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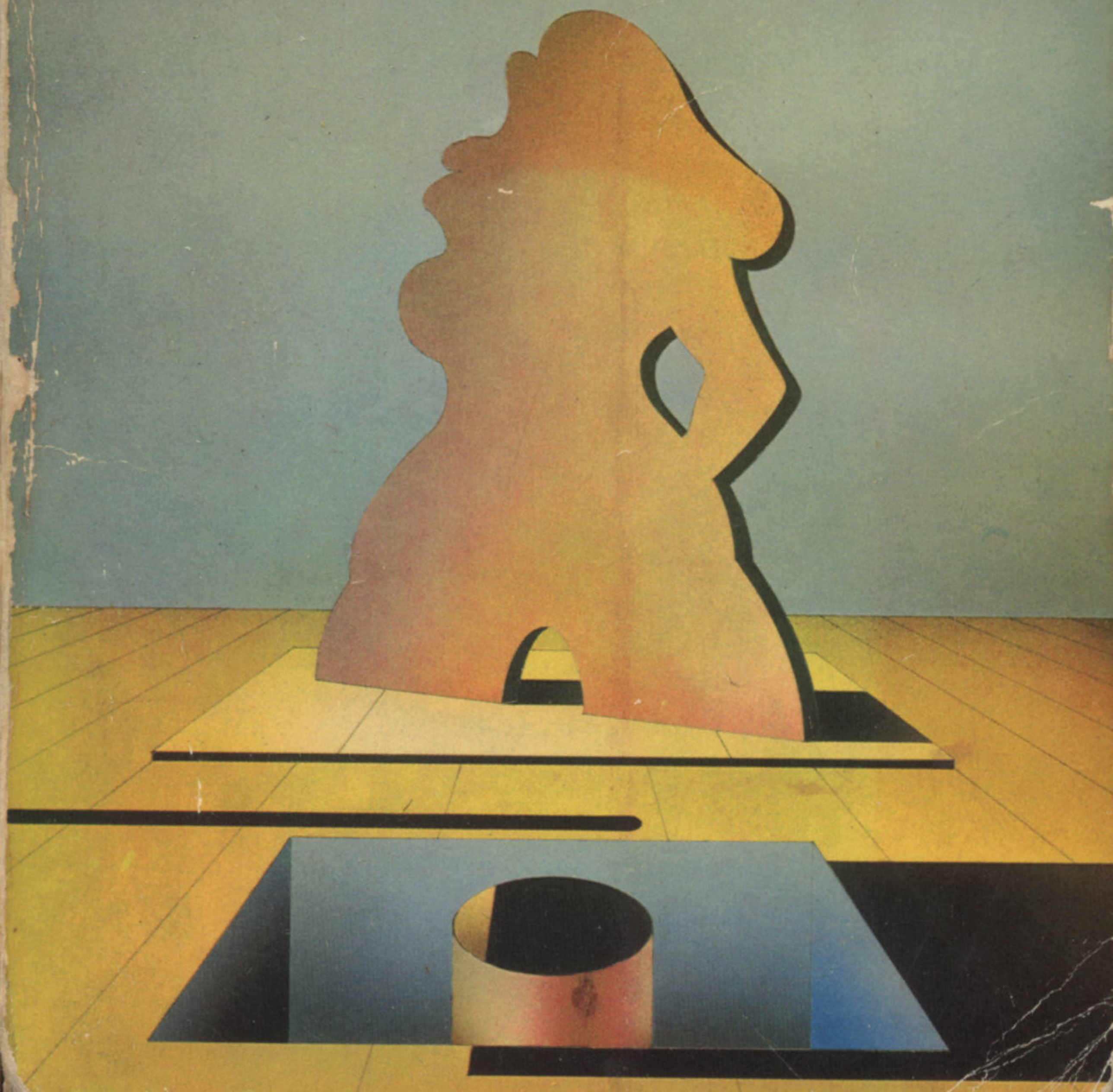
CORGI BOOKS

