelling up before him.

Abruptly, the Great Park exploded across his eyes. He recoiled from the assault of greenery that filled his world, and punched the descent button eagerly.

The tiny vehicle spiralled down and came to rest upon a richly-carpeted lawn in the middle of the Great Park.

Mr. Johnston sat there, unmoving, blinking his eyes and telling himself that it wasn't a dream and that such a place really existed in the world, after all.

A park. A gigantic park. And he had thought that man had forgotten.

How could any man forget such beauty as this?

He stumbled through the doorway and stood a little unsteadily beside the air-car. His eyes swung down and marvelled at the manner in which his feet sank into the soft, green grass. And all around him was a silence so incredibly still and satisfying that he began to doubt the sanity of it all.

Green hills rolled away into the distance. Trees dotted and sometimes dominated the landscape. And there was a sense of timelessness hanging over the great land that rendered the cities to some great limbo.

And indeed, there was no sign of them here. Tall as they were, the park was so placed and recessed so as to render them invisible. Johnston could well have been alone in his own private world.

Never had he imagined such a prize.

Paradise. And if not, as close to it as he could wish. What strange quirk of human nature had presaged the isolation of

this oasis from the rest of the world? Perhaps he had been a little too quick in his bitter judgment of his fellow men.

But why hadn't the Controller told him of such a place?

His brief puzzlement disappeared when he recalled his own impatience. If he had gone on to Room 12 as directed he would no doubt have been directed to the park—and have saved himself several long, wearying days of trekking. Still, there was no denying the fact that privation heightened pleasure. He would never have been able to experience the blissful fulfilment he now felt if he had been calmly ushered off from the city to this idyllic refuge.

He left the air-car and wandered slowly across the grass to where a cobbled pathway wound up through the trees. He followed the stones for some distance until the vehicle was hidden behind a small rise and the last contact with the city world vanished. He was alone in Eden.

As he walked he left the path occasionally to take a closer look at the different species of trees and shrubs growing at carefully spaced intervals, each with a descriptive name plate attached to a trunk or imbedded in the soil. The words were incomprehensible to him. Most of them had long since vanished from the world's vocabulary. But just the same he smiled and nodded his head as if he understood what the plaques said, and moved on to the next one.

The pathway seemed determined to wind on indefinitely through the trees. After a while he wearied of walking and sat down upon the unfamiliar grass. Long slanting rays from the setting sun sent shadows racing across the landscape. Wondrous perfumes rose up from the ground around him. A sudden desire swept down upon him and he sprawled out full length upon the grass, one hand flung indolently across his eyes to shield them against the sunlight.

He swam lazily in the waters of fulfilment. All his resentment crumbled and he forgot the world he had left behind. He took in a great lungfull of the heavily perfumed air and expelled it grudgingly. It was so different from the stale smell of the city air.

He rolled over on to one side and stared into the grass. He studied the tiny slivers of green as if he was investigating some profound secret.

And there was movement in the grass. Fascinated, he watched a long column of ants moving through the miniature jungle, and marvelled at their patience.

A strange sound danced overhead. He looked up and saw a strange creature beating the air with wide appendages and

flitting through the dusk to disappear amongst the branches of a nearby tree.

A bird!

It gave another shrill cry and was silent.

Johnston sat up excitedly. There were live creatures in the park! What momentous discoveries had he yet to make?

And night was falling rapidly now. He didn't have much time.

He scrambled to his feet and hurried over the crest of the next hill. Below him the ground dropped away to a small hollow, and rose again towards another crest. But the hollow was the most remarkable thing he had ever seen. It was covered by a broad sheet of water that could only be a lake, and upon the placid surface several strange creatures sat with their long necks arched indolently towards their reflections.

In his haste to get down the hill he stumbled and rolled the last few yards. But he got up laughing with the sheer joy of existing. Then he approached the edge of the lake and stared, wide-eyed at the impossible creatures now condescending to take notice of him.

He watched them for a long time and then, when the stars began to break out like an impatient rash upon the fading face of day, he lay down on the grass by the water's edge and marvelled at the way his park became transformed by the magic of starlight.

Later, he fell asleep. The air was pleasantly warm and he had no thought of dangers. His last conscious thought was that his journey of discovery had only just begun.

He awoke to a green morning, the first he could ever remember. He bathed his face in the cool waters of the lake and then bade goodbye to the indolent swans. There was another hill he had yet to surmount.

He left the lake below him and passed over the crest of the next rise. And he was unprepared for the splendour that opened at his feet. Instead of the familiar, all-conquering green he had become accustomed to, the country below him erupted into dazzling colour. Mile after mile of gaudy and subtle hues stretched before him, where even the horizon was a bewildering explosion of flowers.

So great was the onslaught of colour that it made him dizzy. And he descended the pathway like a man in a dream. Long colonnades of beautifully landscaped gardens beckoned his step. He began to wonder if he was really dreaming it all. So much beauty had no right to exist in his

world. And yet, the roses were real enough to his touch. The fragrance they poured forth would have intoxicated a Controller and would have been capable of shattering any false dream. And then there came the incredible splendour of the orchids, remarkably resplendent with life in such a temperate climate. And there was more. Much more. Mile after mile of exotic blooms. A veritable forest of flowers stretching for as far as the eye could see.

But who looked after all this, he wondered. And who tended the lawns and trees and fields?

He was still puzzling over this annoying little detail when he came upon the Caretaker's house.

He stood quite still on the edge of the small clearing and studied the peculiar building on the other side. It was only a small construction, and seemed to have been made from the same material as the trunk of the trees surrounding it. Wood, or something like that, he remembered, proud of his latent memory. He had never seen wood before. It seemed impossible that some still existed in the world of the cities.

And it quite surprised him. He had been thinking along the lines of a vast army of robots marching backwards and forwards across the endless lawns and keeping watch over the blossoming of the roses. He had never imagined that the Great Park was cared for by a little old man sitting alone in the centre of everything in a small house carved from the very wood of the trees.

He knocked uncertainly on the door.

"Come in," answered a patient, tired voice.

Mr. Johnston opened the door.

The room inside was lit only by the sunlight filtering in through a number of uncurtained windows. The furniture was incredibly archaic and also fashioned from wood.

The old man was sitting near a window in the far corner. He nodded to Johnston and motioned him to close the door behind him and sit down.

"You've come to see my park," the old man said, in a voice that could quite easily have been compounded of wood as well. The words were a statement, not a question.

Johnston said, "That's right. I . . . I had no idea that such a place existed. I thought that it was . . . all gone. That the cities had swallowed everything."

"No, not everything is 'gone,' " the old man said, softly. Johnston thought that he had never seen anybody look quite

so old. Ancient, really. As if he had been sitting here like this for . . . centuries. "Some places remain. Parklands, like this estate. But not many people come to them any more."

"Why not?" To Johnston it was inconceivable that people should want to stay in the cities when beauty such as this existed on their very doorstep. He said as much to the old man.

The Caretaker nodded his white head, sadly. "What you do not understand, Mr. Johnston, is that most people have forgotten what beauty is. And the rest . . . can't be bothered."

That made sense. It wasn't only that a percentage of humanity had been replaced by machines that moved and looked and acted almost like human beings, but that the remainder of the people had assumed the manner of the machines. Their personalities had been swallowed up by the bare, mechanised world around them until they were almost indistinguishable from the robots. A sterile environment had moulded their thinking into equally barren channels. And that was why it was so difficult to separate man from machine.

"You're the first visitor I've had in . . . years," the old man said. In a voice heavy with time.

The subtle pause that separated the last word from the rest of the sentence was lost upon Johnston. His mind buzzed busily with urgent questions.

"But surely you don't look after all *this* yourself?"

"Heavens no, young man. There are . . . robots,"—he used the word with obvious reluctance—"machines to tend the gardens and the lawns. I am too old to do anything but sit and wait."

"But I didn't see any—"

"Of course you didn't. They do their necessary work by night. Senses such as theirs have no need of the light of day. It prevents them from despoiling the landscape when visitors arrive. Not that it would make much difference these days."

Johnston thanked the common sense that had prompted such a decision so long ago. He couldn't bare the thought of the sight of a machine trundling over his park. By now it had become *his* park—his and the old man's.

"Do you live here, all alone?"

The old man shrugged. "Where else? I have no need of the cities. The cities have no need for me. Here I can be as one with nature. I am fed and looked after by . . . by the

machines. A necessary evil, I'm afraid. My life is complete. I wish for no more."

To Johnston it began to sound more and more like Paradise. "I'd like to stay here. With you," he blurted out, passionately.

The old man frowned, uneasily. "I doubt if that would be possible. The city—"

"To hell with the city! It doesn't care what happens to me. What difference does one life here or there matter?"

"On the contrary, a great deal. You must remember, Mr. Johnston, that you represent part of an equation. A monstrous equation that enables the city cybers to keep the world functioning smoothly. You are part of a vast, complex system of automation where every act is predictable and measured against the consequences of a billion others. To remove you would introduce a random factor into the calculations that could easily endanger the successful management of the city and, ultimately, the entire world. No, I'm afraid that you won't be able to stay. But you may visit often."

"But what if I apply for permission?" Johnston pressed. "They couldn't refuse, could they? I mean, what does it matter, either way?"

The old man was silent for a moment. Then he said: "I suppose they might consider it. It would certainly bear investigation."

They both fell silent. Johnston stared out of the window at the garden and listened to the birds punctuating the stillness with their cries.

"How did it all begin?" he wondered, aloud.

The old man looked up. "How did *what* begin, Mr. Johnston?"

"The cities. The world. Everything. When did we start eating our planet?"

"No one knows, my boy. No one. Perhaps it began when the Gods left earth and ascended to the stars. And closed the Gates so we could not follow. And left us here to perpetuate. We had only one world. What else could we do?"

"But where will it *end*?" Mr. Johnston said.

"End? But it has ended, hasn't it?"

They stared at each other, unable to answer each other's question.

"Do you think they'll ever come back?" Johnston said.

"Who?"

"The Gods."

"Who can answer such a question? For all we know they may have already forgotten us."

Forgotten us.

As we, too, will one day forget them.

The ultimate end of everything, to be lost in the great vaults of memory.

He asked the Caretaker further questions about the Park. How far it extended, what else it contained, and when the old man spoke of wild life and rivers and fish, an impatience suffused his thoughts. Conversation with the old man only brought a return of his despair. He longed to be out in the open air again.

"I think I'll be on my way," he eventually announced, and got up from the old chair that miraculously had not sundered under his weight. "There is so much I want to see before nightfall."

"Certainly. But do call again. It is not very often that I have the opportunity to . . . converse."

They walked to the door and the old man opened it for him and let in the splendour of nature again.

Already the afternoon was drawing to a close. They must have talked for hours. Or was it only that the days seemed so terribly short now? He seemed to remember them being much longer. But that was a long, long time ago. Man had changed all that, as he had changed everything else.

Except this, he thought. *All this beauty around me. He had sense enough to retain this.*

By the doorway was a tremendous rose bush. Scarlet blooms burst hungrily towards the sunlight. A sudden desire swept over him and he stretched out a hand to pluck one of the flowers to carry with him, next to his heart.

"No." The cry from the Caretaker shattered the solitude abruptly.

Johnston stayed his hand a scant few inches from the irresistable petals. He looked around at the little old man.

"You must not touch the flowers."

A sudden anger of resentment flared inside Johnston. He had had enough of orders. They had no place *here.*

Defiantly he curled his fingers carefully around a thorn-free stem of a rose and plucked it quickly from the bush. He held it up in plain view of the Caretaker and sniffed the delicate perfume arrogantly.

In his hand the rose withered and died. Dead leaves

crumpled into a wraith-like, gossamer remnant of the texture of a spider's web.

Johnston stared down at his empty hand. And then looked up at the Caretaker. The anguished look of despair in the old man's eyes was the most terrible sight he had ever seen.

Trembling, he knelt down by the bush and got a firm grip upon the base of the plant. The whole splendid thing came away easily. And while it withered and faded away to gossamer fragility he saw the almost invisible tendrils whipping back into the dark soil.

The truth took a while to break over his reluctant knowledge. And with it came the realization that the beautiful roses were only fakes, complex re-creations that, once separated from the field that produced them, became only a miniscule plastic film that could be screwed up in the palm of one hand.

And if so the rose, so the entire garden. The trees, the lawns, the birds—everything. Why had he been foolish enough to believe that such a place had really survived? It was nothing more than an elaborate memorial. Nothing else. A brilliant mock-up of a diversified group of flowers and trees that could never exist and promulgate under the same identical conditions.

He had been tricked.

A low cry began in the depths of his throat and rose to an anguished scream. "You filthy liar! And you almost had me believing . . . Damn you! All I ever wanted was the truth. You could have given it to me. Only you. And you chose to lie, lie . . .!"

His eyes widened suddenly, and then narrowed into angry slits. His fingers curled into angry fists. "And why? I should have known, should have guessed. Because you're a robot, a bloody machine, like all the others. Aren't you? Aren't you?"

The old man tried desperately to repair the damage. "I . . . I told you not to pick the rose," he stammered. "I tried to stop you from . . . from finding out."

"From finding out the truth!" Johnston screamed, and he smashed one fist into the old face. The Caretaker staggered back against the wall. Johnston followed him, hammering away with vicious fists, screaming over and over again, "Machine! Bloody machine!"

The old man fell to the ground. Johnson slammed one foot against his head and kept kicking away at the face until the synthetic fibres appeared through the mashed protoplasm. Then he turned away and ran across the clearing,

away from the house and into the long colonnades of flowers.

He began sobbing and tearing away at the bushes, hoping desperately to find at least one that was real. But every bloom withered in his hand. Every branch he wrested from a sapling crumbled into nothingness in his hands. He swore and grappled with the wires retreating into the soil. Tore them free and watched them writhe like drunken snakes in his hands. Saw how his furious haste had scratched and ripped at his arms. How the blood began to flow from the cuts.

And he laughed.

There was a whisper of thunder overhead. He flung back his head and looked up at a hovering air-car. There were two men inside studying him dispassionately. The same two men who had picked him up in the city.

Agents of the city. Who had watched him, followed him, let his whim have its way.

Come to take him back. Back to the constricting horror of the city man had made, that encompassed the world in a strait-jacket of steel twenty-seven miles thick.

Where nothing real existed and where robots had become so close to humans and humans so close to machines that it was no longer possible to tell one from the other.

"Don't you understand?" he screamed up at them. *"I might be the last man alive!"*

They just looked at him. The air-car began to descend.

Johnston watched it come closer. He knelt amongst the flowers he had once thought real and which now appeared as artificial as the world he had fled. He lowered his head and looked down at the bright spots of blood on his hands.

There was something real. His own blood. It had been there all along. The only thing that distinguished him from the machines. The one mark of man that remained uncopied.

And he made his decision. He would never return to the city. Better death than intolerable strangulation in that hideous prison.

He tore up a bush and grabbed the writhing tendrils of wire and scraped away savagely at his wrists until the blood gushed redly from the swollen artery.

The air-car lurched and fell the last few yards. The door opened and the two men got out. They approached him cautiously. One of them held a long, narrow instrument that could be a weapon.

Johnston didn't care. He felt weak and dizzy now.

He held his bleeding wrist aloft. "You see *this,* you

damned machines? I can do something you can never do. I can die. *Die!"*

They said nothing, but stood there, a little apart, staring at him. He marvelled at their patience, at their lack of concern, and wondered if they really understood the concept of death.

Only when the blood stopped flowing and the earth had swallowed the last drop of his precious fluid did he comprehend their patience. He stared at his upheld arm and willed the blood to flow afresh. But none gushed forth from the tattered wrist. His veins were empty, already collapsing.

And still he lived. The pulsating awareness buried within his skull had no need of the external carapace designed only to delude his conscience and his fellow men. His was the ultimate evolution. A mind that existed independently of his synthetic body.

There were no tears to express Johnston's grief. His weary body seemed suddenly to split asunder. He sprawled out upon the treacherous earth and, with his face buried in the lying grass, wept for the passing of all things real.

And he never sensed the approach of the watchers nor felt the narrow shaft of ions that entered his chest and cancelled his soulless life.

ALL LACED UP

George Whitley

SHE SAID, "We must get some iron lace . . ."

I looked up from the Sunday paper, regarded her. She was wearing the rather rapt expression that I have come to associate with inspiration. It becomes her—but it is an expression that I have learned almost to dread.

"Iron lace?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes. Iron lace. You know—or don't you? That ancient cast-iron railing stuff that you see around the balconies of old terrace houses . . ."

"Hearts and flowers and whatever," I amplified resignedly. "But what for? We haven't got a balcony . . ."

"For interior decoration."

"Interior decoration?"

"A space divider."

"A space divider?"

"Don't be so dim," she told me. "This room—now that we've knocked three rooms, including the kitchen, into one —is rather long . . ."

"Like a railway carriage," I agreed. "Or a railway tunnel . . ."

"Don't be so funny!" she snapped. Then the rapt expression returned to her face. "I can *see* it. From the wall there, to about two thirds of the way across. Iron lace, painted black . . ."

"And picked out in gold . . ."

She looked at me suspiciously, then relaxed. "Yes, you're right. Just a hint of gold. A sort of . . . shadowing . . ."

I began to catch her enthusiasm. "Subtle," I contributed.

"Yes. Subtle. But dramatic." She scooped the Sunday paper off my lap, substituted for it the Saturday one. A slim finger indicated a classified advertisement that she had already ringed with pencil. I read the ad. It had been inserted by the owner of a junkyard, his premises being situated on the outskirts of Parramatta. He had iron lace—sandblasted and ready for installation—for sale. He was open on Sunday.

It wasn't a bad day for a drive—a little on the chilly side,

perhaps, but sunny. Swiftly and efficiently Sally piloted the Volkswagen through the city and the suburbs, out on to the Parramatta Road. I was acting as navigator, although at first the job was a sinecure. Instead of studying the road map I was able to keep a keen look-out to port and to starboard, to point out fine examples of the iron lacemaker's art decorating the balconies of some of the old terrace-houses that we passed.

And then I had to stop sight-seeing and start navigating. The junkyard was stuck away at the back of beyond, in the middle of a maze of dirt roads that nobody had yet got around to labelling. Sally was worrying about the springs of the car and I, who had given the brute its weekly wash that morning, was concerned about the paintwork and polish as we shuddered over the ruts, ploughed through the dust. But we found the place eventually. It looked like what it was. There was a ragged fence and beyond it were stacks of doors, heaps of old furniture, sad clusters of archaic baths and gas stoves. There was a neat enough fibreboard office from which, as soon as we stopped the car, the proprietor emerged.