# NEW WRITINGS IN SF-4

EDITED BY JOHN CARNELL



The fourth of the series of *New Writings in S.F.* features a little-known story by Isaac Asimov, one of today's top S.F. writers, in which he points out yet another hazard of interstellar travel. David Stringer's *High Eight* concerns an alien invasion that does *not* come from outer space, while for readers who demand more authenticity in their S.F., Colin Kapp writes of how to cope with an emergency on a liquid planet. In *The Country Of The Strong*, Dennis Etchison presents a terrifying aspect of the aftermath of man's folly. Three stories in satirical vein introduce a note of humour : Dan Morgan's *Parking Problem*, *Sub-Lim* by Keith Roberts and finally *Bernie The Faust*, a study of double-dealing between man and alien, cleverly devised by William Tenn.

Also edited by JOHN CARNELL

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Edited by

John Carnell

# New Writings in S.F.—4

CORGI BOOKS
TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS LTD
A National General Company

NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—4
A CORGI BOOK 0 552 08827 7

Originally published in Great Britain by
Dobson Books, Ltd.

PRINTING HISTORY

Dobson Books Edition published 1965
Corgi Edition published 1965
Corgi Edition reissued 1971

All the characters in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.



This book is set in Pilgrim 10/11 pt.

Corgi Books are published by Transworld Publishers, Ltd., Cavendish House, 57–59 Uxbridge Road, Ealing, London, W.5.

Made and Printed in Great Britain by
Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press), Ltd., Bungay, Suffolk.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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"The Country Of The Strong" by Dennis Etchison. Copyright 1962 by Triangle Publications, Inc., and published originally in *Seventeen*. Reprinted by permission of the publisher and the author.

"Bernie The Faust" by William Tenn. Copyright 1963 by HMH Publishing Co., Inc., and published originally in *Playboy*. Reprinted by permission of the author.

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# FOREWORD

## by JOHN CARNELL

EACH successive volume of *New Writings In S-F* has developed a distinctive personality of its own, more by accident than design admitted, for, unlike the average anthology where the editor can select from a wide range of already published material, this series is compiled mainly from new material being written *today*. From the stories submitted, or commissioned, or selected from sources which would normally not be seen by the average reader, the pattern of each book is built up. Therefore, there can not be any preconceived plan in my mind that we shall have a volume devoted to, say, space stories, or interplanetary adventures, or following any particular pattern. In fact, the more varied the contents the greater the amount of enjoyment for a wider audience.

This particular volume leans a little more towards the humorous than usual although it has its quota of tension and even pathos. On the serious side we have Isaac Asimov's "Star Light", and what a pleasure it is to be able to present this little-known gem from such a popular author! Although the plot does not have the scope of his "Foundation" series, it does pack a very considerable punch in its brief passage.

At much greater length, David Stringer heads the volume with an intense story of a man-made (?) alien in our midst; an alien totally unfamiliar to our normal concepts yet a basic part of the one modern commodity our very existence depends upon—electricity! And for those readers who are constantly demanding more accuracy and authenticity in their s-f, Colin Kapp is represented with "Hunger Over Sweet Waters", a *science* fiction story he assures me

is basically accurate by existing techniques—the one added factor to the story is a piece of original research he has made but not considered patenting!

In contrast to the accepted side of s-f as epitomized in the above stories, we have in lighter vein William Tenn's brilliant satire, "Bernie The Faust", which will surely go down as one of the best stories of 1963, the year it was originally published. Too few stories of this calibre come our way, but when they do the genre is that much richer. Two other stories compete for humorous honours: Dan Morgan's pleasant spoof dealing with a time warp for parking vehicles, which produces in "Parking Problem" a solution for the congested city streets of the future but creates an even greater problem for the inhabitants, while in Keith Roberts' "Sub-Lim" there is a lot of fun in the movie industry when a new system for *making* people like films is discovered. The plot, however, carries its own burden of punishment.

By no means least on the list of contents is Dennis Etchison's prize-winning little cameo, "The Country Of The Strong", a rather bitter exposition of the aftermath of Man's folly.

All the stories, however, have been selected with a view to *entertainment*; the fact that science fiction has a penchant for making people *think* is an added bonus for which there is no extra charge.

JOHN CARNELL

February 1965

# HIGH EIGHT

*by*

## DAVID STRINGER

*Although alien invasions have long been a popular conception in science fiction they do not necessarily have to come from outer space and the present-day trend favours more a "boring from within" as David Stringer brilliantly portrays in his first story in this series. The fact that it vitally affects the one commodity all humanity has come to rely upon makes it tremendously thought-provoking, too.*

# HIGH EIGHT

For Rick Cameron, the trouble started one bright morning in Stan Mainwaring's office.

Stan was Outside Works Controller to Saskeega Power, Rick was line maintenance boss for the company. They were great buddies; they'd been through school together, clocked nearly fifteen years together at Saskeega. Rick was sitting on his boss's desk skinning through a copy of the company magazine when the phone blew. Stan picked up the handset. He said, "What? Yeah, you'd better put him through . . ." The phone squawked a long time. Stan's face changed; his fingers gripped the handset rhythmically, an unconscious reflex. Then, "Yeah, I'll do that. Yeah, straight away." He put the instrument down and sat for a moment staring at it, hands spread on the desk top. Rick glanced resignedly at the ceiling.

They'd been using one of the penstocks as a laboratory to check corrosion characteristics on some new metal dressings, they were due to open her up that morning, have a look at what had been happening. Rick had gone over to Main Block to collect Stan, they'd been going to drive up together. Now he had a strong presentiment they wouldn't be making the trip. He said, "What's the matter, Stan? Trouble?"

The other looked at him sombrely. "Had a suicide in the night. Old guy wrapped himself round a set of bus bars. They only just found him, Billy says it isn't too nice. Sheriff's on the way over, I got to go up and see."

"Where was it, Stan, where'd it happen?"

The other man shrugged. "Of all the crazy places. High Eight."

Half a dozen lines went out from Saskeega; Rick's job was to service and maintain them over a radius of some

twenty-five miles from the plant. The shortest run on the sector was the Indian Valley line. That went due west up into the mountains, through Black Horse Pass and down into Indian Valley the other side of the hump. It was the trickiest to service but far and away the most important; it fed the Sand Creek Pool where Sand Creek Atomic Research got their juice. And Sand Creek was about the most important thing in the country. . . . There was something else; the two installations inside the mountain, and the stepdown transformers that fed them. Rick had heard the rumours, he'd heard his boys mutter that they were parts of the Doomsday Brain, that they were bringing the current that ran the Doomsday Brain. He hadn't let himself think too much about it and he certainly hadn't worried. He wasn't the man to worry. His job was to service the lines.

The first transformer was at the bottom of the hill, the second one way up on the Black Horse at the head of the pass. Number two on the line, number eight on the sector; she sat up there in the clouds and that was the name they'd given her, among themselves. High Eight . . .

Rick went along with his boss. Privately, he thought it was his baby as much as Stan's. They drove through Freshet, the little township that had sprung up to house the staff of Saskeega and their families. Passing Rick's place, his wife gave the car a wave. He shook his head slightly. It was just as well she didn't know where they were headed and why, Judy was funny about the lines. They got through town and the road started to climb with the towers striding alongside. Standing room on the mountain was strictly limited, the line followed the road most of the way. When they got high enough Rick could see Saskeega below and miles off, the penstocks running down to it, the white threads of the outfalls.