He bade us good-day affably and asked what he could do for us. We said that we were just browsing. He left us to our own devices and, picking our way gingerly through the assorted debris, we browsed.

What was on display outside was just the rubbish. It was in a shed that we found the treasure. It was stacked high, panel after panel of the old iron lace, its delicacy of design revealed by the sandblasting, gleaming with the dull yet pleasant sheen of good cast iron.

The proprietor followed us into the shed.

"And would you be interested?" he asked.

I said that we should be interested.

Sally, fingering an intricate filagree of harps and shamrocks, asked, "How much?"

"Two pounds ten a panel, madam," he replied.

"Two pounds ten?" she flared.

"Yes," she was told firmly. "There's the cost of the sandblasting. And one coat of primer . . ."

"Too much," she said.

We turned to go.

He said, "Perhaps you might be interested in this . . ."

"No," said Sally firmly just as I said, "Perhaps."

The junkman lifted a rag of tarpaulin in a dim corner of the shed. Beneath it was a small stack of panels, of metal railing. It gleamed—but it wasn't the gleam of cast iron, nei-

ther was it that of aluminium. There was something odd about it.

"I can let you have this cheaper," said the proprietor. "A pound a panel."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Iron lace."

"It's not," said Sally.

"It looks . . . interesting," I said.

I went to the corner, lifted one of the panels. It was heavy, but not as heavy as it would have been had it been iron. The metal felt strangely warm to my fingers. I stood it on its edge, propping it against the stack and the wall, stepped back to get the full effect.

The design was intricate enough—but there were no hearts and flowers, no harps and shamrocks. It was abstract—and yet it was vaguely familiar. I tried to decide what it was that it reminded me of. There were interlocking circles—but they were more than mere circles. There was that odd twist to them . . . I got it then. Mobius Strips.

"It . . . It has something . . ." admitted Sally reluctantly.

"Most people don't like it," confessed the junkman, "but perhaps you . . ."

"I didn't say that I liked it," said Sally firmly. "Not at that price."

"Fifteen shillings?"

"Ten."

"All right. To you—twelve and six."

"What do *you* think, Peter?" she asked me.

"It's . . . It's different . . ." I told her cautiously.

"All right. We'll take six panels."

"Now?" asked the junkman with a rather strange eagerness.

"No. You said in your advertisement that you delivered. My husband will give you the address."

And that was that.

We sat in our chairs and looked at our space divider. It had taken the coating of black matt paint well enough and we had decided that its design was sufficiently dramatic to make the use of gold trimming unnecessary. Dramatic? It was that all right. It was . . . disturbing.

I said, between sips of my drink, "I had a couple of beers with Fred at lunch time today."

"Oh? What's new with him?"

"He's settling down at *The Courier*. They've got him doing features now."

"What sort of features?"

"Haunts. Poltergeists and such. *The Courier* always has been keen on the supernatural or the paranormal or whatever you care to call it."

"Anything to build up circulation among the credulous."

"They sent him out to investigate and write up a haunted junkyard, Parramatta way . . ."

"A haunted junkyard?" she asked, with awakening interest. "Was the junkman flogging old tombstones?"

"No. The haunting was in the shed where he kept his iron lace. It appears that every morning he'd find it flung all over the place."

"What junkman was it?" she demanded sharply.

"He didn't say . . ."

"And you didn't ask. Of course."

I was startled by the expression on her face. "What's all the flap about, Sally?"

"Poltergeists," she said briefly.

"But you don't believe . . ."

"I'm an agnostic. I neither believe nor disbelieve."

"Then why . . . ?"

"Why was the junkman, *our* junkman, so keen to get rid of *this* iron lace?" she said, pointing.

"But you wanted it."

"I didn't really. It was just the price."

I attempted to reason with her. "I've never heard of haunted iron lace. Besides, this stuff isn't old. The design is . . . contemporary. Modern . . ."

"Too modern," she said.

I began to get what she was driving at. That delicately wrought metal had an alien quality—but it was alien, somehow, in a temporal sense. I got up, refilled our glasses and then, when I was seated again, began to play with ideas, ludicrous ideas, hoping thereby to laugh Sally out of her disturbingly fey mood.

"I see it now," I told her. "I can visualise those panels back where they belong—in the engineroom of a ship, an interstellar ship. They're all part of the Interstellar Drive, the Space Warp. The ship must have crashed near here, and parts of her found their way into the junkyard. And even though there's no power source, there's enough residual energy for the wreckage of the Drive to try to warp Space, to try to sling us from here to Alpha Centauri in three seconds flat . . ."

She grinned. "You read too much science fiction, Peter," she told me.

"There's no such thing as too much—not if it's good stuff.

And, anyhow, Interstellar Drives are far more credible than ghosts and hauntings."

"They are *not*," she stated firmly.

"They *are*," I stated more firmly.

And the resultant, quite enjoyable argument, lasted us through dinner and until bed time.

It was at three in the morning that I was awakened.

There was that odd, grating noise coming from the living room. It was too loud to be made by a mouse or a rat and, so far as we knew, there were no oppossums in this inner suburb. Sally was still sleeping. She liked her sleep and hated to be disturbed. So, carefully, I slid out from between the sheets on my side of the bed, thrust my feet into my slippers, picked up my dressing gown from the chair and got into it. Somehow the thought of human intruders did not cross my mind. There was nothing in the house to tempt a burglar. All evidence to the contrary notwithstanding I was sure that I should find a 'possum in the living room. Or a family of 'possums.

I walked softly to the door, opened it.

There was moonlight coming through the front window, but its illumination was not necessary. The panels of wrought metal were glowing with their own light—a cold, blue luminescence. And they had torn themselves loose from their fastenings—that had been the noise that had disturbed me—and were moving, slowly, purposively.

I was afraid.

I was too afraid to cry out. All I could do was to stand there and watch the inanimate shockingly become animate, watch the panels slide and shift, stare as they arranged themselves into a hexagon.

And then, immediately, the whining started—thin, high, almost supersonic at first. Thin and high it was and then, as it became louder, its tone deepened, and as it deepened so the colour of the moonlight changed, became more and more ruddy until the room was filled with rose-tinted shadows.

Inside the hexagon the shadows shifted and stirred, coalesced, took form.

There was a woman there.

Tall she was, breasts high and proud under the loosely fitting sweater, legs long and slim in their tight jeans. Her pale golden hair was pulled back in a pony tail. There was a glittering, complex bracelet on her left wrist and with her right hand she did something to it, made some adjust-

ment. The humming died to a barely audible murmur. She stooped gracefully, slid one of the panels aside and stepped into the room.

"Made the scene, Dad," she announced.

I gaped at her.

"Dontcha dig, man?" she demanded.

"I do not," I managed to say.

"A square," she stated rather than asked.

"You could call me that," I admitted.

Her wide, generous mouth displayed perfect teeth as she smiled. She said, "I was told that squares were a dying race in this period. It would seem that they are not."

"Far from it," I agreed.

She smiled again. "Let me introduce myself. I am Lorn Verrill. Doctor Lorn Verrill. The Time Warp is my invention." She waved a hand airily towards the panels. "I had to send the cage back first, of course, but it was broken up before I could follow it. I have been trying to reassemble it by remote control. At last I succeeded." She stood with her hands on her hips, surveying the room. "And so this is a typical Twentieth Century pad," she remarked.

"Not so typical!" snapped a sharp female voice.

I turned, saw that Sally had come out of the bedroom. She had put on her robe, but since it was transparent rather than translucent and worn over nothing at all the effect was decorative but far from modest.

She demanded, "Peter, who is this woman?"

"Her name," I said carefully, "seems to be Lorn Verrill. *Doctor* Lorn Verrill." I babbled on. "A doctorate in physics, maybe, or philosophy . . ."

Lorn Verrill laughed pleasantly. "You assume too much, Peter. My degree is in one of the arts. D.I.D., if you must know."

I said, "But you must be a scientist. That . . . That . . ." I gestured towards the broken hexagon. "That Time Warp . . ."

"Just a flair for the higher mathematics," she said modestly.

"Then what the hell does D.I.D. stand for?" demanded Sally crossly.

"Doctor of Interior Decorating, of course, duckie," said Lorn.

Sally swore softly and then went to the bookcase that afforded stowage for all sorts of things in addition to books. She opened the bottle locker door, poured herself a stiff

whisky. She strode to the nearest chair, plumped down into it, regarded us balefully over the rim of her glass.

She said, "This is rather much. This is rather too much. I am woken up at half past three in the bloody morning and I find my husband entertaining a blonde beatnik who says that she's a D.D. . . ."

"Not D.D.," I corrected her. "D.I.D."

"So you're on her side. You would be." She lowered the level of the whisky in her glass appreciably. "How do you know she's not a ghost? Or something worse? Like . . . Like a succubus . . ."

"Whoever heard of a succubus wearing jeans?" I asked reasonably enough.

"There has to be a first time for everything. Anyhow, those jeans are so tight they might as well have been painted on."

"I wore what I thought would be an appropriate costume for this century," Lorn Verrill told her stiffly.

"It could be appropriate at that," said Sally nastily.

"Your own attire," snapped the time traveller, "is hardly decent."

"This is my home," said Sally, "and I wear what I damn well please inside these four walls. And if you don't like it—there's the door."

I decided that it was time to pour oil—or alcohol—on the troubled waters. And I wanted a drink myself. I asked our visitor, "Whisky? Rum?"

"In that rig," suggested Sally, "a glass of thick, treacly muscat might be the shot."

"We haven't got any," I said shortly. Then, "Brandy? Sherry? Port?"

"Brandy, if I may," said Lorn Verrill politely.

I poured two generous dollops into two snifters, handed one to Lorn Verrill. I refilled Sally's glass. I said, "Here's mud in your eye," but the two women ignored me.

"And now," said Sally, when gullets had been wetted, "perhaps you will favour us with an explanation. It had better be a good one."

"But it's all so simple," said the other. "My name is Lorn Verrill. I am a Doctor of Interior Decorating, but my hobby is the study of mathematics. I stumbled upon the principle of the Time Warp and, naturally, decided to use the device for my own professional ends . . ."

"Which are?" demanded Sally suspiciously.

"In my century there is a craze for old things. Really

old. Period stuff. And I thought that I might be able to pick up such items cheaply in the Past. My Past."

Sally is a shrewd businesswoman. She said, "And how would you pay for your purchases?"

"Barter, of course. I shall have to operate through contacts who will give me what I want in return for what I give them. And they will be able to sell the merchandise from my century."

"What sort of merchandise?" I asked.

She extended her left hand. On her wrist, above that intricate bracelet which we now recognised as a control panel in miniature, was a beautiful watch, a piece of personal machinery that was obviously of the highest quality.

"These timepieces," she told us. "Atomic powered. Virtually everlasting."

"What about something really good?" I asked her—although nobody could possibly have said that the watch was not good. "Anti-gravity, or the interstellar drive?"

"And shunt the world on to a different Time Track?" she countered. "No thanks. I like my world the way it is. I like me the way I am. But small luxury items will not influence the course of history."

"They will," I said, "if anybody opens 'em up to see what makes 'em tick."

"They will never go wrong," she assured me. "And they cannot be opened. And if anybody should try to break one open he will get no more than a blob of fused metal for his pains."

"Miss Verrill has something," said Sally thoughtfully.

"*If* she comes from the Future," I said, suddenly dubious.

"Switch on all the lights, Peter," ordered Sally. I obeyed her. "Look at that sweater," she said. "Look at those jeans . . ."

"What about them?"

"*Men,*" said Sally scornfully. "It's obvious to the trained eye that those fabrics are far superior to any that we have. Superior—and different. Very different. That sweater, for example . . ."

"Venusian spider silk," Lorn Verrill told us.

"And the jeans?"

"Multicron."

"You see? Or don't you? Not that it matters." She turned again to our visitor. "Now, Miss Verrill, we're willing to go into business with you. Perhaps if you can give us some idea of what you want . . ."

"This is an exploratory trip, Mrs. . . ."

"You can call me Sally."

"This is an exploratory trip, Sally, and my time is limited."

She glanced either at the watch or the control panel on the bracelet, or at both. "But I have two hours in hand . . ."

"Get dressed, Peter!" Sally snapped. "You'll excuse us a few minutes, Lorn, won't you?"

"Help yourself to another drink if you like," I added.

"This is the chance of a lifetime!" Sally whispered fiercely, inserting a shapely leg into one leg of her own jeans.

"It could be," I agreed. "But what will she want?"

"Just what everybody is wanting now. Hurry up, you clot!"

I hurried, Sally hurried. Together we almost ran back into the living room, were relieved to find Lorn Verrill still there. We swept her out of the back of the house and into the car. I ran to open the driveway gate—and then had to run to get aboard the vehicle as it charged out into the street. Then there was delay, for which I was cursed, when Lorn Verrill was obliged to get out of the front seat to allow me to get into the back. But we got under way and in a very short time had embarked upon a moonlight tour of Paddington.

That old iron lace, on the old, reconditioned terrace houses, was good. With its bright new paint it stood out bravely in the light of our headlamps, in the light of the full moon. I could hear Lorn Verrill exclaiming, "But this is lovely! What couldn't I do with that? Stop, Sally, I want a good look at that balcony!" and so on. And I heard Sally say, "And the annoying part of it all is that only a few years ago this iron lace was regarded as rubbish. You could get it for nothing!"

And then the drive was over and we were pulling to a stop outside our house. Lorn Verrill was anxious and impatient, brushing past me as I opened the front door, running to her hexagon of metal panels. She was inside the hexagon, pulling the open panel into place, as Sally came in.

"Sorry," she called. "Time short. Can't stay. Thank you!"

The deep humming swelled in volume and the moonlight, and the light of the one lamp that we had left burning, assumed a ruddy tinge. And then the humming became a thin, intolerable whine, painful to the ears, and the tall form of our visitor inside the cage flickered and faded, flickered and faded and was gone. And the lights were back to normal, and the room was normal save for the hexagonal grouping of the panels and there was an oppressive silence

broken by Sally, who said, "We're on to a good thing Peter, a good thing."

She's a good businesswoman, is Sally.

But interior decorators, even in this day and age, are good businesswomen too, and anybody with a doctorate in that art or science must be an exceptionally good businesswoman.

We went back to bed to try to get some sleep—and surprisingly, we did sleep. And when the alarm clock awakened us we talked for awhile to convince ourselves that we had not shared a particularly vivid dream.

Sally was first out of bed. I heard her cry out from the living room. I ran to see what it was that had excited and distressed her.

Our space divider was gone.

On the carpet, where its panels had been rearranged to form a hexagon, there were two parcels—a small one and a large one. And there was a very commonplace looking envelope addressed in a neat hand, *Peter and Sally.*

Sally tore open the envelope. Inside it was a single sheet of thick, creamy notepaper with an embossed letter heading. I read, over Sally's shoulder, *Lorn Verrill, D.I.D. Vegan Trust Building, Laurentian Square, Atlantia.* Underneath the address had been written, *The date doesn't matter.*

The letter itself was short and to the point.

Dear Peter and Sally,

Sorry to have to do this to you, but I'm not in business for my health and must buy in the cheapest market as well as selling in the dearest. But please accept the accompanying small tokens of my regard.

Sincerely,
Lorn Verrill.

The wrapping of the parcels was a thick plastic that, once the seal was broken, vapourised into a fragrant mist. In the small one, addressed to myself, was one of the watches. In the larger one, addressed to Sally, was a sweater of the Venusian spider silk and a pair of the multicron jeans.

It's a good watch. By any normal standards it's a perfect watch. And that spider silk sweater washes and wears and wears and still looks as new as it did the day it was unpacked. And multicron is indeed a miracle fabric; if the simple directions on the leaflet that came with the jeans are followed the garment can be made to change colour, as desired, with every wash, and can be shrunk to form matador

pants or shorts, or lengthened to make elegant tapered slacks. (An industrial chemist of our acquaintance to whom Sally gave a snipping for analysis told us crossly, after spending a frustrating month working on it, that he was a chemist and not a nuclear physicist and pleaded with us to tell him where we had obtained the material.)

But there's been no real pleasure from the gifts.

For one thing, we haven't been able to replace our space divider; iron lace is more fantastically expensive with every passing day. And it's vanishing. Have you noticed? On Thursday you might admire a terrace house with something especially elegant decorating its balcony, and on Friday that same terrace house will exhibit a glassed-in balcony, and that balcony will look as though it's been there for years. And you'll have the uneasy feeling that there's something wrong somewhere, or somewhen, and then decide that your memory is playing tricks on you.

And there seems to be a growing number of expensive looking wristwatches—watches without winding knobs, watches whose cases, although gleaming, show the subtle signs of years of wear. And Sally tells me that she is always spotting women, middle-aged or elderly women, wearing skirts or dresses obviously made from multicron.

There's no doubt about it.

Somewhen in the Past that shrewd businesswoman from the Future has the game all laced up.

ROUTINE EXERCISE

LAXLAND LEANED FORWARD and pulled the black folder-file towards him. He had no intention of reading it, he knew the contents almost by heart but he liked it there as a symbol and a reference. It was, as it were, part of the fittings, the 'props', it went with the bleak room, the high backed chair, and the square black table-desk behind which he sat.

Laxland was a tall man, balding, with pale but astute blue eyes which could be, and often were quite ruthless.

He pressed a button beneath his desk. "Send in Captain Harvey." Automatically he reached for his glasses, they were thick rimmed and had blank pebble lenses. When he wore them he looked neutral, benign and blandly wise. He was neither neutral nor benign but it suited his motives and his profession to wear a mask. An interrogator (Psychiatric Branch) must often beguile the suspect into an admission of guilt and Laxland had learned that his appearance helped. So many people came before him, spies, saboteurs, potential traitors and most of them had to be mentally dissected down to the very bone.

Laxland waited until the naval escort with fixed bayonets had departed.

"Sit down, Harvey." He pushed across a box of cigarettes. "Help yourself."

Harvey sat down, slowly, almost carefully. His thin brown face looked tired and cynical.

Laxland waited until the other had helped himself to a cigarette. "How do you feel, Harvey?" He made a steeple with his fingers and looked over them benignly.

Harvey looked at him, the dark eyes suddenly bitter. "How should I feel—sir?"

Laxland puckered his lips as if considering the question, then he said, "You're not impressing me as being particularly co-operative, Captain, I'm here to help you."