He turned round to Stan. "How in Hell did he manage to get hold of those bars? He must have been crazy . . ." He wasn't feeling too great himself; once when he was in the army he'd seen a guy take a thousand cycles, hadn't been a thing left but his shoes. And supertension was worse; you

couldn't fool with a hundred thousand volts, it played too rough. The bus bars were the big terminals where the contacts were made between the transformers and the cables, they were fenced with guard rails. Drop a spanner over those rails and there it stopped till a Routine Outage. Slide under to get it and the voltage waiting there would come crackling out to meet you, shake you by the hand. Rick ran his fingers through his cropped hair. He said again, "The old guy must've been crazy as a coot to crawl inside. . . ."

Stan didn't answer, just put his foot down harder. They passed number seven; a few miles on and they could see High Eight perched over a cliff, its white walls shining in the sun. When they reached it Stan swung off the road and stopped. They got out. There were a couple of cars parked, one of the station service trucks and the Sheriff's estate wagon. They walked towards the building and Sheriff Stanton came out the door. One of his deputies backed out after him, taking a bulb out of a flash camera. Stanton nodded to the Saskeega men, wagged his thumb at High Eight. He said, "Better take a look, fellers, your steak-frier's sure done him proud."

They went in.

It could have been worse. The body was lying curled up just inside the door, a little old man, grey-haired, clothes ragged. Just an old hobo. The flash had blown him clear instead of taking him in and cooking him, his hands were charred but that was all. He'd smashed the back of his skull on the guard-rail. Not that that mattered, he'd been dead when he hit it. A yard or so away was a tin box. The lid had come off, there were old papers scattered, a couple of photographs. And there were the bus bars shining in the half dark, the transformers singing all round.

An ambulance had been called, they loaded him in as soon as it arrived. Stanton picked up the junk that was spread about, thumbed through it. He shrugged. "No names. Guess if we could trace next of kin they wouldn't want to know. Maybe he's better off, poor old guy. You boys known a thing like this before?"

Rick shook his head slowly. Suicides happened, they just happened all the time, but there weren't many people that chose the lines. It wasn't a nice way to go. . . .

The door lock was smashed where the old man had broken in. Stan fingered it; he said slowly, "Maybe he was just lookin' for shelter and a place to sleep awhile. He sure as Hell found that." They told one of the maintenance men to get up there with a new lock, that was about all they could do. Rick drove back down with Stan, tried to put the whole thing out of his mind. He managed it till he got home that night. He saw Judy's face and could tell she knew. He asked her how she'd found out. She said she saw the trouble wagon in town, asked one of the boys. Rick swore under his breath about guys who just had to shoot off their big mouths. It wasn't the sort of thing it did Judy any good to know, not feeling the way she did about the lines. Rick blamed himself partly for that. He'd taken her up to High Eight one day, and it had scared the Hell out of her. The big housings singing like cats, the static over their tops making blue crackles in the dark. She'd lived with the fear for years, but she'd got no better.

He could see the thing was on her back again. She said, "Why'd he do it, Rick, you find out why he did it? Maybe, you know, did he leave a note or something, say why . . .?"

He said, "No note, honey, nothing. Just wasn't a reason, I guess. Poor old guy was crazy, is all." He stood squarely, facing her and frowning, worrying about something outside his experience and wondering how to quieten her.

She shook her head violently. She said, "I know why he did it, Rick, I can see why, can't you?" She gulped. Then, "Was he . . . . much burned?"

"Look, Judy . . ."

She said. "It was the lines. It's always the lines. Like the rails in a . . . station, in a subway, they pull, Rick, you never felt them pull? You stood there with the train coming and the noise and felt the rails pull harder and harder . . ."

"Honey, please . . ."

She ignored him. "It's that way with the lines, Rick. They

drew him. Can't you see him up there, that poor old man, lonely, nobody to go to, nobody around? That's when they pull most, when there's nobody around. He was hungry and cold and the night was coming and there were the lights on the wall inside High Eight, like sort of red and amber eyes watching and saying come on, it's O.K., come on . . . and the singing all round, and the shining things behind the rail pulling and pulling. . . ."

He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "Judy, for God's sake . . ."

She wrenched away from him, ran into the kitchen. She snapped switches. She said, "Electricity, Rick. It scares me. Look at it all round, Just think, if it was waiting. If it all wanted to pull. . . ."

His temper snapped. He yelled at her, "For Christ's sake, *shut up*. . . ." He said, "I was the one had to pick him up, get him in the bloodwagon. I didn't like it honey, I don't *like* that sort of thing. You think I'm a sort of ghoul likes going round picking people off the lines? You want it, you asked to know, yeah, his hands were burned. They were burned black, you could see the bones. . . . Now are you happy, I been trying to forget it most of the day. . . ."

She screwed her eyes up, hand across her mouth as if she was in pain. A long wait; then, "Rick I'm . . . I'm sorry, honey, I don't know what gets me going like that. It's a thing I got, about the lines . . . I'm sorry. . . ."

He sighed, feeling the old trembling he always felt when he rowed with her. "O.K., so we both got it out of our systems. Now what say we forget it all. These things happen, honey, isn't any cause to go wild. . . ."

"Rick, couldn't we go off? You know, you get some other job, we could go some place miles from Saskeega where we didn't have to see the lines. . . ."

They'd been through that fifty, a hundred times before. Rick would have done most things for her even if she wanted them for crazy reasons but he couldn't take another job, the lines were all he knew. Or so he told himself. But there was something else, something he didn't talk about

with Judy because she wouldn't understand. The lines did get you, after a time. Oh, not in the crazy way she said, but there was something about them, the towers and the lines soaring off across the country taking power to run peoples' lives, run the world. There was something in that. He used to talk about it odd times with Stan; he never really knew how to get it into words but Stan knew what he meant.

That night Rick kept having a recurring dream. It seemed the phone was ringing and he kept answering it and finding there was another body in High Eight. The fifth or sixth time it happened he sat up in bed, thinking blearily that the crazy talk Judy had given him had somehow gotten on his mind. He looked round. The room was dark, he could see his wristwatch dial on the side table. He picked the watch up. It read just after three. He yawned and rubbed his eyes, then the noise that had woken him started again.

The phone *was* ringing.

He got up and answered it. He listened to what it had to say, then he put the handset down and wondered if he was going to wake up again. But it was no good, this was for real. He went back to the bedroom and started to dress. His hands worked mechanically, almost of their own volition. There was another body in High Eight, the lines were out, he had to get up there quick as he could.

Judy put the light on, and Rick turned round. She was shivering. "Rick, what is it, what goes on? Was it the phone . . .?"

He said, "Look honey, I gotta go out. They got some trouble, I'll try and not be too long. . . ."

She got hold of his arm. "It's another one. In that God-awful place. . . ."

"Honey, it isn't, isn't anything like that. They got some trouble down at the plant. Icing on the insulators." He said the first thing that came into his head. It didn't do any good, he could see the look in her eyes, he could tell she knew.

Rick got the car out and drove for the pass. Soon as he left the shelter of town he started to feel the wind pulling and twitching at the steering. There was always a wind on

the Black Horse, it blew like a bitch up there night and day. Something came into his mind. He remembered the wind in the poem, the wind that blew in the wasteland where nobody ever came. There was nothing on the mountain either except High Eight.

He didn't care for that idea too much. Essentially, Rick was a rational guy; but the morning had been bad, and with the wind yelling that way and everything black as Hell it was a whole lot worse. He tried to think about something else, started a sort of mental argument with Judy.

"Look honey, there's nothing wrong with electricity. You use it right, it's fine. You fool about and you get in trouble, most things are like that. Look, the lines are good. They light your home, cook your meals, run your television, help you have fun. They keep you warm, they keep you happy. We couldn't do without the lines. . . ."