"Of course, sir." Harvey's lips were suddenly thin.

'Aggressive,' thought Laxland with satisfaction. 'The pre-interview team has done a good job this time. Once a man

is goaded sufficiently, he becomes aggressive and away goes his caution.'

"Gently, now, Captain. I know you've been through the mill but can't you understand they're giving you a break? They're giving you a *chance,* and in a good mancy countries, remember, you would have been shot or brainwashed. Now suppose you begin by telling me the truth."

"I've told you the truth, sir—it's there." Harvey pointed to the folder-file. "It's all neatly typed out and—"

Laxland interrupted him. "The bare facts, Captain, *not* the truth." He leaned forward, both hands flat on the surface of his desk. "Look at it from our point of view, Harvey, the Navy point of view. Two men's lives have been lost under peculiar circumstances during a routine exercise and your vessel returns to base with the following deficiences." He flipped open the file. "In brief, a large quantity of ammunition, various, two torpedoes and—" He paused meaningfully, "—two Hunt Class missiles with atomic warheads!"

Laxland leaned back in his chair. When he spoke again, his voice was pleasant and reasonable. "Use your head, Captain, if you were a senior officer, wouldn't *you* ask questions?"

"But, damn it, sir, I've answered the questions." Harvey was suddenly on his feet.

"Partly," said Laxland in a flat voice.

Harvey sat down abruptly. "Partly or wholly, what does it matter? It's an execution or a padded cell, either way."

"Allow me to decide that, please."

"But don't you understand sir, you *can't* believe me. If you believe me, you're on *my* side of the fence."

Laxland studied his finger nails with apparent concentration and did not look up. "Captain Harvey, I'm the last rung, the top of the ladder and the deciding factor. When you leave this room, *my* recommendation will carry a great deal of weight with Board of Enquiry." He looked up. "I'm prepared to do all I can for you, *if* you co-operate." He made a gesture with his hands. "You can tell it your way, I won't try and catch you out on inconsistencies and I promise not to interrupt. Now let's have the whole story, Captain."

Harvey stared at him, twisting the cigarette nervously in his fingers. "How will you know it is the whole story? How will you know if it's truth or imagination?"

"I shall know." Laxland's voice held confidence and a hint of menace. "I've been in this business for years. I shall know." He reached for the file. "Suppose I help you to get started?" Inwardly, Laxland was pleased, the suspect was

responding excellently. Accusation, fear, interrogation, reason. You followed a set pattern until the suspect was responsive. 'In less scrupulous countries,' he thought suddenly, 'the suspect was ripe for impressions,' a verbal testimony and a written confession would be but a week or so away. Fortunately Harvey served a happier state and in any case, they didn't want a dictated confession, they wanted the truth.

What is the truth? Laxland wondered. A mass hallucination or...

He leaned forward, quite suddenly it was no longer a case but something which *had* to have an answer.

He turned a printed page. "You were on routine exercises in the nuclear submarine *Taurus*. What was the nature of these exercises, Captain?"

Harvey frowned in a puzzled way as if surprised at the question. "Just routine stuff, sir, practise really, dummy runs on surface vessels, things like that."

"This included surface attacks?"

"Oh, yes, sir, that was one of the main objects of the exercise, getting the men on deck and at the guns in the shortest possible time."

"I see." Laxland felt an inner satisfaction. Harvey was following beautifully, very soon now the whole story would be tumbling from him without prompting. "These exercises included, I believe, the theoretical launching of a Hunt missile from beneath the surface?"

"I put the men through the drill daily, sir."

"Good, good. It was during one of these drills, I understand, that there was some sort of blow-out in one of the electrical circuits?"

"Yes, sir, I didn't see it and the man on duty—"

"Yes, Captain, I understand." Laxland's voice was very gentle. "The man on duty was one of those lost." He pointed to the box on the table. "Help yourself to a cigarette whenever you feel like it." He leaned back in his chair. "What happened when this circuit blew?"

Harvey looked at the floor, suddenly a little paler. When he spoke his voice was low and a little strained. "There was a sort of bump, sir."

Harvey was quick to lead him. "A bump? What sort of bump?"

"Well, it's a bit difficult to describe, sir. It was like a distant depth charge, yet it seemed to turn our stomachs inside out—it was sort of peculiar." He laughed weakly. "It's really rather hard to describe."

"Never mind. What did you do then?"

"I ordered immediate surfacing, sir, in case we'd fouled some submerged wreckage."

"And then?"

"Well, then I went up to have a look round, sir. There didn't seem to be any damage to the ship at first glance but—"

"Mendel!"

"Sir." The first officer climbed up beside him and saluted.

Harvey was silent for a few seconds. "Anything strike you as strange?"

"Hot, isn't it?" Mendel pushed back his peaked cap and mopped his face. "Very hot." He wrinkled his nose. "What's the stink? Smells like a compost heap, rotting vegetation. I was in Peru once—" He stopped suddenly, staring upwards. "A *full* moon, sir!"

"Yes." Harvey's voice was carefully controlled. He signalled for slow ahead and turned. "Don't make a song and dance about this, Mendel, something has happened but we don't know what. When I consider the time is right I'll speak to the crew personally, until then, the least said the better."

"Yes, sir." Mendel was rigidly at attention.

Harvey leaned almost casually on the metal rail. "All crew on a yellow alert, I want an immediate check on radar soundings and find out if anything can be raised on the radio. Report back to me personally."

When Mendel had gone, Harvey gripped the rail and tried to stop his legs shaking by an effort of will. Ahead of him the black bulk of the submarine with its surface gun and anti-aircraft weapons looked solid and reassuring. The purr of the motors, the whisper and slap of water at the bows were sounds with which he was familiar and yet . . .

The sea was too oily and too brilliantly phosphorescent for these particular waters, stray wisps of vapour curled upwards from it like lost ghosts.

"Nine fathoms, sir." Mendel rejoined him slightly out of breath. "I've given orders for a constant check. God, we could run aground." He paused and mopped his face nervously. "They can't get a thing on the radio, sir, but there's a kind of high frequency static smothering most of the bands which Trice seems unable to tune out." He paused again as if to draw breath. "Surface radar gives a land mass, mostly mountains, about eighteen miles dead ahead."

"The nearest land should be about a hundred and twenty

eight." Harvey was keeping his voice calm by a controlled effort.

"Yes, sir, I know. Incidentally, all the compasses are spinning round like pinwheels."

Harvey took out his pipe and thrust it between his teeth, the cold stem seeming to give him a measure of calm. He puffed slowly through the unlit bowl. "I want look-outs posted fore and aft. Have them issued with night glasses—surface gun crews to close up and stand by for action."

"Sir." Mendel touched the button and gave the necessary orders.

They were silent, each vaguely aware of the other's inward turmoil but both outwardly calm.

"You said something?" Harvey turned.

"Er—yes—no, not exactly sir, an exclamation. I thought I saw something fly across the moon." He laughed nervously. "Imagination, I guess."

"What sort of something—an aircraft?"

"Looked more like a bat, sir, only it was too big—the neck was too long in any case, probably some sort of shadow."

"No doubt," Harvey was suddenly curt. "Keep a sharp look nonetheless."

Below them, men were tumbling out of the deck hatches and running towards the guns.

'Normal' Harvey thought, dully. 'This happens every day, everything else must be a trick of the nerves, a temporary psychosis, I'll be all right in a minute or so.' At the same time, he was acutely aware that he wouldn't, this was *real.*

The men hunched about the gun were stirring slightly and he could well imagine the kind of conversation which was going on: "North Atlantic, me foot, mate! Don't tell me there ain't something bloody wrong . . ."

Harvey sighed. Sooner or later he'd have to make some sort of announcement, it would have to be the vaguest of his life.

The blowers went and he touched the button. "Bridge, Captain speaking."

"Oh, it's Trice here, sir. We're being blipped, something like a radar beam is bouncing off our hull every seventeen seconds and closing."

"Closing?"

"The blips are getting more frequent, sir, like as if they'd found us and were shortening their arc, trying to centre."

"Very good, Trice, keep me posted." He opened one of

the water-tight boxes attached to the rail, took out the mike, flicked the switch and raised it to his lips. "Captain speaking, attention all hands." He cleared his throat. "This is a genuine alert, repeat, *genuine*." Inwardly he was surprised at the matter-of-fact calmness of his own voice. "Circumstances have arisen which may make it necessary for us to take offensive or defensive action at a moment's notice. Our instruments are detecting radar beams which are different to those employed by any country in the world. As your Captain it is my duty, until able to prove otherwise, to assume the operators hostile. Under the peculiar cirumstances apparent to you all, I have no alternative but to place this vessel at full alert." He paused. "Action stations, load all torpedo tubes and stand by. That is all."

He replaced the mike and shook himself irritably. 'Under the peculiar circumstances apparent to you all.' What the devil did that mean? Nothing, of course, but what could he say? Look, we submerged on a new moon and surfaced on a full one. Or, equally idiotic, while we submerged the temperature rose sixty-five degrees and the land moved a hundred and ten miles closer?

"Radar blips every six seconds, sir."

Harvey touched the blower button. "Full ahead together."

"Full ahead together, sir."

He spun the wheel abruptly as the phosphorescent water began to cream at the bows. Maybe he could lose them.

"Trice, report, please." The vessel was beginning to vibrate slightly and he could see the shiny bow waves curling swiftly away on either side.

"Sixteen—seventeen—sixteen—they're hanging on, sir—fifteen—"

"All right, Trice, stand by."

"Vessel bearing green O five!" The shout came from the forward look-out.

Harvey felt his hands tighten on the wheel. "See anything?"

Mendel, night glasses pressed to his eyes, was hunched on the rail. "An outline, sir, no navigation lights. Could be another sub."

"Signals! Challenge!"

He watched the Aldis lamp begin blinking into the darkness. "*Who are you? Identify yourself.*"

Out of the corner of his eye he was relieved to note that all surface guns were trained and at the ready.

"Lights!"

"Looks like a conning tower well for'ard, sir." Mendel was

still straining his eyes through the glasses. "A bit high though, sort of—"

"Searchlights, damn you!" Harvey's voice was rasping.

"Sorry, sir." Fingers of whiteness leapt suddenly outwards, wavered and centred.

"All guns—fire!"

To his relief, the anti-aircraft weapons began barking almost before the words had left his mouth, the tracer curving outwards and away like bright red stars.

There was a sudden piercing noise like a ship's siren, wildly off-key, an enormous threshing in the water, a long gurgle sound, then silence.

Harvey realised duly that the guns had stopped firing but the searchlights still shone on a huge area of disturbed water.

"Out lights!"

Beside him Mendel made a sound which was half sigh and half whimper. "What the hell do you think it was, sir?"

"I don't know. Candidly, I don't want to know."

"Neither do I—it's head was bigger than our conning tower." He fell silent, his youthful face in the dim light angled and tense. "Have you any theories, sir?"

"None that I'd care to air outside this conning tower." He straightened and smiled twistedly. "To be honest, I had a sort of half-formed theory about time travel."

Mendel nodded slowly. "I had. I didn't like to mention it. I mean, you don't really know with atomic subs, do you? That blown circuit and then that bump—" He looked quickly at Harvey and away. "That thing I saw fly across the moon, sir, I saw something like it in a book once. I think it was called a terry something or other—sort of flying lizard."

"Pterodactyl," supplied Harvey in a thoughtful voice. The past—could there be such a thing as a time-shift? The whole idea was a paradox, wasn't it? Like that yarn about the chap who went back in time and murdered his own grandfather.

He stiffened, thrusting his hands angrily into his pockets. "It's quite a theory, Mendel, but a lot of facts don't fit."

Mendel shrugged tiredly. "Does anything fit, sir?"

"None that I can—Yes, Wallace?"

The rating saluted. "The for'ard look-out, sir—he's gone." The man was shaking visibly. "I went to take him some cocoa, sir—the deck was all dark and slippery like—"

"Yes, yes—anything else?"

"I found these, sir."

Harvey leaned forward and took the flattened night glasses

from the rating's hand. They looked as if they had been crushed by an enormous weight. They had felt no shock and heard no cry but it was equally possible that something had reached out of the water.

"Very well, Wallace, carry on. When you've taken the cup back to the galley, report to the sick bay. Tell the S.B.A. I sent you down for a sedative."

When the rating had gone, he turned to Mendel. "Break out the automatic weapons. I want an armed guard standing by the look-outs."

The blower went again. "Fifteen fathoms, sir. Radar blips every three seconds."

"Fifteen fathoms, Trice—deepening?"

"Deepening fast, sir, sea bed slanting away almost sheer —twenty-two fathoms—er—twenty-three—"

Under his breath Harvey said: "Thank God!" And aloud. "Very good, Trice, keep me posted, I want an all clear at a hundred."

"Nearly that now, sir, sea bed going down like a cliff."

"We'll take a chance it stays that way. Clear decks and secure! Stand by to dive."

He had intended a normal descent to a safe depth but it wasn't to be that way.

As the last man disappeared down the hatch, there was an abrupt slapping sound which stunned his ears and a column of steam and water rose up suddenly a hundred feet to starboard. Before his mind could grasp the implications of the phenomena, another column gushed skywards almost the same distance to port.

Dully his mind formed the word 'straddled' as he almost hurled himself below.

"Dive!"

The crew must have been more than usually alert for the vessel began to tilt almost as the hatch clanged comfortingly shut behind him. *'Thank God for the new crash buttons. There had been a time when you pulled the damn thing tight behind you . . .'*

His senses registered four nasty bumps as the submarine slid downwards, a few more seconds and they should be out of range.

He took her down to near maximum depth, cut the motors and waited.

"Something happen up there, sir?" Mendel's voice was low.

"We were fired on. They straddled us with the first salvo."

"Shells, sir?"

"I wouldn't know." Harvey hesitated. "I had the impression it was some form of condensed energy which released intense heat on impact, but maybe I just dreamed that part."

Mendel opened his mouth to reply but the other waved him abruptly to silence, his face intent.

Like a great many naval officers, Harvey *looked* young but he wasn't, at least, not *that* young. At forty-three his face was lean and almost unlined, there was no trace of grey in the dark hair but he was old enough to have served in submarines in World War II. He knew exactly what the faint sounds above him might mean—something on the surface was looking for him.

After a few seconds he detected three somethings moving on the surface engaged on what was obviously a hunt.

Long combat experience told him they were about a mile distant, travelling in line abreast and probably making about fifteen knots.

Mendel had obviously heard it too, his face seemed etched into sharp lines and his breathing had become almost inaudible.

'Taking it pretty well, on the whole,' thought Harvey, briefly, 'particularly so in an impossible situation like this.'

He turned his attention once again to the sounds with an uncomfortable feeling of unreality. He was used to the sound of ships' screws, the 'express train' sound of a destroyer racing directly overhead but this was beyond his experience completely. It was a bubbling, rasping noise, rather like—his mind sought similes—an underwater jet plane which boiled the water round it as it went past.

One of the—vessels?—passed directly overhead and he felt his stomach muscles tighten uncomfortably; unconsciously he was waiting for depth charges.

To his relief there was no sudden jolt of a close explosion but the hunt was by no means over. After travelling about a mile, the vessels turned abruptly and returned on a slightly different course. The hunters proved to be not only thorough but nerve-wrackingly persistent. They covered, recovered, triangulated and squared that particular area for almost three hours. Only then, it seemed reluctantly, did the rasping sound slowly fade into the distance and vanish.

He waited a full two hours before he ordered the tanks blown and a cautious ascent to the surface.

"Care to buy a fine tooth comb, sir?"

Harvey smiled at him, not without a certain pride. Men-

del had guts and he had even managed a smile when he said it. After all, he was only a fresh faced kid.

He smiled again. "Not now, thanks. Our friends up there are giving them away gratis." He was suddenly grim. "I think the word hostile is an adequate description, don't you?"

He turned his attention once again to the job in hand. "Up periscope!"

He gripped the instrument and, peering through it, was strangely startled to find that daylight had come. Visibility, however, was poor, a thin but unchanging mist limiting his vision to a bare two miles.

The sea was smooth with an oily, almost imperceptible swell and wisps of vapour still drifted from its surface like —he thought morbidly—steam from a cauldron.

He made a complete circle of his narrow horizons before he ordered a cautious "slow ahead."

"Surface parties close up, torpedo men stand by. Chief!"

"Sir." The mahogany coloured face of the Chief Petty Officer was comfortably familiar and reassuring.

"Issue automatic weapons to the look-out guards, chief, then pick two reliable men for additional guard duties amidships."

"Aye, aye, sir, I'll check the weapons myself."

When Harvey finally opened the hatch, the heat struck him almost like a physical blow. It was both searing and humid and by the time he stood upright in the conning tower his uniform was limp and soaking. He could feel the sweat running down his ribs and arms in an almost continuous stream.

Above, a large and, it seemed, incredibly white sun, was only partially blanketted by the mist.

"My God, sir!" Mendel stood upright beside him. "It's like the inside of a pressure cooker." His thin face was beaded with sweat. "Still stinks, doesn't it?"

"Yes, only worse." Harvey brushed sweat from his face and picked up the mike. "Attention all surface parties—Captain speaking." He paused briefly. "All guards watch the surface of the water. If anything comes up or if there is any visible disturbance below the surface, don't wait, open fire immediately. Look-outs and gun crews, watch the horizon and the sky." He paused again. "If any man feels dizzy from the intense heat, don't wait until the last minute, lie down or report below for a relief. If a man faints and falls overboard, we may not be able to get to him in time. That is all."

He leaned forward and touched the blower button. "Trice, anything coming over?"

"Not a thing, sir. They don't seem to be sweeping like they were before."

"How's the depth?"

"Five hundred and eighty, sir, steady."

"Good show." Perspiration was running down his face and stinging his eyes but he managed to grin convincingly at Mendel. "We do see life, don't we? Join the navy and see the world."

"Which world?" asked Mendel, wryly. He frowned. "Maybe that isn't a joke anymore, perhaps—"

The blower interrupted him. "Aircraft at one o'clock, sir. It's about seventy five thousand up, sir, descending in spirals but making about twelve hundred knots."

Harvey did not hesitate. "Clear decks! Diving stations." He came down the ladder so fast after the last man he almost fell on him. "Dive, dive, dive!" He gripped the nearest projection and hung on as the vessel tilted. By God, the crew were getting damn good. Surprising what a real emergency would do.

Inwardly, he had no illusions. He had no idea what sort of aircraft—if it was an aircraft—was coming down at them but he knew his only safety was in depth. Manning the Oerlikons and trying to fight it out with a vessel with a speed in excess of a thousand miles an hour would be pointless suicide.