Somehow he knew what she'd answer. It was almost like she was there with him in the car. She said, "The lines are waiting, Rick. Every place, all the time. Just waiting. And one day . . ."

He took a bend. The headlights shone silver off the foot of one of the towers. He wondered suddenly if the thing was a gag, somebody had decided to have a little fun sending him chasing up there in the middle of the night. Didn't seem likely, but there was a chance. That meant he'd get to High Eight, wouldn't be a soul around. Just the wind booming off the cliff and the coloured eyes up there in the housings singing in the dark . . . . He tried to see up towards the pass, but as far as he could tell it was all black. He was suddenly sure the thing was a gag. He felt like turning the car and going straight back, but he knew he couldn't do that.

Rick got a cigarette out of his windcheater pocket and fumbled it alight. He was angry with himself; he was acting and thinking like a kid fresh from High School. What he was going to do was ride on up and check the place; and if there was nobody around he was going to phone back to Saskeega and somebody was going to get taken apart. That was all there was to it.

There were folk there. There was a patrol car, he saw the roof-flasher from a couple of miles down the road. Somebody was waving a lamp. He stopped the car and got out. The wind was evil; it felt like a solid, animate thing. He leaned into the gusts, tacked across to High Eight.

It was quieter inside, the wind was muted and the housings were silent because the lines were out. A couple of the night maintenance staff from Saskeega were there, and two cops. They were standing in a group looking at the bus bars. One of the engineers was saying "Gee, *look* at that! Gee, *look* at that!" He was talking softly, like somebody at a pretty firework display. "Gee, look at *that* . . .!"

The Thing squatted with its back turned to Rick, showing him the top of its bald head. Its hands were on the bus bars, but he wasn't holding the contacts any more. Its arms were burned off at the wrists. The stumps sticking out from the body were dried and twisted. The man must have dived in head first, got hold of the bars one in each hand. God alone knew how. . . . Then they'd got hold of him and the arcing hadn't stopped till his arms were burned apart. All round for yards across the concrete floor were the black scars where the sparks had drummed and hissed.

The wind howled outside. The man said, "Gee, *look* at that . . .!"

Rick turned round on him, managed to talk somehow. "Turn if off, will you? Just turn it off. . . ."

The engineer looked at him and shook his head. "Gee, Rick," he said. "Just look at *that* . . .!"

The overseer walked the length of the building to the phone. He rang through to Saskeega, got the duty engineer in West Power Block. He said harshly, "Donnell, what in Hell you playing at down there?"

There was a lot of static on the line. It was hissing and crackling like it was trying to talk as well, a gibberish of embryonic words. Rick could hardly hear his own voice. He said, "*What in Hell you playing at?*" Suddenly he couldn't stop himself yelling. He felt he wanted to take

somebody and pound their face in because of what had happened. But there was no one to blame. . . .

Donnell sounded half crazy. "Rick, I don't know what happened, I don't know how in Hell it happened. Trips shoulda pulled the line, they stayed in. Trips didn't work, I don't know what in Hell happened. . . ."

Cameron swore. "What are you using for eyes down there, what about your line volts? What you doing down there, what you using for eyes . . .?"

A great guffaw of static. Then, "I pulled the line soon as the volts jumped, Rick, I don't know what in Hell happened. . . ."

"Soon as Hell you did. Guy's hands fried off up here, Donnell, while you were sitting waiting for your meters to kick. You took his hands off his body, God damn it, you took 'em right off his body. . . ."

"Rick, I don't know how in Hell——"

The overseer slammed the phone down and got out. The whole place smelled like somebody had been cooking meat with no salt, and he knew within two minutes he was going to be sick as a dog.

They had to wait while photographs were taken. You always had to have pictures of a thing like that, Rick reflected bitterly, just in case you ever managed to forget it. Then they started clearing the lines. Rick would have called Stan but it would have done no good; he'd gone off to a big convention the afternoon before, he wasn't expected back for a couple of days.

Power was restored about six in the morning, and Rick Cameron drove back down to Saskeega and into a hornets' nest; the feeder had been out most of the night, they'd had to pull juice from half across the country to keep Sand Creek alive. He called Stan long-distance from his office. He still felt pretty shaken up. He had to try three hotels before he reached his boss, when he came on the line he already knew what had happened. Stan flew back the same morning, he was in Saskeega in about six hours. They went down together to see Sheriff Stanton.

They'd taken all the precautions they could; the lock on the door had been fixed, but the second victim hadn't got in that way. There were a couple of windows in the transformer house, they were fairly small and they had heavy bars across, but it looked like the suicide had pulled the bars out with his bare hands and the glass and frame as well. There was no sign of anything he could have used as a lever and there was blood on the sill and on the floor inside, a trail of it to the bus bars. It looked as if he'd torn his hands to pieces smashing the window. Stanton said maybe more would be known after the autopsy, but it looked plain enough; the guy had been crazy, like the hobo. He shook his head. He said he'd known the dead man, he was a farmer from down in Indian Valley. He said, "Beats me how a little guy like that could have busted that window apart. He must have been deranged, crazy as Hell . . . but that don't help us none, what you boys goin' to do about this?"

The Saskeega men looked at each other a little blankly. Then Stan said, "Don't seem to be much we can do, Andy. Like you said, suicides happen. If a guy goes crazy we can't read his mind. We didn't kill those folk."

Stanton grunted. "Your juice did. Look fellers, I seen things like this before. Take my word. Not on the lines, that's something new, but I'm telling you if there's a suicide, say a drowning, and the word goes round, you've got a dozen more. Seems the idea gets in peoples' minds, triggers half the potential nut cases in the county. Now I've seen this and I don't want no more bodies coming down off that mountain, what're you going to do?"

Rick said carefully, "You think maybe the old guy heard about the hobo?"

"Don't see how. Lived on his own, got a little place way out of town, hardly ever saw any folks. I'll check on it, but I don't see how in Hell he could have known."

Stan said, "Well, we can't write it off as just bad luck. What say we put a guard on that place a few nights, Rick, till things quiet down?"

Rick thought of the blackness up there, the wind talking

in the wires all the night through. The warning lights that Judy reckoned said come on. . . . He said, "Two men, Stan, and better arm 'em. Makes 'em feel better."

Stan looked at the overseer sharply, but nothing more was said. He brought the thing up again that night though, while Rick was driving him home. "Two lots of double time just to watch one bloody little transformer stage, see no more crazy bastards turn themselves into rare steak. . . . The old man's going to nail my ears to the wall for this, Rick. They want a guard, I say put on a guard, fine, put a guard on the place. But why the Hell two?"

Rick narrowed his eyes and squinted at a bend. "You like to do it, Stan, you do it on your own?"

He said, "I'd do it if I had to, and you damn well know it, what'n Hell you getting at?" He sounded surly. Rick glanced at him quickly. That wasn't like Stan. . . .

They posted the guards and that took care of things at High Eight for a time. But High Eight wasn't the real worry. What Rick wanted to know, what Stan wanted to know, what it seemed everybody in Saskeega wanted to know was why those trips hadn't worked. On all high-tension lines there is gear designed to kill the circuit in an emergency, if, for instance, a tower blows down or gets struck by lightning. If the lines stayed in they'd burn up everything, fry anybody within yards as well. That's what the trips are for, in the event of a major short they pull the plug after three or four seconds at the outside. But the suicide had been on the bars a lot longer than that and the lines didn't cut at all till Donnell shut down by hand.

That was another mystery, of course. How could Donnell and the whole night staff have missed seeing things were wrong? Donnell swore he took action as soon as the voltage went crazy and he was a good engineer, Stan knew that. "But the Hell, Rick," he said worriedly. "He didn't pull those lines till there was nearly nothing left of the guy, he didn't pull till the voltage had steadied again. He could have had the whole feeder burn out under his nose. Under all their noses. . . ."