Harvey's memories of previous engagements came back to him. He had always found that it helped to try and see into the mind of the enemy commander. If *he* were in command of the enemy destroyer, for example . . . Here, of course, the whole situation was a strange and impossible one but the potentials were the same. Automatically his mind fell into the familiar grooves. Had they seen him or was this purely a daylight reconnaisance? The enemy's next move would probably tell him a lot.

He had exactly seven minutes to wait before the now familiar rasping began again.

He waited. The sound continued but seemed to draw no closer. He placed its position at about a mile, dead ahead. It faded slowly, then increased again, faded.

A search, he thought, suddenly. A careful and systematic search in daylight with enemy vessels moving in an expanding circle or widening parallel lines. If they were being that systematic then, obviously, they hadn't spotted him as they came down or the search would have begun closer.

He straightened suddenly, his mind made up. "Blow tanks!"

He seemed to himself curiously calm and detached as they rose cautiously towards the surface yet acutely aware of everything around him as if his senses had been increased to meet the situation. A drop of water from condensation fell from somewhere above and splashed on his wrist with almost painful force; Mendel's tense, almost inaudible breathing beside him sounded whistling and impossibly loud in his ears.

"Up periscope!" His own voice helped a little to relieve his sense of unreality. He bent almost double as the periscope rose, pressing his face to the foam-rubber mountings and following it up.

Light came into his eyes, the flickering surface of the water, the oily hill of a long swell.

He couldn't remember afterwards whether he swore aloud or not. He could not remember if he was staggered by what he saw or if it was like the image he had inwardly imagined.

The thing was black, shaped like an elongated pear-drop and perhaps a hundred and thirty feet in length. There was no suggestion of ports or openings in its dull unreflecting surface but astern at the narrow end, the water boiled and steam rushed upwards in a high white column. There was no sign of flame or smoke and yet, despite the brightness of the sun, there was the suggestion of immeasurable heat.

Sort of spaceship, he thought dully. Only it floats. They're using their tubes as a drive.

The vessel was moving forward, creating a slight bow wave and probably making about eight knots.

As he watched she turned abruptly, almost but not quite, retracing her previous course. She was obviously looking for something—the wreckage of a submarine perhaps?

Harvey's half formed thought was never completed. Somewhere within the submarine there was a distinct *ping*.

Mendel's breathing seemed to stop abruptly and Harvey felt the muscles in his face stiffen with an unpleasant numbing sensation. Almost everyone on board would know what that *ping* meant. Asdic, some sort of underwater detection device.

For a moment he almost panicked but forced his mind to calmness. 'Think, man, *think*.'

Suddenly his thoughts became clear and logical, moving from one point to another with almost startling clarity.

Three of the things had hunted him last night but there had been no pings then, today it was different. The answer

was suddenly clear in his mind. They knew he was here but beneath the surface they had no means of finding him but they were smart enough to improvise something overnight. Their asdic, or whatever it was, had been jury-rigged in a few hours and was now being tried out. Actually pin-pointing him might take a little time.

"Stand by forward torpedo tubes." His voice seemed quite normal and matter-of-fact but his mind was racing. Eight knots—how much did the thing draw, twelve feet—fifteen, better give the torpedoes a surface setting. He began to give orders in a clear voice, his hands surprisingly steady on the periscope grips.

The vessel was still cruising slowly in a dead straight line, coming across his bows at green O.

"Fire one!"

The submarine lurched slightly and there came the familiar rumbling sound of a released torpedo yet somewhere within and above the noise was another *ping*.

"Fire two!" Mentally he counted up to four then shouted "Dive!" He had no intentions of watching the results through the periscope, if the torpedoes missed, an enemy as advanced as that would not be slow in tracing them to their source. He had already decided that the enemy, whoever they were, technically outclassed his own culture by about fifteen hundred years, if not more.

As they went down at a steep angle, there was a perceptible thud.

'One' he thought, with grim satisfaction. 'Unless they're too tough to hurt.'

There was another thud, this time more pronounced and he suddenly found himself flung heavily against Mendel.

The lights went out, glass tinkled, objects fell on the metal floor from walls and lockers.

"You all right?" Dazedly he regained his balance.

"In one piece, sir." Mendel was panting slightly. "What happened?" He answered the question himself. "We must have hit their boiler room or whatever corresponds to it."

Harvey grunted agreement and shouted for damage reports but they were mercifully small. No one had been injured.

In less than a minute the emergency lighting was on and ratings were replacing broken bulbs.

"Surface!" He waited, listening to the faint sound of the pumps and the gurgle of water.

"Don't think there'll be much to salvage, do you sir?"

Mendel's voice was artificially casual but a little too high pitched.

"No." He looked at Mendel quickly, despite the intense heat he was shivering.

Harvey sympathised with him but he knew there was nothing he could say that would help matters. A man adapted to an impossible situation or he was shocked. Mendel was badly shocked, his imagination was sufficient to grasp the situation but a little too rigid to embrace it. Facing a normal enemy under normal circumstances with the hazards known, he would have remained unshaken but the unknown, the imponderables, added stresses he just couldn't take without help.

"You need a battle-pill," said Harvey gently. "Run along to the sick bay and take two B7's."

"Two, sir—oh, I don't think—"

"That's an order, Mendel."

"Yes, sir. Very well, sir, right away."

Harvey nodded to himself, satisfied. His order would probably save Mendel trouble later, the B7's would calm the nerves and inhibit the shock before it got a grip. Further, and at the moment, more important, he would be fit for action again within ten minutes.

"Up periscope!"

Through the eye-pieces the water looked churned and muddy and the oily surface was thick with drifting weed. A dead fish, upturned belly white in the sun, drifted slowly past his range of vision.

Far away, something huge and leathery flopped weakly in the water and slowly vanished from sight.

"Surface—slow ahead together." He didn't want to go up, but he knew he had to. He knew it was his duty to climb up into the heat just in case there was *something* which might help.

There was no breeze, the atmosphere seemed even more fetid than before and the heat seemed to have doubled.

What was he looking for? He could hardly expect wreckage after an explosion like that, could he?

He stood staring dully at the water, the drifting clumps of weed, at the dead fish sliding half-submerged past the submarine's conning tower.

He stiffened suddenly. Something was drifting in the water about ten feet away, something in a blue-black tight fitting uniform that was somehow shimmering like metal.

How it had escaped the explosion, Harvey did not know.

Perhaps the blast had flung it clear leaving it outwardly unharmed.

It was a man, clearly he was dead and—he was *human.* A young man perhaps twenty years old, fair haired, fresh faced, the blue eyes staring glassily at the sky.

Somehow the sight of him made Harvey feel sick inside. Secretly he had imagined the crew of the black vessel, if not as monsters, at least unhuman. He'd thought of *them,* things with bluish skins or lidless eyes, or even boneless hands. The enemy was a *man,* a dead boy, a kid like Mendel.

He went down the ladder slowly, he had seen all he wanted to see. In a voice that didn't sound like his, he ordered descent to periscope depth and tried to behave normally. Here, at least, things *looked* familiar, gauges, the polished brass, the wheels. Here, at least, he could *imagine* that above him were the familiar waters of the North Atlantic and not the tepid waters of an ocean millions of years in the past. He wondered vaguely if on the distant land the dinosaur was still king or had that yet to come?

"Find anything, sir?" Mendel joined him looking calmer and sure of himself again.

"Some dead fish and a lot of weed." Harvey was slowly getting a grip on his nerves but he was in no mood, as yet, to talk about the dead man. He turned his attention once again to the periscope.

"Expecting more trouble, sir?"

Harvey shrugged. "If we lost a ship under peculiar circumstances, we'd go looking for it, wouldn't we?" He made a complete circumference of the misty horizon and smiled grimly. "I don't think their reaction will be any different from ours. Let's hope we're too far away when they arrive for them to find us." He removed his eyes briefly from the periscope. "Full ahead together!"

"Going to stick to periscope depth, sir?"

"I prefer to know what's happening, Mendel. A blind run could bring us right under their noses unless we know."

Five minutes later Mendel saw him begin to swing the grips slightly from side to side as if trying to centre on something.

"Didn't take them long." Harvey straightened. Now that the crisis had come, he felt calm and quite clear headed. "You'd better take a look, Mendel. It could be a dream but I have my doubts."

"Yes, sir." When he straightened some seconds later, his

face was pale and uncomprehending. "What the devil is it? A baby moon or something?"

Harvey shrugged as he stepped forward to take over the periscope again. "It looks almost big enough, doesn't it?" He had already formed the opinion that the sphere was almost a mile *thick*. Let's see, to find the circumference of a circle —no, time was too short. "I think it's the Mother-ship," he said, evenly.

Mendel looked at him blankly. "I don't understand, sir."

"Explain later." He turned. "Missile party—close up!" His mind slipped almost unconsciously into its wartime grooves. *Think like the enemy, place yourself in his position.*

To his surprise, the picture was almost clear in his mind. If he was worried about them, they were probably even more worried about *him*. He had classified them in his mind as a stellar race probably on some sort of survey mission, probably checking likely planets for future colonisation. When their instruments detected an obvious technology, albeit primitive by their standards, their commander must have done a double-take. How had a technology arisen on a planet which, by the simple processes of evolution, could not support it? Obviously, the solution that it originated with another stellar race, had been considered and quickly discarded as impossible. No doubt, the enemy command had him pretty well classified by now, what his vessel was powered by and the technical level of those who constructed it. The point was, how had it *got* there.

Think like the enemy. The enemy command would know by now that the mystery vessel was dangerous in its own element. Clearly it was incapable of leaving the water and coming up to fight, therefore it was at a disadvantage, destruction or capture should be easy. The vessel's success with its underwater missiles had been almost wholly due to lack of precaution on the part of the scout ship; that and the ill fortune of the missiles hitting a vital spot.

Harvey nodded to himself. Might not the enemy Commander conclude—and it would be a reasonable assumption—that since the mystery vessel was confined to the water, all its weapons were designed for that element only? Might he not be a little over-confident, overlooking the fact that the midget below him, might have, metaphorically speaking, something up its sleeve. He no doubt knew by now that the scout had been destroyed by a chemical explosive and what could a chemical weapon do against a vessel designed to sail be-

tween the stars? Harvey was banking everything on the hope that this, basically, would be the commander's reaction.

"Missile party—stand by to launch!" He realised suddenly without particular emotion, that he didn't expect to win. He was making a gesture, nothing more, this was a fighting ship and he was going to try and fight back, that was all. A gesture of self-preservation which was better than running away—where could he run to anyway—to a nice safe port some one might build several million years in the future?

"Missile party at the ready, sir."

He nodded, feeling a sudden pride in the calm voice. He had heard the man say: "Stow hammocks," in precisely the same tone.

"Count down!" He felt a sudden unease. The Hunt missile although accurate was designed for specialised land targets such as harbours and other military installations, not as an interceptor.

He squinted quickly through the periscope. He couldn't miss, could he? The thing was now almost overhead, at the most no more than five thousand feet above him.

"Zero—missile away, sir."

"Stand by to launch—*jump to it*!" He wanted two away before he tried to dive and run. Thank God the muddy weed-strewn water concealed him from visual observation, although, no doubt, up there a team of scientists were rapidly determining his position by instruments.

"Ready, sir."

"Count down!" Perhaps that one would upset their calculations for a bit.

As soon as he heard "Missile away!" He shouted "Dive!" He was conscious of a dry metallic taste in his mouth and was expecting, at any moment to be blown out of the water. "Level off—full ahead." He couldn't be getting away with it, could he? Surely they'd do something about him soon?

In his mind he began to count the seconds and at two hundred was compelled to battle a rising hope. He still had no illusions, the missiles may have deterred the enemy for the time being but they would be back. In the unlikely event of a direct hit, the war-heads were of the restricted type for small specialised targets and would be unlikely to do more than blow a hundred foot hole in the thing. In a vessel of that size such damage, if not minor, was by no means decisive. He had seen vessels during the war with bridges shot to pieces, their superstructure a shambles and their hulls riddled with shell holes still make port under their own steam.

The submarine was now making her maximum underwater speed of thirty-one knots and he had begun to count the minutes instead of the seconds. He had almost reached seven when a dull crunching sound reached him faintly above the noise of the screws and the submarine vibrated heavily.

He gave brief orders to stop engines and waited impatiently for the vessel to lose way.

The sounds which reached him were almost frighteningly familiar. The crumpling sound and muffled explosions of shifting metal and failing bulkheads. He had seen and experienced it himself more than once. Heavy objects, such as guns or crates, wrenched loose by the impact of a direct hit, had gone crashing into the bulkhead as soon as the vessel had begun to list. Once he had seen a bulky water-tight door hurled clean through a vessel's side from the pressure of water and air behind it.

"Chief, what do you make of that noise?"

The C.P.O. frowned. "Sounds like a ship breaking up, sir. Damn big one, very big, breaking fast though, although they still seem to have some machinery going somewhere—hear it, sir? Perhaps they've got some of those auxiliary pumps going, waste of time by the sound of it, big as she is she's going fast. Did *we* get her, sir?"

"Yes—yes, I think we did." Harvey discovered suddenly that his legs had become strangely weak and shaky. He'd *got* her, he'd brought down a thing big enough to hold the small market town in which he had been born.

An elation which bordered on hysteria made him light headed for a moment but was quickly replaced with reason. No, he hadn't been quite that good, he hadn't blown her spectacularly to pieces but one, or both, of the missles had partially disabled her, so much so that she couldn't stay in the air. Nonetheless, it had taken her seven minutes to fall five thousand feet which meant she had not dropped like a stone.

Why was she breaking up so fast? Slowly he realised that, in effect, a vessel designed for space was a submarine in reverse. The hull of the *Taurus* was designed to keep pressure *out,* a spaceship would be constructed to keep it *in.* The submarine's hull had been built to withstand pressure per square inch from the outside whereas a space craft must contend with near vacuum outside and air pressure inside. Her bulkheads, emergency doors and safety doors, therefore, were designed to stop the air rushing out and were understandably failing when water under enormous pressure started rushing in.

Dimly he could still hear a faint purr suggesting that a great deal of her machinery was still functioning at full efficiency but it never occurred that when water finally touched that machinery . . .

His first warning was a faint tingling sensation in his hands and feet and a sudden peculiar jolt at the base of his spine.

It seemed to him that the submarine turned over twice, somewhere there was a bluish flash and he thought he heard a man scream. Perhaps he lost consciousness but when he regained it, he was still standing, shaken and dizzy in exactly the same position.

The first thing which struck him was the silence, the crunching noises and muted explosions had abruptly ceased. He inhaled deeply, trying to rid himself of the bruised feeling in his stomach and looked about him.

"Yes, Chief?"

"It's Wilkins, sir, I think he's dead. He was just making a routine check of fuses when the current arced right across his hands for no reason at all."

"No reason at all!"

"Wilkins knew his job, sir, the flash came with that sort of bump just now."

"I see, very well, put him in the torpedo room for now, I'll be along in a minute—surface!"

When he looked through the periscope a few minutes later, he was still too dazed to feel either relief or surprise. Around him were the grey, wind-swept waters of the North Atlantic.

"So that's the end." Laxland had been pacing up and down for a long time. He had taken off his glasses and his face seemed to have aged and hardened. "We imagined it might be something like that."

"You *believe* me, sir?" Harvey's surprise was tinged faintly with suspicion. "You're not humouring me?"

"On the contrary, certain crustacea adhering to the hull no longer exist today save as fossils." He laughed briefly and abruptly. "The experts we called in confirm but cannot account for it, naturally we haven't told them. As a matter of fact the complete truth will only be known to four very high ranking people in Naval Intelligence who will prepare a carefully worded and completely convincing explanation for the more orthodox departments. The crew of course, saw only a part of the action and are unlikely to talk—at the first mention of a sea monster everyone will think they're yarning."

"There's my first officer, Mendel, sir."

"Lieutenant Mendel picked up a mild unknown fever which fortunately succumbed to antibiotics but he was delirious for some hours. His memories are confused with his deliriums and we have encouraged him to believe it was all a dream. He promises to be first class material under normal conditions."

"But if you believe me, why?—" Harvey stopped helplessly.

"Obvious, isn't it?" Laxland picked up the file. "No mention of temperature changes or inference you had shifted in time. 'Attacked by aircraft which you claimed you saw too briefly to describe or identify, everything slanted to give the examining board the idea you were sane'." He laughed softly. "It may surprise you to know that there are alert imaginative men even in Naval Intelligence. When they were satisfied it was not a mass illusion, they wanted the complete story."

Laxland closed the file and put it back on the desk. "Now I know you're a scientist, Captain Harvey, but have you formed any theory for yourself as to why this—er—time-shift took place."

"Well sir, I don't think it was anything to do with the *Taurus,* I think it was something *they* were doing."

"Go on."

"I think," Harvey frowned as he sought to put his idea into words, "I think for a vessel to travel between the stars, it would have to overcome time as well as space. I'm a bit vague on the theory but unless they could bend time in relation to space an interstellar journey would be almost everlasting. Possibly conditions were just right, too. I mean, for example, when conditions are just right, a ham radio operator can speak to someone on the other side of the world, but not normally. I think, maybe, that they were checking their power units and somehow tuned in on us. Maybe we were just right too, just the right power coming from the reactors, just the right power in the circuits operating at the time. Unwittingly they had created a time warp and we were snatched into it."

"And when the sea water reached those mechanisms, a short was created and the process reversed itself?"

"That's the theory I formed, sir, yes."

Laxland nodded and lit a cigarette. "Seems a logical enough theory on the face of it although, like yourself I am not a scientist." He paused. "Captain Harvey, I think it only fair to tell you, that you come out of this rather well. For pur-

poses of secrecy your crew were interrogated under drugs and all of them praised your bearing. Whatever you may have felt inwardly, you were outwardly calm and apparently in command of the situation." Laxland smiled. "Obviously we can't give you a medal but we can say that promotion should be fairly rapid."

Harvey nodded. "Thank you, sir, thank you very much."

Laxland looked at him quickly. "Something still worrying you?"

Harvey fumbled a cigarette from the now almost empty box. "It's a question really, sir and I've got a sort of guilt complex mixed up with it." He looked at the floor frowning. "A highly advanced race could sink to barbarism, multiply, and in the course of a few million years, climb up again couldn't it?"

Laxland frowned down at him. "Yes—yes, I suppose it could, but I fail to see quite what you're driving at."

Harvey did not seem to hear him. "It was a hell of a size, should have been at least four thousand saved if not more—"

"I'm afraid I still don't—"

Harvey looked at him directly. "I shot down the mother ship, cut them off from their world—I can't help wondering if we're the descendants of the survivors."

FLUX

Michael Moorcock

MAX FILE leaned forward, addressing an impatient question towards the driving compartment. "How long now before we get there?"

Then he remembered that this car had no driver. Usually, as Marshall-in-Chief of the European Defensive Nuclear Striking Force, he allowed himself the luxury of a chaffeur; but today his destination was secret and known not even to himself.

The plan of his route lay safely locked away in the computer of the car's automatic controller.

He settled back in his seat, deciding that it was useless to fret.

The car left the Main Way about half a mile before it met up with the central traffic circuit which flung vehicles and goods into the surrounding urban system like a gigantic whirling wheel. The car was making for the older parts of the city, nearest the ground. For this, File was grateful, though he did not overtly admit it to himself. Above him, the horizon-wide drone and vibrating murmur of this engineer's paradise still went on, but at least it was more diffuse. The noise was just as great, but more chaotic, and therefore more pleasing to File's ear. Twice the car was forced to pause before dense streams of pedestrians issuing from public pressure-train stations, faces set and sweating as they battled their way to work.

File sat impassively through the delay, though already he was late for the meeting. What did it mean, he wondered, this Gargantua which sat perpetually bellowing athwart the whole continent? It never slept; it never ceased proudly to roar out its own power. And however benevolent it was towards its hundreds of millions of inhabitants, there was no denying that they were, every one, its slaves.

How had it arisen, what would become of it? It was already so overgrown internally that only with difficulty human beings found themselves room to live in it. If it were seen from out in space, he thought, no human beings would

be visible: it would seem to be only a fast-moving machine of marvellous power but no purpose.

Max File did not have much faith in the European Economic Community's ability to prolong its life infinitely. It had grown swiftly, but it had grown by itself, without the benefit of proper human design. Already, he thought, he could detect the seeds of inevitable collapse.

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Patiently, the car eased forward through the crowd, found an unobstructed lane and then continued on its complicated route. Eventually it made its way through a tangle of signs, directions and cross-overs, before stopping in front of a small ten storey building bearing a grim but solid stamp of authority.

There were guards at the entrance, betokening the gravity of the emergency. File was escorted to a suite on the fifth floor. Here, he was ushered into a windowless chamber with panelled wood walls and a steady, quiet illumination. At the oval table, the Government of the European Economic Community had already convened and was waiting silently for his arrival. The ministers looked up as he entered.

They made an oddly serene and formal group, with their uniformly dark conservative dress and the white note-paper lying unmarked in neat squares before them. An air of careful constraint prevailed in the room. Most of the ministers gave File only distant nods as he entered and then cast their eyes primly downward as before. File returned the nods. He was acquainted with them all, but not closely. For some reason they always tended to keep their distance from him, in spite of the high position he held—and for which he seemed to have been destined since childhood.

Only Prime Minister Strasser rose to welcome him.

"Please be seated, File," he said. File shook the old man's proferred hand, then made his way to his place. Strasser began to speak at once, clearly intending to make the meeting brief and to the point.

"As we all know," he began, "the situation in Europe has reached the verge of civil war. However, most of us also know that we are not here today to discuss a course of action—I speak now for your benefit, File. We are here to understand our position, and to propose a mission."

Strasser sat down and nodded perfunctorily to the man on his left. Standon, pale and bony, inclined his head towards File and spoke.

"When we first sat down to deal with this problem, we thought it differed from no other crisis in history—that we

would first consider the aims and intentions of the quarrelling economic and political factions, decide which to back and which to fight. It was not long before we discovered our error.

"First, we realised that Europe is only a political entity and not a national entity, obviating the most obvious basis for action. Then we tried to comprehend the entire system which we think of as Europe—and failed. As an industrial economy, Europe passes comprehension!"

He paused, and a strange emotion seemed to well just beneath the surface of his face. He moved his body uneasily, then continued in a stronger tone.

"We are the first government in history which is aware, and will admit, that it does not know how to control events. The continent in our charge has become the most massive, complex, high-pressured phenomenon ever to appear on the face of this planet. We no more know how to control it than we know how to control the mechanism governing the growth of an actual living organism. Some of us are of the opinion that European industry has in fact become a living organism—but one without the sanity and certainty of proper development that a natural organism has. It began haphazardly, and then followed its own laws. There is one of us—" he indicated stern Brown-Gothe across the table—"who equates it with a cancer."

File mused on the similarity of the ministers' conclusions to his own thoughts of only a few minutes before.

"Europe suffers from compression," Standon continued. "Everything is so pressurised, energies and processes abut so solidly on one another, that the whole system has massed together in a solid plenum. Politically speaking, there just isn't room to move around. Consequently, we are unable to apprehend the course of events either by computation or by common sense, and we are unable to say what will result from any given action. In short, we are in complete ignorance of the future, whether we participate in it or not."

File looked up and down the table. Most of the ministers still gazed passively at their notepads. One or two, with Strasser and Standon, were looking at him expectantly.

"I had been coming to the same conclusion myself," he said. "But you must have decided upon something."

"No," said Standon forcefully. "This is the essence of the matter. If things were that clear-cut there would not be this problem—we should simply choose a side. But there are not two factions—there are three or four, with others in the

background. The very idea of what is best loses meaning when we do not know what is going to happen. Logically, destruction of the community is the only criterion of what is undesirable, but even then, who knows? Perhaps we have grown so monstrous that there is no possibility of our further existence. There are no ideals to guide us. And in any case, there is no longer deliberate direction as far as Europe is concerned."

Standon took his eyes off File and seemed to withdraw for a moment. "I might add," he said, "that after having had several weeks to think about it, we are of the opinion that this has always been the case in political affairs: only the fact that there was space to move around in gave the statesmen of the past the illusion that they were free to determine events. Now there is no empty space, the illusion has vanished and we are aware of our helplessness. At the same time, everything is much more frightening."

He shrugged. "For instance, Europe, because of its massiveness, could absorb a large number of nuclear fusion explosions and still keep functioning. I need hardly add that at the present time such weapons are available to any large-scale corporation. We even think there are some small-yield bombs in the hands of minority groups."

File reflected as calmly as he could. Suddenly the crisis had slid over the edge of practical considerations into the realm of philosophy. It sounded absurd, but there was no denying the fact.

He appreciated the caution of these very self-composed men. Like them, he had a fear of tyranny, but history provided many warnings against hasty preventive measures. It was to avert tyranny that the conspirators murdered Caesar, yet within hours the consequences of their foolish deed had plunged the state into a reign of terror even worse than anything they had imagined. The ministers were right: there was no such thing as free will, and a state was manageable only if it was uncomplicated enough not to go off the rails in any case.

He said: "I presume everything has been done to try to analyse events? Cybernetics . . . ?"

Standon gave him a tolerant smile. "Everything has been done."

As if this were a cue, a third man spoke. Appeltoft, whose special province was science and technology, was younger than the others and somewhat more emotional. He looked up to address File.

"Our only hope lies in discovering how events are organised in time—this might sound highly speculative for such a serious and practical matter, but this is what things have come to. In order to take effective action in the present, we must first know the future. This is the mission we have in mind for you. The Research Complex at Geneva has found a way to deposit a man some years in the future and bring him back. You will be sent ten years forward to find out what will happen and how it will come about. You will then return, report your findings to us, and we will use this information to guide our actions, and also—scientifically—to analyse the laws governing the sequence of time. This is how we hope to formulate a method of human government for use by future ages, and, perhaps, remove the random element from human affairs."

File was impressed by the striking, unconventional method the Cabinet had adopted to resolve its dilemma.

"You leave immediately," Appeltoft told him, breaking in on his thoughts. "After this conference, you and I will fly to Geneva where the technicians have the apparatus in readiness." A hint of bitterness came into his voice. "I had wished to go myself, but . . ." he shrugged and made a vague, disgusted gesture which took in the rest of the Cabinet.

"That's a point," File said. "Why have you chosen me?"

The ministers looked at one another shiftily. Strasser spoke up.

"The reason lies in your education, Max," he said diffidently. "The difficulties facing us now were beginning to show themselves over a generation ago. The government of the time decided to bring up a small number of children according to a new system of education. The idea was to develop people capable of comprehending in detail the massiveness of modern civilisation, by means of forced learning in every subject. The experiment failed. All your schoolfellows lost their sanity. You survived, but did not turn into the product we had hoped for. To prevent any later derangement of your mind, a large part of the information which had been pressured into it was removed by hypnotic means. The result is yourself as you are—a super-dilettante, with an intense curiosity and a gift for management. We gave you the post you now hold, and forgot about you. Now you are ideal for our purpose."

Inwardly, File underwent a jolt: even more so because the account agreed well with his own suspicions concerning

his origins. He pulled himself together before he could become introspective.

"I was the only one to make it, eh? I wonder why."

Standon regarded File steadily in the dim light. Once again that strange layer of emotion seemed to stir in him, lying somewhere below his features, but not affecting the muscles or skin.

"Because of your determination, Mr. File. Because whatever happens, somehow, you have the capacity to find a way out."

File left the building even more aware of his speculations than before. Appeltoft came with him, and the car whined smoothly towards the nearest air centre.

He had a peg to hang his thoughts on now. The sequence of time . . . Yes, there was no doubt that the explanation of the titanic phenomena through which he was being driven, lay in the sequence of time.

Looking around him, he saw how literally true were the statements just given him by the ministers.

After the formation of the Economic Community, into which all the European countries were finally joined, the continent's capacity had accelerated fantastically. Economic development had soared so high that eventually it became necessary to buttress up the whole structure from underneath. Stage by stage, the buttresses had become more massive, until the community was tied to the ground, a rigid unchangeable monster, humming and roaring with energy.

Even the airy architectural promise of the previous century had not materialised. The constructions wheeling past the car had an appearance of Wagnerian heaviness, blocking out the sunlight.

He turned to Appeltoft. "So in an hour I'll be ten years in the future. Ridiculous statement!"

Appeltoft laughed, as though to show he appreciated the paradox.

"But tell me," File continued, "are you really so ignorant about time's nature, and yet you can effect travel in it?"

"We are not so ignorant about its nature, as about its structure and organisation," Appeltoft told him. "The equations which enable us to transmit through time give no clue to that—in fact they say that time has no sequence at all, which can hardly be possible."

Appeltoft paused. His manner towards File gave the latter cause to think that the scientist still resented not being allowed to be the first time traveller, though he was trying to

hide it. File didn't blame him. When a man has worked fanatically for something, it must be a blow to see a complete stranger take over the fruits of it.

"There are two theories extant," Appeltoft eventually went on. "The first, and the one I favour, is the common-sense view—past, present, future, proceeding in an unending line and each even having a definite position on the line. Unfortunately the idea has not lent itself to any mathematical formulation.

"The other idea, which some of my co-workers hold, goes like this: that time isn't really a forward-moving flow at all. It exists as a constant: all things are actually happening at once, but human beings haven't got the built-in perceptions to see it as such. Imagine a circular stage with a sequence of events going on round it, representing, say, periods in one man's life. In that case they would be played by different actors, but in the actuality of time the same man plays all parts. According to this, an alteration in one scene has an effect on all subsequent scenes all the way round back to the beginning."

"So that time is cyclic—what you do in the future may influence your future past, as it were?"

"If the theory is correct. Some formulations have been derived, but they don't work very well. All we really know, is that we can deposit you into the future and probably bring you back."

"Probably! You've had failures?"

"Thirty-three per cent of our test animals don't return," Appeltoft said blithely.

Once they were at the air centre, it took them less than an hour to reach the Geneva Research Complex. From the air receptor on the roof, Appeltoft conducted him nearly half a mile down to the underground laboratories. Finally, he pulled an old-fashioned key-chain from his pocket, attached to which was a little radio-key. As he pressed the stud a door swung open a few yards ahead.

They entered a blue-painted chamber whose walls were lined with what looked like computer programme inlets. A number of white-robed technicians sat about, waiting.

Occupying the centre of the room was a chair, mounted on a pedestal. A swivel arm held a small box with instrument dials on the external surfaces; but the most notable feature was the three translucent rods which seemed to ray out from just behind the chair, one going straight up, and the other two at right angles one on either side.

The floor was covered with trestles supporting a network of helices and semi-conductor electron channels, radiating out from the chair like a spider's web. File found himself trying to interpret the set-up in the pseudo scientific jargon which was his way of understanding contemporary technology. Electrons . . . indeterminacy . . . what would the three rods be for?

"This is the time transmission apparatus," Appeltoft told him without preamble.

"The actual apparatus itself will remain here in the present time: only that chair, with you sitting in it, will make the time transference itself."

"So you will control everything from here?"

"Not exactly. It will be a 'powered flight,' so to speak, and you will carry the controls. But the power unit will remain here. We might be able to do something if the mission goes wrong, perhaps not. We probably won't even know.

"The three rods accompanying the chair represent the three spatial dimensions. As these rotate out of true space, time-motion will begin."

Stepping carefully across the trestles, they walked nearer to the chair. Appeltoft explained the controls and instruments. "This is your speed gauge—you've no way of controlling that, it's all automatic. This switch here is 'stop' and 'start'—it's marked, you'll notice. And this one gives the point in time you occupy, in years, days, hours, and seconds. Everything else is programmed for you. As you see, it reads Nil now. When you arrive it will read ten years."

"Point in time, eh?" File mused. "That could have two meanings according to what you've just told me."

Appeltoft nodded. "You're astute. Pragmatically, my own view of straight line time is closest to the operation of the time transmitter. It's the easiest to grasp, anyway."

File studied the apparatus for nearly a minute without speaking. The silence dragged on. Though he wasn't aware of it, strain was growing.

"Well, don't just stand there," Appeltoft snapped with sudden ferocity. "Get on the damned thing! We haven't got all day!"

File gave him a look of surprised reproof.

Appeltoft sagged. "Sorry. If you knew—how jealous I am of you. To be the first man with a chance to discover the secret of time! It's the secret to the universe itself!"

Well, File thought to himself, as he watched the young minister's lean, intense face, *"if I had his determination I*

might have been a scientist and made discoveries for myself, instead of being a jacked-up dilettante. "A dilettante," he muttered aloud.

"Eh?" Appeltoft said. "Well, come on, let's get it done."

File climbed into the seat built into the back of the chair, camera lenses peered over his shoulders. "You know what to look for?" Appeltoft asked finally.

"As much as anybody. Besides—I want to go as much as you do."

"All right then. Capacity's built up. Press the switch to 'start.' It will automatically revert to 'stop' at the end of the journey."

File obeyed. At first, nothing happened. Then he got the impression that the translucent rods, which he could see out of the corners of his eyes, were rotating clockwise, though they didn't seem to change their positions. At the same time, the room appeared to spin in the opposite direction—again, it was movement without change of position.

The effect was entirely like having drunk too much, and File felt dizzy. He pulled his eyes to the speed gauge. One minute per minute—marking time! One and a half, two . . .

With a weird flickering effect the laboratory vanished. He was in a neutral grey fog, left only with sensation.

The first sensation was that he was taking part in the rotating movement—being steadily canted to the left. As his angle to the vertical increased, the second sensation increased: a rushing momentum, a gathering speed towards a nameless destination.

000001.146.15.0073—the numbers slipped into place, swiftly towards the right hand side, slowly towards the left. 000002—3—4—5—6—7—

Then the nausea returned, the feeling of being spun round—the other way, now. Light dazzled his eyes.

000010.000.00.0000.

When he grew used to it, the light was really dim. He was still in the laboratory, but it was deserted, illuminated by emergency lights glowing weakly in the ceiling. It was not in ruins, and there was no sign of violence, but the place had obviously been empty for some time.

Climbing down from the chair, he went to the door, used the radio key which Appeltoft had given him, went through and closed it behind him. He walked along the corridor and through the other departments.

The whole complex shouldn't be deserted after only ten years . . . something drastic must have happened.

He frowned, annoyed at himself. Of course it had. That was why he was here.

The high-level streets of Geneva were equally deserted. He could see the tops of mountains in the distance, poking between metallic roadways. The drone of the city was missing. There was some noise to be heard, but it was muted and irregular.

As he mounted an inter-level ramp he saw one or two figures, mostly alone. He had never seen so few people. Perhaps the quickest way to find out what was going on would be to locate the library and read up some recent history. It might give a clue, anyway.

He reached the building which pushed up through several layers of deserted street. A huge black sign hung over the main entrance. It said:

MEN ONLY

Puzzled, File entered the cool half-light and approached the wary young man at the Enquiry Desk.

"Excuse me," he said and jumped as the man produced a squat gun from under the counter and levelled it at him.

"What do you want?"

"I've come to consult recent texts dealing with the development of Europe in the last ten years," File said.

The young man grinned with his thin lips. The gun held steady, he said: "Development?"

"I'm a serious student—all I want to do is look up some information."

The young man put away the gun and with one hand pressed the buttons of an index system. He took two cards out and handed them to File.

"Fifth floor, room 543. Here's the key. Lock the door behind you. Last week a gang of women broke through the barricades and tried to burn us down. They like their meat pre-cooked, eh?"

File frowned at him, but said nothing. He went to the elevator. The young man called: "'For a student you don't know much about this library. That elevator hasn't worked for four years. The women control all the main power sources these days."

Still in a quandary, File walked up to the fifth floor, found the room he wanted, unlocked the door, entered and locked it behind him.

Seating himself before the viewer, he pressed the appropriate buttons on the panel before him and the pages started to appear on the screen.

Hmmm . . . Let's see . . . Investigations of Dalmeny Foundation members. Paper VII: PARTIAL RESULTS OF THE BAVARIAN EXPERIMENT . . .

—Civil war imminent, the Council temporarily averted it by promising that thorough research would be made into every claim for a solution to the problems of over-compression. This, as we know now, was a stonewalling action since they later admitted they had been incapable of predicting the outcome of any trend. The faction, one of the most powerful, headed by the late Stefan Untermeyer, demanded that they be allowed to conduct a controlled experiment.

—Unable to stall any longer, the Council reluctantly agreed, and a large part of Bavaria was set aside so that the plans of the Untermeyer faction could be implemented. This plan necessitated sexual segregation. Men and women were separated and each given an intensive psycho conditioning to hate the opposite sex. Next, acts were passed making contact with the opposite sex punishable by death. This act had to be enforced frequently, although not as frequently as originally had been thought. Ironically, Untermeyer was one of the first to be punished under the act.

—It is difficult these days, to make a clear assessment of the results of this experiment (which so quickly got out of hand and resulted in the literal war between the sexes, which now exists with cannibalism so prevelant, each sex regarding it as lawful to eat a member of the other) but it is obvious that measures for re-assimilation have so far met with little success and that, since this creed has now spread through Germany, Scandinavia and elsewhere, an incredible depletion of life in Northern Europe is likely. In the long run, of course, repopulation will result as the roving hordes from France and Spain press northwards. Europe, having collapsed, is ready for conquest and when the squabblings of America and the United East are ended, either by bloodshed or peaceful negotiation, Europe's only salvation may be in coming under the sway of one of these powers. However, as we know, both these powers have similar problems to those of Europe in its last days of sanity.

File pursed his lips, consulted the other card and pressed a fresh series of buttons.

—Nobody could have predicted this. But by the look of it there's more to come. Let's see what this is: FINDINGS OF THE VINER COMMITTEE FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF SOCIAL DISINTEGRATION IN SOUTHERN EUROPE . . .

—The terms of reference of the Committee were as follows: To investigate the disintegration of the pre-experimental European society in southern Europe and to suggest measures for re-organising the society into an operating whole.

—Briefly, as is generally known, the European Council gave permission for the Population Phasing Group to conduct an experiment in Greece. This Group, using the principles of suspended animation discovered a few years earlier by Batchovski, instituted total birth-control and placed three-quarters of the population of Greece into suspended animation, the other quarter being thought sufficient to run public and social services and so on, reasoning, quite rationally it seemed, that in this way further population explosion would be averted, less overcrowding would result and the pace of our society could be relaxed. After a given time, the first quarter would go into suspended animation and be replaced by the next quarter and so on. This phasing process did seem to be the most reasonable solution to the Problem of Europe, as it was called.

—However, in ridding the population of claustrophobia, the system produced an effect of extreme agoraphobia. The people, being used to living close together, became restless, and the tension which had preceded the introduction of the PPG Experiment, was turned into new channels. Mobs, exhibiting signs of extreme neurosis, completely insensate and deaf to all reason, attacked what were called the S.A. Vaults and demanded the release of their relatives and friends. The authorities attempted to argue with them but, in the turmoil which followed, were either killed or forced to flee. Unable to operate the machines keeping the rest of the population in suspended animation, the mobs destroyed them, killing the people they had intended to re-awaken.

—When the Committee reached Southern Europe, they found a declining society. Little attempt had been made to retrieve the situation, people were living in the vast depopulated conurbations in little groups, fighting off the influx of roaming bands from France, Spain and Italy, where earlier a religious fanatic had, quite unexpectedly, started a jehad against the automated, but workable, society. This 'back to nature' movement snowballed. Power installations were destroyed and millions of tons of earth were imported from Africa to spread over the ruins. In the chaos which ensued, people fought and squabbled over what little food could be grown in the unproductive earth where it had been imported and in the Holiday Spaces. Britain, already suffering

from the effects of this breakdown and unable to obtain sufficient supplies to feed its own population properly, had begun sending aid but had been forced to give up this measure and look to its own problems—the sudden spread of an unknown disease, similar to typhus, which was found to have come from Yugoslav refugees who had themselves suffered badly from the introduction of a synthetic food product which contained the germs. By the time we reached Southern Europe, the social services all over the continent had disintegrated and only the Dalmeny Foundation (which had commissioned us) and half-a-dozen less well-organised groups were managing to maintain any kind of academic activity . . .

As File read on through the depressing texts, he felt the blood leave his face. At length he had checked and rechecked the documents; he sat back and contemplated.

The blundering nature of the experiments appalled him. Nothing could be a better confirmation of what he had been told at the Cabinet Meeting, and it made him doubt, now, that anything at all could be done to avert the calamity. If men were so blind and foolish, could even Appeltoft's incisive mind save them? Even supposing he succeeded in making a clear, workable analysis of the science of events from the information File had obtained . . .

That part of it was out of his hands, he realised, and perhaps Appeltoft's confidence stood for something. Impatiently he rushed back to the laboratory mounted the chair of the time machine and pressed the switch to 'start.' 000009.000.00.0003 . . .

Soon there was a grey mist surrounding him as before. Rotation and momentum began to impress themselves on his senses.

Then his gauges jigged and danced, clicked and tumbled insanely. 009000.100.02.0000—000175.000.03.0800—6309-46.020.44.1125.

Something had gone wrong. Desperately he tried to stop the machine and inspect the controls. Every dial registered noughts now.

But the laboratory was gone. He was surrounded by darkness.

He was in limbo.

—000000.000.00.0000.

File did not know how long he sped through the emptiness. Gradually, the mistiness began to return, then, after

what seemed an interminable time, a flurry of impressions spun round his eyes.

At last, the time machine came to a halt, but he did not pause to see what was around him. He pressed the 'start' switch again.

Nothing happened. File inspected all the dials in turn, casting a long look at one which, as Appeltoft had told him, registered the machines' 'time-potential,' that is, its capacity to travel through time.

The hand was at zero. He was stranded.

Thirty-three per cent of our test animals don't return. Appeltoft's remark slipped sardonically into his memory.

The cameras behind his shoulders were humming almost imperceptibly as they recorded the scene on micro-tape. Bleakly, File lifted his head and took stock of his surroundings.

The sight was beautiful but alien. The landscape consisted of sullen orange dust, over which roamed what looked like clouds—purple masses rolling and drifting over the surface of the desert. On the horizon of this barren scene, the outlines of grotesque architecture were visible—or were they just natural formations?

He glanced upwards. There were no clouds in the sky: evidently they were too dense to float in free air. A small sun hung low, red in a deep blue sky where stars were faintly visible.

His heart was beating rapidly; as he noticed this, he realised that he was breathing more deeply than usual, every third breath almost a gasp. Was he so far removed from his own time that even the atmosphere was different?

Skrrak! The sound came with a brittle, frail quality over the thin air. File turned his head, startled.

A group of bipeds was advancing, straggling on bony, delicate limbs through knee-deep strata of purple clouds which rolled in masses a few hundred yards away. They were humanoid, but skeletal, ugly, and clearly not human. The leader, who was over seven feet tall, was shouting and pointing at File and the machine.

Another waved his hands: *"Sa Skrrak—dek svala yaal!"*

The group, about ten in number, carried long slim spears and their torsos and legs were covered with scrubby hair. Their triangular heads had huge ridges of bone over and under the eyes so that they seemed to be wearing helmets. Thin hair swirled around their heads as they came closer, proceeding cautiously as if in slow motion.

As they approached, File saw that some of them carried curious rifle-like weapons, and the leader bore a box-shaped instrument with a lens-structure on one side, which he was pointing in his direction.

File felt the warmth of a pale green beam, and tried to dodge it. But the alien creature skilfully kept it trained on him.

After a second or two, a buzzing set up in his brain; fantastic colours engulfed his mind, separating out into waves of white and gold. Then geometric patterns flared behind his eyes. Then words—at first in his brain, and then in his ears.

"Strange one, what is your tribe?"

He was hearing the gutteral language of the alien—and understanding it. The creature touched a switch on the top of the box, and the beam flicked off.

"I am from another time," File said without emphasis.

The warriors shifted their weapons uneasily. The leader nodded, a stiff gesture, as if his bone structure did not permit easy movement. "That would be an explanation."

"Explanation?"

"I am conversant with all the tribes, and you do not correspond to any of them." The warrior shifted his great head to give the horizon a quick scrutiny. "We are the Yulk. Unless you intend to depart immediately, you had best come with us."

"But my machine . . ."

"That also we will take. You will not wish it to be destroyed by the Raxa, who do not permit the existence of any creature or artifact save themselves."

File debated for some moments. The chair and its three rods were easily portable, but was it wise to move them?

Idly, he moved the useless 'start' switch again. Damn! Since the machine no longer worked, what difference did it make if he moved it to the Moon? And yet to go off with these alien creatures when his only objective was to return to the Geneva Complex seemed the most obvious absurdity.

A sick feeling of failure came over him. He was beginning to realise that he was never going to get back to Geneva. The scientists had known that there was some fault in their time transmission methods; now, he knew, the chair with its three rods had lost all touch with the equipment in the laboratory. It was, in fact, no longer a time machine, and that meant he was doomed to stay here for the rest of his life.

Helplessly he gave his consent. A quartette of warriors

picked up the chair and the party set off across the ochre desert, glancing warily about it as they travelled.

They skirted round the moving clouds wherever they could, but sometimes the banks of purple vapour swept over them, borne by the wide movements of the travelling breeze, and they stumbled through a vermilion fog. File noticed that the alien beings kept a tight hold on their weapons when this happened. What was it they feared? Even in this desolated and near-empty world, strife and dramas played themselves out.

An hour's journey brought them to a settlement of tents clustered on a low hillside. A carefully cultivated plot of some wretched vegetation grew over about half the hill, as though only just managing to maintain itself in the sterile desert. Tethered over the camp were five floating vessels, each about a hundred feet long, graceful machines with stubby, oblate sterns and tapered bows. A short open deck projected aft atop each vessel and the forward parts were laced with windows.

File's gaze lingered on these craft. They contrasted oddly with the plainly nomadic living quarters below, cured animal hides with weak fires flickering among them.

A meal had just been prepared. File's time machine was taken to an empty tent and he was invited to eat with the chief. As he entered the largest tent of the settlement and saw the nobility of this small tribe gathered round a vegetable stew-pot with their weapons beside them, he knew what it was they reminded him of.

Lizards.

They began to eat from glass bowls. It seemed these people knew how to work the silicates of the desert as well as build flying ships—if they had not stolen them from some more advanced people.

In the course of the meal, File also discovered that the machine the warrior had trained on him in the desert was one hundred per cent efficient. He had been completely re-educated to talk and think in another language, even though he could, if he chose, detach himself slightly, hear the strangeness of the sounds which came from both his mouth and those of the Yulk.

The chief's name was Gzerhtcak, an almost impossible sound to European ears. As they ate, he answered File's questions in unemotional tones.

From what he was told, he imagined that this was an Earth in old age, an Earth millions, perhaps billions of

years ahead of his own time, and it was nearly all desert. There were about eight tribes living within a radius of a few hundred miles, and when they were not squabbling among themselves they were fighting a never-ending struggle for existence both with the ailing conditions of a dying world, and with the Raxa, creatures who were not organic life at all but consisted of mineral crystals conglomerated into geometrical forms, and, in some mysterious way, endowed both with sentience and the property of mobility.

"Fifty generations ago," the Yulk chief told him, "the Raxa had no existence in the world; then they began to grow. They thrive in the dead desert, which is all food for them, while we steadily die. There is nothing we can do, but fight."

Furthermore, the atmosphere of the Earth was becoming unbreathable. Little fresh oxygen was being produced, since there was no vegetation except at the plantations. Beside this, noxious vapours were being manufactured by a chemical-geological action in the ground, and by slow volcanic processes which drifted through the sand from far below. Only in a few places, such as this region where the tribes lived, was the atmosphere still suitable for respiration, and that only because of the relative stillness of the atmosphere, which discouraged the separate gases from mixing.

It was a despairing picture of courage and hopelessness which gradually unfolded to File. Was this the final result of man's inability to control events, or was the collapse of the European Economic Community an insignificant happening which had been swallowed up by a vaster history? He tended to think that this was so; for he felt sure that the creatures who sat and ate with him were not even descended from human stock.

Lizards. The old order of the world of life had died away. Men had gone. Only these fragments remained, lizards elevated to a manlike state, attempting to retain a foothold in a world which had changed its mind. Probably the other tribes the Yulk spoke of were also humanoids who had evolved from various lower animals.

"Tomorrow is the great battle," the Yulk chief said. "We throw all our resources against the Raxa, who advance steadily to destroy the last plantations on which we depend. After tomorrow, we shall know in our hearts how long we have to live."

Max File clenched his hands impotently. His fate was sealed. Eventually he too would take his place alongside the

Yulk warriors in the last stand against humanity's enemy.

Appeltoft spread his hands impassively and looked at Strasser. What could he do? He had done all he could.

"What happened?" said the Prime Minister.

"We tracked him ten years into the future. We got him on the start of his journey back, and then quite suddenly—gone. Nothing. I told you we lost thirty-three per cent of our experimental animals in the same way. I warned you of the risk."

"I know—but have you tried everything? You know what it will mean if he doesn't return . . ."

"We have been trying, of course. We are searching now, trying to pick him up, but outside the Earth's time-track all is chaotic to our instruments—some defect in our understanding of time. We can probe out—but really, a needle in a haystack is nothing compared . . ."

"Well, keep trying. Because if you don't get him back soon we shall be forced to allow the Untermeyer people to go ahead in Bavaria and we have no means of predicting the result."

Appeltoft sighed wearily and returned to his laboratory.

When he had left the chamber, Standon said: "Poor devil."

"There's a time and a place for sentimentality, Standon," Strasser said guiltily.

The Earth still rotated in the same period, and after a sleep of about eight hours File left his tent and stretched his limbs in the thin air, aroused by the sound of clinking metal. It was just after dawn, and the fighting males of the tribe were setting out to battle. The females and children, shivering, watched as their menfolk went off in procession into the desert. A few rode reptile-like horses, precious cossetted animals all of whom had been harnessed for the battle. Twenty feet above their heads the five aircraft floated patiently following the direction given by the chief below.

File hung around the camp, apprehensive and edgy. About an hour after sunset, the remnants of the forces returned.

It was defeat. A third of the men had survived. None of the aircraft returned, and File had learned the night before that although the tribe retained the knowledge and skill to build more, it was an undertaking that strained their resources to the utmost and the construction of another would almost certainly never begin.

Humanity's strength was depleted beyond revival point.

The mineral intelligences called the Raxa would continue their implacable advance with little to stop them.

The Yulk chief was the last man in. Bruised, bleeding and scorched by near-misses from energy beams, he submitted to the medications of the women, and then called the nobles together as usual for their evening meal.

One by one, the wearied warriors took their leave and made their ways to their tents, until File was left alone with Gzerhtcak.

He looked directly into the old man's eyes. "There is no hope," he said bluntly.

"I know. But there is no need for you to remain."

"I have no choice." He sighed. "My machine has broken down. I must throw in my lot with you."

"Perhaps we can repair your machine. But you will be plunging into the unknown . . ."

File made a gesture with his hands. "What could you possibly do to repair my machine!"

The chief rose and led the way to the tent where the machine lay. A brief command into the night produced a boy with a box of tools. The chief studied File's machine, lifting a panel to see behind the instruments. Finally, he made adjustments, adding a device which took him about twenty minutes to make with glowing bits of wire. The time-potential meter began to lift above zero.

File stared in surprise.

"Our science is very ancient and very wise," the chief said, "though these days we know it only by rote. Still, I, as father of the tribe, know enough so that when a man like yourself tells me that he has stranded himself in time, I know what the reason is."

File was astounded by the turn of events. "When I get home—" he began.

"*You will never get home.* Neither will your scientists ever analyse time. Our ancient science has a maxim: No man understands time. Your machine travels under its own power now. If you leave here, you simply escape this place and take your chance elsewhere."

"I must make the attempt," File said. "I cannot remain here while there is a hope of getting back."

But still he lingered.

The chief seemed to guess his thoughts. "Do not fear that you desert us," he said. "Your position is clear—as is ours. There is no help for either of us."

File nodded and stepped up to the chair of the machine.

As he cleaned off the grime and dust with his shirt sleeves, it occurred to him to look at the date-register—he had not bothered to read the figures on his arrival. He did not expect it to make sense, for it had too few digits to account for the present antiquity of the Earth.

But when he read the dial he received a shock. 000008. 324.01.7954. Less than nine years after his departure from the Geneva Complex!

He seated himself on the time machine and pressed the switch.

Internal rotation clockwise . . . external rotation anti-clockwise . . . then the forward rushing. He plunged into the continuum of Time.

Minutes passed, and no sign came that he would emerge automatically from his journey. Taking a chance, he pressed the switch to 'stop.'

With a residual turning of the translucent rods, the machine deposited itself into normal space-time orientation. About him, the landscape was more mind-shaking than anything he had ever dreamed.

Was it crystal? The final victory of the crystalline Raxa? For a moment the fantastic landscape, with its flashing, brilliant, mathematical overgrowth, deluded him into thinking it was so. But then he saw that it could not be—or if it was, the Raxa had evolved beyond their mineral heritage.

It was a world of geometrical form, but it was also a world of constant movement—or rather, since the movement was all so sudden as to be instantaneous, of constant transformation. Flashing extensions and withdrawals, all on the vertical and horizontal planes, dazzled his eyes. When he looked closer, he saw that in fact *three-dimensional form was nowhere present.* Everything consisted of two-dimensional shapes, which came together transitorily to give the *illusion* of form.

The colours, too . . . they underwent transformations and graduations which bespoke the action of regular mathematical principles—like the prismatic separation into the ideal spectrum. But here the manifestations were infinitely more subtle and inventive, just as subtle, tenuous music, using fifty instruments, can be made out of the seven tones of the diatonic scale.

File looked at the date register. It told him he was now fifteen years away from Appeltoft, anxiously awaiting his return in the Geneva Complex.

He tried again.

A lush world of lustrous vegetation swayed and rustled in a hot breeze. A troup of armadillo-like animals, but the size of horses, paraded through the clearing where File's machine had come to rest. Without pausing, the leader swung its head to give him a docile, supercilious inspection, then turned to grunt something to the followers. They also gave him a cursory glance and then they had passed through a screen of wavy grass-trees. He heard their motions through the forest for some distance.

Again.

Barren rock. The sky hung with traceries of what were obviously dust-clouds. Here the ground was clean of even the slightest trace of dust, but a strong cold wind blew. Presumably it swept the dust into the atmosphere and prevented it from precipitating, scouring the rock to a sparkling, ragged surface. He could hardly believe that this scrubbed shining landscape was actually the surface of a planet. It was like an exhibit.

Again.

Now he was in space, protected by some field the time machine seemed to create around itself. Something huge as Jupiter hung where Earth should have been.

Again.

Space again. A scarlet sun pouring bloody light over him. On his left, a tiny, vivid star, like a burning magnesium flare, lanced at his eyes. An impossible three-planet triune rotated majestically above him, with no more distance between them than from the Earth to the Moon.

He looked at the date register again. Twenty-odd years from departure.

Where was the sequence? Where was the progression he had come to find? How was Appeltoft to make sense out of this?

How was he going to find Appeltoft?

Desperately, he set the machine in motion again. His desperation seemed to have some effect: he picked up speed, rushing with insensate energy and now he was not just in limbo but could see something of the universe through which he was passing.

After a while he got the impression that he was still, that it was the machine that was static while time and space were not. The universe poured around him, a disordered tumult of forces and energies, lacking direction lacking purpose . . .

On he sped, hour after hour, as if he were trying to flee

from some fact he could not face. But at last, he could hide from it no longer. As he observed the chaos around him he *knew*.

Time *had* no sequence! It was *not* a continuous flowing. It had no positive direction: it went neither forwards, backwards, nor in a circle; neither did it stay still. *It was totally random.*

The universe was bereft of logic. It was nothing but chaos. It had no purpose, no beginning, no end. It existed only as a random mass of gases, solids, liquids, fragmentary accidental patterns. Like a kaleidoscope, it occasionally formed itself into patterns, so that it *seemed* ordered, *seemed* to contain laws, *seemed* to have form and direction.

But, in fact, there was nothing but chaos, nothing but a constant state of flux—the only thing that was constant. There *were* no laws governing time! Appeltoft's ambition was impossible!

The world from which he had come, or any other world for that matter, could dissipate into its component elements at any instant, *or could have come into being at any previous instant, complete with everybody's memories!* Who would be the wiser? The whole of the European Economic Community might have existed only for the half-second which it had taken him to press the starting switch of the time machine. No wonder he couldn't find it!

Chaos, flux, eternal death. All problems were without solution. As File realised these facts he howled with the horror of it. He could not bring himself to stop. In proportion to his despair and fear, his speed increased, faster and faster, until he was pouring madly through turmoil.

Faster, further—

The formless universe around him began to vanish as he went to an immense distance and beyond the limits of speed. Matter was breaking up, disappearing. Still he rushed on in terror, until the time machine fell away beneath him, and the matter of his body disintegrated and vanished.

He was a bodiless intelligence, hurtling through the void. Then his emotions began to vanish. His thoughts. His identity. The sensation of movement dropped away. Max File was gone. Nothing to see, hear, feel or know.

He hung there, nothing but consciousness. He did not think: he no longer had any apparatus to think with. He had no name. He had no memories. No qualities, attributes or feelings. He was just *there*. Pure ego.

The same as nothing.

There was no time. A split second was the same as a billion ages.

So it would not have been possible for File, later, to assign any period to his interlude in unqualified void. He only became aware of anything when he began to emerge.

At first, there was only a vague feeling, like something misty. Then more qualities began to attach themselves to him. Motion began. Chaotic matter became distantly perceptible—disorganised particles, flowing energies and wavy lines.

A name impinged on his consciousness: Max File. Then the thought: That's me.

Matter gradually congregated round him and soon he had a body again and a complete set of memories. He could accept the existence of an unorganised universe now. He sighed: at the same moment the time machine formed underneath him.

All he could do now was to try to return to Geneva, however remote the possibility. How strange, to think that the whole of Europe, with all its seriously-taken problems, was nothing more than a chance coming-together of random particles! But at least it was home—even if it only existed for a few seconds.

And if he could only rejoin those few seconds, he thought in agonised joyousness, he would be dissolved along with the rest of it and be released from this hideous extension of life he had escaped into.

And yet, he thought, how could he get back? Only by searching, only by searching . . .

He reckoned (though of course his calculations were liable to considerable error) that he spent several centuries searching through mindless turmoil. He grew no older; he felt no hunger or thirst: he did not breathe—how his heart kept beating without breath was a mystery to him, but it was on this, the centre of his sense of time, that he based his belief about the duration of the search. Occasionally he came upon other brief manifestations, other transient conglomerations of chaos. But now he was not interested in them, and he did not find Earth at the time of the E.E.C.

It was hopeless. He could search forever.

In despair, he began to withdraw again, to become a bodiless entity and find oblivion, escape from his torments in the living death. It was while he was about to dispense with the last vestige of identity, that he discovered his unsuspected power.

He happened to direct his mind to a grouping of jostling

particles some distance away. Under the impact of his will —it moved!

Interested, he halted his withdrawal, but did not try to emerge back into his proper self—he had the feeling that as Max File he was impotent. As an almost unqualified ego—perhaps . . .

He allowed an image to form in his mind—it happened to be that of a woman—and directed it at the formless chaos. Instantly, against dark flux, lit by random flashes of light, a woman was formed out of chaotic matter. She moved, looked at him and gave a languorous smile.

There was no doubt about it. She was not just an image. She was alive, perfect and aware.

Amazed, he automatically let go of the mental image and transmitted a cancellation. The woman vanished, replaced by random particles and energies as before. The cloud lingered for a moment, then dispersed.

It was a new-found delight. He could make anything! For ages he experimented, creating everything he could think of. Once, a whole world formed beneath him, complete with civilisations, a tiny sun, and rocket-ships probing out.

He cancelled it at once. It was enough to know that his every intention, even his vaguest and grandest thought, was translated into detail.

Now he had a means to return home—and now he could solve the government's problem for good and all.

For if he could not find Europe, could he not create it over again? Would that not be just as good? In fact, it was a point of philosophy whether it would not be in fact the same Europe. This was Nietzche's belief, he remembered —his hope of personal immortality. Since, in the boundless universe, he was bound to recur—File's discoveries had reinforced this view, anyhow—he would not die. Two identical objects shared the same existence.

And in this second Europe, why should he not solve the government's dilemma for them? Was there any reason why he should not create a community which did not contain the seeds of destruction? An economic community with stability, which the prototype had lacked?

He began to grow excited. It would defeat Flux, stand against the chaos of the rest of the universe, containing a structure which would last. Otherwise, it would be the same in every detail . . .

He set to work, summoning up thoughts, memories and

images, impinging them on the surrounding chaos. Matter began to form. He set the time machine in motion, travelling on to the world he was creating . . .

Suddenly he was in mistiness again. Rotating . . . rotation without change of position . . . rushing forward . . .

The numbers clicked off his dial: 000008—7—6—5—4 . . .

Then everything steadied around him as the machine came to a stop. He was in Appeltoft's laboratory in Geneva. Technicians prowled the outskirts of the room, beyond the barriers of trestles. The time machine, its translucent rods pointing dramatically in three directions, rested on a rough wooden pedestal.

File moved, stiff, aching and dusty, in the grimy seat. Appeltoft rushed forward, helping him down anxiously and delightedly.

"You're back on the dot, old man! As a test flight it was perfect—from our end." He flicked his finger over his shoulder "Bring brandy for the man! You look done in, Max. Come and clean up; then you can tell us how it went . . ."

File nodded, smiling wordlessly. It was almost perfect . . . but he had not realised just how efficiently he had been taught a new language.

Appeltoft had spoken to him in the voice-torturing tongue of the Yulk.

THE LAST SALAMANDER

John Rackham

WALTER COCKBURN had learned the trick, early in life, of splitting himself into two parts, one of which could appear to listen and nod and even comment, while the other was busy about its own interests. The trick served him well as he stood patiently by, while his immediate superior chattered. For at that moment, they were a deeply engrossed group. Tommy Jordan, charge-engineer; Wally Bowles, shift-foreman; leading-stoker Clarke, regulator, all had in passionate common the fate of a certain football team and what better time to argue about it than the Saturday night of the big match? The boilerhouse clock stood at eleven and all the washed-and-dressed personnel of the previous shift had safely departed. Plant operators were completing their eleven o'clock readings and transferring carry-forward data to new log sheets. Auxiliary personnel were drifting on to the floor in ones and twos. In another place, control-engineers were carefully pinching-off the load, megawatt by megawatt.

The telephone buzzed and Clarke took himself out of the wrangle to answer it. After a moment, he nodded, grunted an acknowledgement, put back the hand-set and picked up the public-address microphone.

"Nine—eleven—thirteen, stop your stokers, please," he said and waited until three answering pips came back over the loudspeaker. Then he went to his board, where he wiped out figures with a spit-wet finger, made chalk marks and hastened back to the argument. Away at the far end of the haze-filled boiler-house a water-alarm screamed for attention and the responsible operator dropped his evening paper and went to deal with it.

Cockburn watched, with seeming bland indifference, but he missed none of it. In an hour, almost all of this groaning machinery would be still, the fires would be allowed to dwindle to red masses of glowing coke for a breathing space, until the demand came on again in the morning. Another night-shift, just like thousands that had gone ahead of it into the nothingness of yesterday. A time to read, to chat, to search out odd jobs, to drink tea until it palled. To

try to keep awake and attentive, just in case. That was the major problem—how to keep alert and attentive for something which, in the normal course of events, should never happen, just in case it did? The best of machinery, the most ingenious automatics, can fail. That's why you need men, not to work, but to know exactly what to do if something should go wrong.

A little milling group of auxiliary-plant operatives began to gather in the middle of the boiler-house. Bowles excused himself to go and deal with them. The little chatter-group broke apart. Jordan turned away, sighing.

"We'd better go and take a look at the ash-plant, Cocky," he said. Walter hated the nickname that had been fastened on him despite the fact that his name was pronounced 'Co'burn,' but there was nothing he could do about it. "They've reported some trouble down there, on Number One side. Better see what it's all about, I suppose."

Walter nodded and followed as Jordan led the way to the central lift, but his thoughts were still his own. For two years now, at the request of a Very High Authority, he had been trying to get the general feel of this giant, sprawling industry, and the task was still engrossing him. Six months ago, he had come here, to Bell Road Generating Station, straight from an oil-fired installation. Months before that, he had been one of those present at the 'going critical' of yet another nuclear station. A few months into the future, according to the rough general plan he had been given, he was due to be transferred to a hydro-electric plant. All by way of experience, to gain impressions. There were so many varied ways of making electricity—and that was another of the problems.

How do you achieve uniformity of organisation, co-ordination, in an industry in which the archaic rubs shoulders with the ultra-modern and the whole range of in-betweens is still functional? How do you span the time-technology gap between shovel and slice and the deep-screened rupturing of enriched atoms? When you can move, in a matter of hours, from an old station that labours mightily to generate five megawatts, to a newer station where each boiler-turbine is a complete unit, purringly producing thirty times that much—when you have semi-skilled people performing routine motions, in one place and highly-trained technicians, scientists almost, to nurse the complex controls in another—how do you lump them all together? All are producing that life-energy of the modern world—electricity. All of them are people, human

beings doing a job. And, when the breakers go home, the switches move, the buttons are pushed and the world out there wants power, more power, and wants it right now, all these people are equally indispensable.

Walter was secretly glad that it was not for him to find answers to these problems. All he was asked to do was observe and report on a factual level, without bias. That much he was singularly competent to do.

"Bet you never had any ash-basement trouble in your last place," Jordan grumbled, as they waited for the lift to settle. "That's one thing about oil-fuel—no ash!"

"That's right," Walter agreed, knowing full well that Jordan was merely making conversation. For this was his gift, the ability to know what the other person was feeling. Not so much in verbal terms, or on a conscious level, but in an overall sense of reactions and emotions. That was why, as one of the rare and precious 'X' people, he had been approached by the Very High Authority and asked to render service, if possible.

"Sooner or later," the V.H.A. had said, "we shall be compelled to close down the older stations. All of them are either obsolete, or obsolescent—and they are inefficient. Their cost-per-unit generated is six, seven, sometimes eight times as much as the more modern plant. The only reason we have to keep them in operation is simply because we just cannot do without them at the moment. The demand for power increases faster than we can build plants to meet it. But there are signs that the two curves are converging. We shall catch up. We are modernising all the time. And there is the other factor, that we are rapidly coming to the end of our resources of fossil fuel. When that is gone, it's gone!"

Walter had seen the broad picture even then. With no more coal, or oil, the old and traditional ways of generating power were at an end, like it or not. New ways, complicated and technical methods, would have to assume the whole burden. That inescapable fact merely underlined the basic problem. What do you do with your man-power? You have thousands of trained men, good men, willing workers, when it is a matter of dealing with fires, and boilers, and ash—things they can see and appreciate. But when all this is gone and there is nothing to see but the jump of a needle on a guage? Some men, a few, can find interest and understanding in visualising something that is going on out of sight, but the great majority need concrete problems to handle, objectivity to occupy their minds. Walter had already sensed that

boredom was a major hazard, relieved only slightly by intermittent bursts of activity. It would be infinitely worse when there was nothing at all to do except watch a meter, push a button and wait.

The lift-gates clashed behind them and they sank rapidly down to the gloom and uproar of the basement. Walter made the effort to push away his personal pre-occupations. The problem was plain enough and he would so report it, but, after that, it was none of his business. He had done his share, outlived his usefulness and was looking forward to the moment when he could get out and find something more congenial for his unusual talents.

'I'm wasting my time here,' he thought, as he picked his way through the scattered bulks of pumps, switchboxes and ash-races, where water hissed under pressure and great roiling lumps of ash fled to the central pit, there to be grabbed and hoisted out to the waiting bunker. Jordan leading the way, they moved into Number One side, where the races were silent and the great grab hung crippled and askew over the pit. Davie Miller, ash-plant charge-hand, caught sight of them and came stalking across. Long and lean, wearing a set expression of perpetual gloom, he shook his head at the grab.

"Same trouble as we had three months ago," he grunted. "It's always this one. We had some decent fitters in this place, the thing wouldn't keep on breaking down. Now we'll have to chuck all the ash out on the floor."

"There's no need for that," Jordan retorted amiably. "All these boilers will be off by midnight, so there won't be much more ash to come down. You get Number Two side ashed out and then you can re-route this stuff over there."

"Nothing much?" Miller protested. "What d'you fancy they've been doing all the afternoon, then?" Walter shut his ears to the rest of it. This was as much a routine as a stage-comedian's patter and just as insignificant. Miller was making a gesture. It would be easier to undog the side-doors and let all the ash roll out on the floor, to be barrowed away some other time. It would be a little more trouble, but the efficient thing, to re-route the ash over to the other side of the basement and grab it out in the normal way. But, as the charge-hand, Miller couldn't volunteer that suggestion. It was his role to resist anything that sounded like extra work, just as it was Jordan's role as 'authority,' to give the unwelcome instruction. All part of an unwritten code.

Walter turned away, casting his eyes round the dark,

shadowy scene, listening to the moan of machinery and the intermittent explosive crunch as unseen rollers bit on the huge lumps of fused ash, crushing them into pieces small enough to fall through the gaps and into the collecting hoppers. Dante, he thought, had never dreamed of an inferno like this. All this massive complex of men and machinery, merely to burn coal, to make heat, to push steam through sets of whirling blades, to make electricity. Which was gone, used up, dissipated forever, in the very same split second that it was made. It was irreversible destruction on a scale to stagger the mind. Thousand upon thousands of tons of pre-history, laid down after millennia of care, countless generations of living things of all kinds had given to this—and it was being destroyed at a fantastic rate—two thousand tons a day in this one station and nothing to show for it but dead, lifeless, sterile ash.

A stray flash of imagination carried him back millions of years, to the time when the Earth was a steaming sultry jungle of giant ferns, alive with the click and grunt of life and belching volcanoes—and he caught at the odd thought. Volcanoes? He shivered, wondering whether his imagination was playing tricks. Why should he think of the yawning firemouth of a volcano as a pleasant place? Associations perhaps.

His wandering eye fell on something that snapped him right out of his reverie and into the urgent present. Away over to his far right, a sweating man had just heaved back on a long iron bar, pulling it out of a port-hole in the side of the ash-hopper—and that bar was spitting white hot for six inches of its final length! Jordan saw it, too, and turned.

"Hey!" he said, in momentary amusement. "That's a bit of hot stuff, in there!" His grin persisted as the man stepped back, laying the bar down and staring at it, but Walter sensed something utterly impossible, something that should not be and he went forward quickly. He recognised the man and felt the mental twist of his bewilderment. And something else that he couldn't identify.

"What have you got there, Dick?" he asked, and the man looked up.

"Blest if I know. That bloody rod was seven foot long just now, when I poked it in there. Now look at it!" From the rapidly cooling end to where Dick Small had held it in a heavy-gloved hand, it was barely five feet. A lump of ash so hot that it could melt an iron bar? Walter took a swab from his overall pocket and used it to cautiously lift the port-

hole cover. There was no need to look in, even if he had been able to. The vivid glow that streamed out told its own story.

"They might at least burn the damn stuff before they chuck it down," Davie Miller grumbled at his elbow. Then Jordan put an incautious palm in the glow, and snatched it away again hurriedly. His grin vanished.

"That's hot!" he said, unnecessarily. "Davie, busted grab or not, that will have to be flushed out before it wrecks the hopper. Who the hell . . . ?" he shook his head and stepped back as Miller hurried away, taking Dick Small with him. A glance from side to side and Jordan nodded, checking landmarks.

"This is Boiler Six. There must be a hell of a fire in there, or there's a defect on the grate. Or something. We'd better go look. We don't want any more trouble, not on this side, not tonight."

As they hurried away, they were saved the journey. From the direction of the lift, hurriedly making his way through the huddled machinery, came a squat-built man clutching an aluminium shield.

"Ben Cook," Jordan muttered. "This is one of his boilers. There must be something up, here!"

Walter appreciated the thinking. Ben Cook was much the senior operator on this shift and not given to hurrying himself as a rule, yet here he was, almost trotting.

"Did you see it?" he demanded breathlessly.

"See what?" Jordan wondered and Cook shrugged helplessly.

"I dunno, exactly. I was just inspecting my fire. The stoker's been out for half an hour now and she's about ready to bank. I was having a look, to make sure. And there was this funny-looking lump of clinker, right on the back end. I didn't make anything of it until it moved!"

"It moved?" Jordan gasped. "What the hell d'you mean—it moved?"

"Well, it fell over into the ash-pit, just like any lump of clinker does, but you usually get a shower of sparks and dust, you know, and a lump. But this didn't. It sort of slid, like a red-hot jelly-fish. Looked as if it was trying to hold on. And when it landed in the pit, it didn't make a lump at all. It seemed to slip right through. So I came down, just to have a look and satisfy myself. I've never seen anything like it, not in all the twenty-five years I've been running these fires."

"Been smelling the barmaid's apron on the way in, too, I

expect." Jordan strove to keep up his jollying-along pose. Cook stiffened.

"I don't drink," he said, flatly, "and I know what I saw." He went to the port-hole, twitched the cover aside with a swabbed hand, hefted his shield with a practised swing and peered through the purple-glassed slit into the ash-hopper. After a moment he turned away and drew a deep breath, holding out the shield to Jordan.

"Here," he said, quietly. "You see for yourself. I didn't believe it the first time and I can't hardly believe it now, but that thing, whatever it is, is alive. Like a red-hot jelly fish!"

Long before Walter could take a turn with the shield he knew that Cook had spoken the literal truth, although he could not have explained how he knew. This was where that vivid flashback from the past had come from. This was what had thought of a volcano as a pleasant place. He sensed that it was newly born and bewildered, but strong, with a firm grasp on life. Concepts shuttled swiftly in his mind, leaping the gaps in his knowledge. Something like this could have lived on Earth, eons ago, in the time of great heat; spouting fires from the Earths' bowels and creeping masses of molten lava would have been its proper environment suiting its fantastic chemistry.

But such a life-form must have withered and perished when the fires died down, when the crust settled and became more suited for complex, low-temperature forms, based on carbon-oxygen-water compounds. So long ago that the mind ached at the effort to measure it, things like this had ceased to exist. So how . . . ? Then it was his turn with the shield and the tinted glass and he saw a blob without shape, of white-hot slow movement, maybe the size of a football. It nestled among a pile of jagged fragments of ash, on the sloping floor of the hopper and it pulsed. Slowly, as if gasping for breath, it pulsed and wire-veins of orange squirmed across its surface with each heave. Walter was at once reminded of a chicken, newly hatched and a wet, bedraggled mess, struggling for breath, gaining strength. That must be it. This thing had been an egg, or a spore, waiting all these unthinkable ages for the right conditions to trigger off its burst into life. Looking at it, he felt a greater, powerful sense of identity with it, knew that it was momentarily exhausted, hungry, but had reached a self-sufficient stage. It didn't need outside heat any longer. Given the right food, it could, and would, generate its own and grow.

Food! What did it, what *could* it feed on? Delicacies such as carbon and oxygen, in no matter what combinations, would be as the lightest of cream-puff to this kind of metabolism. Judging by the iron bar it had a taste for metals and at that temperature metals would probably serve it as body-fluids serve us. Jordan grabbed his arm, drew him aside. In the distance Miller shouted a warning and a pump screamed into life, its wail ascending rapidly into inaudibility.

"You mind your eye," Jordan warned. "When the water hits that, there'll be a blow-back like an explosion. But we'll soon have it out, whatever it is. Odd bit of coal, I reckon. You get all kinds of queer things in the coal they send us these days. Fancy old Ben thinking it was alive! Next thing you know, he'll be telling us it was one of the Devil's kids!"

Jordan's chuckle was suddenly lost as Miller swung off on a wheel-valve and a hard jet of river-water speared into the ash-hopper. There was a hiss and a cracking explosion a split-second after it. The gloom became thick and clammy with steam, rich with the acrid pungency of sulphur fumes and hot metal. Walter, eyes tight shut and holding his breath, could feel that alien 'life' just as clearly as ever. The water hadn't killed it, hadn't even diminished it. If anything, it was stronger. In all likelihood it could strip water into its component atoms and consume them if it wanted to. In the confusion of shouting all around, he opened his eyes in time to see, through the eddying steam, that Miller had spun the valve shut again and was scrambling down from the edge of the race.

There, in the hollow camber of the ash-race itself, the thing squatted, bright enough to sear the eyes—and it stared at them. At least, Walter thought, screwing up his eyes and trying to peer, it was just as if it was staring at them and probably wondering what they were going to do next. And what were they going to do? Switching his mental attitude suddenly, Walter saw this, now, as a problem calling for urgent solution. So far, he had been intrigued by the novelty of it, without bothering to think any further. But somebody had to think ahead and do it quickly.

He realised that he was still holding Ben Cook's shield. Lifting it up in front of his face he studied the strange mass as it squatted there, still pulsing. It had grown. The chances were that it would keep on growing until it reached whatever was its optimum size. And then it would spawn,

or divide, or whatever it was that it had to do to propagate.

Into his mind came uneasy thoughts, unreal and unfamiliar, that he was at first at a loss to translate. Then it came to him, obscurely, that this thing would give birth in its own way. A dizzying flash of an aching process, separating out the necessary cells, encysting them, hatching them, inside the parent body and then delivering them—and he pulled a stern curtain down over his mind. Harsh logic dictated to him, regardless of feelings. The thing would have to be destroyed—killed!

On the instant that the idea formed itself in his mind, the shining thing in the race gave a fluid heave and put out searing-hot pseudo-pods questingly.

"My God!" Jordan gasped, squinting fearfully, "it *is* alive! Shove the water on it, Davie, put the bloody thing out, before it gets loose!"

"No!" Walter forbade it, taking charge without thinking about it. Now that the problem was reduced to bare essentials, all his personal feelings had been put into the background and he was as intent as a chess-player working out the next move. "You won't achieve anything, putting water on it. That's feeding it, helping it to grow."

"Feeding it?"

"Yes. If it is alive—and I think we had better assume that—then it must feed, it must eat, to manufacture and replace energy, just as we do. And that last lot of water didn't harm it at all."

"But how else?" Jordan demanded, thickly. "If it gets loose, at that temperature, we'll never be able to stop it. You saw what it did to that iron bar!"

"Yes . . ." Walter mused. "Metal. That's one thing. But it's not affecting the liners of the race, you'll notice." He dug down into his memory for details of the composition of the liners. Basalt! Volcanic material of course. The thing wouldn't eat that. It must feel almost at home. Safe, for the moment, at any rate. But only for the moment. A question crossed his mind and he turned to Dick Small, who had come back and was staring, open-mouthed and slit-eyed, at this 'queer lump of ash.'

"Where's that iron bar you were using?"

Small got it. Walter took and juggled it awkwardly in one hand, holding the shield in the other and again offered the end of the bar to the creature. He watched as closely as he could, feeling his overalls singe and smoulder, because he

wanted to be really sure whether the thing actually ate the metal or just melted it away. As he watched, the incandescent thing absorbed a foot of the bar without effort, the wire-veins of orange scattering crazily over its surface as it did so.

"I'm as crazy as you are," Jordan said, unsteadily, "but now you're feeding it, aren't you?"

"That's right," Walter withdrew the bar. "Just making sure. It likes metal. If we can offer it a few tasty pieces, we might be able to entice it out of there."

"What for? Man, it's harmless, just where it is!"

"For the moment, yes. But its consumption must be enormous at that heat and when it can't stand it any longer, it will go looking for food." Without meaning to, Walter used the same tone to his superior that an adult might use to a child. "If we can lure it, we can control it by that much, which is better than having it running around on its own."

"What about a fire-extinguisher?" Ben Cook asked, following a train of thought all his own. Walter frowned, then shook his head.

"It would probably take the CO^2 apart just as easily as it did the water and feed on it. We must kill it, somehow. We can't beat it to death. We might poison it, if we knew enough, but we don't..."

"Suppose I put the water in and wash it down into the pit?" Miller suggested and Jordan sneered at him instantly, quite forgetting that he himself had suggested just that, only a minute or two earlier.

"Water doesn't even cool it," he pointed out, scornfully. "You saw what happened when you put the jet on it. Dump that damned thing in the pit with all that water and there'll be an explosion big enough to wreck half the blasted boiler-house. Talk sense, man!"

The ever-shifting patterns of colour that ran in fine lines over the surface intrigued Walter. It was as if the thing was thinking and this was the shape and pattern of its thought. He started from reverie to feel Ben Cook touch his arm.

"My shield..." the old man said. "I've got to get back to my units. I hope you work out some way of killing it. It *is* alive, isn't it?" He was only seeking reassurance but the question sent Walter off on a different line of thought. How does one define living? Among all the other attributes, a living, sentient thing, must have communication between its various parts. It must have awareness of some kind, mes-

sages, sensations, nerves, a nervous system. The ghost of a solution began to appear and he groped anxiously for it.

A host of ambient noises clamoured for attention. The public-address speaker boomed hollowly as the regulator called boiler after boiler to bank. Other men of the ash-gang, seeing the glow and scenting excitement, began to come close and Jordan waved them furiously away. Walter drew the curtain of his mind tight against all these distractions and pursued the thin thread of thought he had stumbled on. Nervous system. Could a thing live, any kind of thing, without communication? This thing seemed to communicate, anyway, else where did he get that overpowering certainty that it was alive?

"We'll have to electrocute it," he said, suddenly. Jordan heard that.

"Electrocute it? How the hell are we going to do that?" Walter made as if to answer, but the ideas were so formless, so undecided in his mind, that it would have been a waste of time to try to explain them in detail. Turning his shoulder to the bright glow, he sent his gaze searching round for something he had subconsciously seen in the shadows on the way here. There—there it was. A couple of feet of heavy copper wiring, thickly covered in bright red plastic insulation. Discarded from some recent repair, no doubt. He went to pick it up, came back with quick steps.

If only it 'liked' copper as much as it did iron. Fishing a knife from his pocket, he whittled hurriedly at the plastic, to bare about six inches of bright metal in a tight cluster of silver-plated strands. Then, wrenching the piece roughly straight, he approached the thing again and gasped as the heat bit at his face and hand. Lacking some kind of protection he couldn't see what he was doing. If only Ben Cook hadn't gone away with his shield.

"Damn it, I can't see!" he fumed and Jordan groped in his breast-pocket to produce a wood-framed glass.

"This any good?" he asked. "What the hell are you going to do?"

"Find out if it likes copper." Walter held the glass, peering through it and went forward reaching out with the wire. The heat scorched his fingers. He retreated hurriedly as an incandescent 'arm' grew out of the thing to reach for and take the end of the wire. He and Jordan retreated still more in a scrambling rush as the thing heaved itself up and over the side of the race and flopped on to the tiled floor, ab-

sorbing the rest of the cable. Gagging at the foul stink of burning plastic, Jordan clutched Walter by the arm.

"Did you see that? It can shift when it likes—and it ate that chunk of wire, too!"

"I saw. That's what I was hoping for."

"What?"

"You'll notice it didn't grab hold and pull. It followed the wire. My guess is that a thing like that wouldn't 'take' things—it would go wherever they are. And that's a help."

"God knows how it's a help!"

"Of course it is. What I want now is a lot more cable. All the old bits there are lying about. Especially heavy armoured stuff, and quick . . ."

"What for?" Jordan insisted, shaking the sweat out of his eyes. "What the hell are you trying to do?"

"I'm going to entice it along to the nearest high-power cable there is. And it will help if it can get used to the 'taste' of armoured stuff."

"Power cable?" Jordan parroted, staring around. "There isn't any here, not on the ground. All this machinery is fed in through overhead channel-plates, except—my God, you don't mean the tunnel?"

"That's right. The six-point-six . . ."

Walter couldn't have said when the idea really came into his mind. It had been just part of a total rationalisaton of the whole, done in a split-second of inspiration. Get it moving. Get it accustomed to attacking armoured cable. Get it to attack something powerful enough to be absolutely certain of killing it outright and altogether. And the cable tunnel was quite near. About nine or ten yards away, across an unobstructed tiled floor. Six thousand six hundred volts, with all the amperage anyone could ever want, should be enough to take care of even this incredible thing. But Jordan, very properly, was thinking of other things.

"You can't do that!" he shouted, in rank disbelief. "You'll black out the whole bloody station! There'll be Hell to pay!"

"That's better than having this thing out on the loose, isn't it? It's growing, you know, all the time . . ." and it *was* growing, visibly. "Just look at the tiles!" Walter stood back and pointed. Around the flattened bottom of the creature, the red tiles could be seen cracking and puddling.

"If it melts through those, there's only concrete, which won't stop it and then the structural girders. And it likes metal . . ."

Jordan stood, irresolute, caught in a desperate moment of decision. Walter felt acutely sorry for him. This kind of thing was completely outside his terms of reference. Then, committing himself, he whirled into action.

"Davie!" he shouted, waving furiously. "Round up your lads, help Mr. Cockburn, here. I'm going up to warn Control," he said to Walter. "I daren't try to tell them over the phone. They'd never believe it. I don't believe it, myself. God knows what the Super will say, when he finds out about it. And on a Saturday night, too . . ." and he was gone, at a run, into the gloom, heading for the lift.

"All the old bits of heavy copper wire you can find," Walter said, not taking his eyes off the thing through the glass. "Bits of heavy armoured stuff especially. All you can find. Bring it here as quick as you can."

It was bigger now, the size of a good fat pig, and it looked not unlike such an animal, as it surged forward in heavy lunges at each proffered tit-bit. Behind it lay a trail of molten tiles, a groove gouged out of the surface, edged with a fine sprinkle of greenish dust. Flickering arms grew out of the mass and were engulfed again as Walter fed it tasty morsels of copper cable, dropped carefully close, yet distant enough so that it had to reach for them. Keep it moving, he thought. Keep it moving. At the back of his mind was the niggling fear that it might develop to the point where it would be able to sense other metal for itself and reject his enticement.

It had taken on a distinctly greenish glow now, as far as he could judge through the tinted glass. It must be practically pure copper, he thought. He had lost all track of time and felt as if he had been doing this for hours. The skin of his face and hands was scorched and angrily tender. His white overalls smouldered in a dozen places. And the back of his mind was a shifting mosaic of utterly unrelated thoughts, busy thinking themselves while his attention was elsewhere.

Team-work. The ash-plant gang were helping out magnificently and without question. Jordan had been stumped, but only for a moment. Then he had made his decision and carried through with it. Prompt action. Any action. Problems, visible and concrete difficulties, something to occupy the mind—challenges—was that the answer? Can a man be happy in a job which makes him feel largely unnecessary?

He swept the sweat from his eyes, moved back and felt the hard concrete of the tunnel wall at the back of his knees. This was the moment he had been trying not to think too

much about. Turning quickly, he took up three pieces of the heavy armoured cable and pitched them down the three shallow steps into the darkness of the tunnel. He would have to go first down there, into that cramped space and then lure the thing in after him. And then, should his theory be mistaken—he would be trapped in that rat-run, with this seething molten monster. Jordan came back, a white figure out there on the other side of the glare, adding one more staring face to the ring.

"You all right, Cocky?" he called, anxiously. "Everybody's standing by. How's it going, all right?"

Reassuring noises, Walter thought, as he readied a longer piece of cable, trying to place it so that it would lead directly to the access-door. The cable twisted in his slippery hand and the thing reached for it with deceptive speed. He threw himself bodily backwards down the steps, grazing his knees painfully. Now, all at once, he was cold, sweat-clammy and in the dark. Then the demon-glow spilled over the edge and grew swiftly brighter as the thing gobbled its greedy way along the bait. He backed away, crouching awkwardly, using the arm-thick cable as a guide and support. Six-point-six kilovolts—would it be enough, or not? He would soon know.

The white eye of the glare came suddenly, almost painfully, and he hurriedly backed away still more, banging his head against the hard roof. The thing slithered over the edge and flowed, semi-liquid, down the stone steps. His face and hands cringed from the blast of its heat. Little pockets of dust burst into showers of sparking fire and the hot breath of Hell swept over Walter, catching his breath. Blinking his eyes, he saw that the creature was now pooled in a heap under the cable and feasting on the morsels he had thrown down for it. It was big, now. Evil green from all the copper it had consumed.

He wondered, in a few seconds he had left, what sort of life the progenitors of this thing could have known. Could there be such things as intelligence, emotion, even affection, at this temperature? Perhaps they, too, had once ruled the world and thought themselves the acme of creation. It might have been from racial memories of creatures such as this that the old legends had arisen, of the Phoenix and fiery serpents and salamanders and all the demons of the old-time Hell.

It was still now, except for that characteristic pulsing. Could it be sensing the rich hoard of tasty metal just about it? For a daring moment he relaxed the curtain of his mind

and allowed himself to share the feelings of this thing. He sensed its everlasting hunger, its growing power and strength —and something more, something he could not define—an urgency. Stifling his feeling of treason in attempting to encompass the destruction of a fellow living thing, he concentrated on the thought of 'reaching upwards'—and it slowly put up a fiery arm, gropingly—and touched the heavy cable. In a moment, other glowing arms followed, wrapping themselves around the armour. Then he hurriedly withdrew his contact and backed away, heedless of the rough scrape of the concrete.

There came a sudden blue-white glare, blinding in its intensity and the hissing spit-crack thunder of discharge, the choking stink of ozone and a sudden darkness and stillness. His head ringing, eyes stunned into blood-red glare, Walter heard the dismal, heart-stopping wail of dying machinery and far-off shouting. Ahead of him there was a dull red mound of dying fire, dwindling to a skeleton mass of running, winking sparks, struggling to make networks—and then nothing. He knew it was dead, because he had 'heard' its death-scream and felt it. That feeling of treason, of betrayal, came back stronger than ever. Its only crime had been to be born several million years too late and alone. And he had killed it.

Then, incredibly distant, lights came on, noises gathered themselves and grew loud, a beam showed in the access-door. Walter stirred himself, went towards the light, carefully. Where the thing had been, there was now nothing more than a shapeless heap of glittering powder, still warm. He stirred it with a toe, to reveal a clump of small, brittle grey things, like eggs. They crumbled as he upset them and became dust, like the rest of it. By his shoulder, the power-cable had lost a three-inch length of armoured insulation. Bright copper gleamed there.

"Don't touch that!" Jordan warned, waving his torch.

"All right, I won't."

"Is it dead?"

"Oh yes, it's dead all right." Walter climbed out of the tunnel, limp and weary. All at once he was aware of a dozen small distractions, the pain of blisters and burns, the sogginess of sweaty clothes and a quite uncontrollable unsteadiness in his knees. He felt empty, too, and apprehensive. How were they going to explain all this, how to report it in cold, matter-of-fact words? As they plodded wearily towards the lift, Jordan brushed the whole question aside lightly.

"Not to worry, Cocky," he said. "I'll work something out

that will read all right in the log-book. It will be something to pass away the time."

And there is your answer, Walter told himself. That is what a man, any man, needs from a 'ob; that it shall offer him some sort of challenge that he has a chance of beating; that it shall occupy his mind and help him to pass the time away. That was what he would report back to the Very High Authority when the time came and if that suggestion achieved any kind of result, then the last of the Salamanders would not, after all, have lived and died completely in vain.

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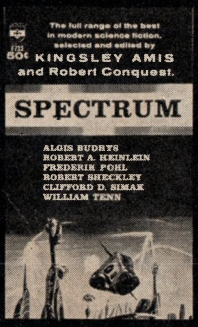
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