The Controller questioned everybody, but he could get no leads. There just didn't seem to be a reason for any of it. The trip gear was checked a dozen times, there wasn't a thing out of place. That line just had to pull. And yet it didn't.

They had to leave things like that. Nobody liked it, but there wasn't anything to be done. The guards were kept on High Eight a couple of weeks, but nothing else happened. Rick put another set of bars on the window, had the door double-locked and hoped the line had settled down for good. But it had not. The day after the guards were removed Saskeega lost three men.

Two of them were killed in a chopper that crashed into the cliff right below High Eight. Nobody could explain it; a farmer who saw it happen said the machine just turned and flew straight at the rock. The Company ran half a dozen helicopters, they were good for patrolling lines in awkward country. Stan grounded the rest as soon as he heard; that didn't make Rick's job any easier. He tried to make the best of it. He was sanguine enough to realize there was nothing else his boss could have done.

The other death was on the Indian Valley feeder as well. The man's name was Halloran, Rick had known him very well. He was half Irish, hadn't seemed to have a nerve in his body. He was boss of one of the maintenance gangs, he'd been with Saskeega for years.

He took a truck out that day, nobody saw him go. Nobody missed him either. About five in the afternoon a patrol came through from Indian Valley on a routine job, saw something they never would have believed. One of the men told Rick later, they drove down and stopped and got out of the car and stood staring, and they still could hardly believe. Parked beside one of the towers was the trouble wagon; and up above it, way up in the sky, Jim Halloran was crouched over an insulator stack, blue fire in his hands and the pain of the Pit in his eyes. . . .

Rick began to lose staff. They sloped off in ones and twos, found other jobs where they wouldn't have to keep looking

over their shoulders wondering who was going next. Halloran's death hit them harder than anything else that had happened. Old farmers can go crazy, bums can get tired of life, but Halloran was a guy they'd worked with, got drunk with. He wouldn't have killed himself, that was what they muttered. Something dragged him up to that tower, he didn't take his own life, and whatever the something was, if it could kill a guy like Halloran it could do anything.

Rick knew the rumours were going round, but there wasn't a thing he could do. He'd got his hands full as it was; there was a lot of routine work on the lines, repair jobs were always coming up; kids out for kicks shooting up the insulators, all sorts of things like that. The choppers were still being taken apart to find out what made them fly into rock walls, he'd had to split the remnants of half a dozen gangs and make up new bosses, and there was trouble there. Always friction when a thing like that has to be done. He was working most hours God gave, his wife was headed for a nervous breakdown on account of all the trouble, he'd just about had enough. Then he heard about Stallion Jim.

It seemed one of the gangers was a halfbred Indian. Whatever the truth of his tale, he reckoned years back his people had owned most of Saskeega County. He said that Indian Valley had been their chief hunting ground, which explained its name, and that the Black Horse was sacred land, the home of the tribal gods. Stallion Jim was the boss spirit or totem, and there was a legend that one day he would return and drive the white-eyes back into the east. There would be portents when that happened, thunder and lightning on the peak, and people would be killed by fire from the sky. It all fitted in very nicely, and it was just about what was needed to start a general rout.

Rick decided this was one thing he could knock over the head. He had the Indian—Joey, they called him—in his office, and had the mother, father and grand-daddy of all rows. He told him one more word out of him about phantom horses or curses or fire from above and there'd be more fire than he knew what to do with right down on

earth, and he'd personally kick him to the other side of Saskeega. Joey didn't answer much; but even while his boss was bawling him out his eyes were flicking to the window of the office. The lines were visible from that window, threading away towards the hills, and the Black Horse was lowering in the distance. . . .

The Indian saved Rick his trouble. He lit out the same day, they never saw him again.

But the damage had been done. Saskeega lost more men than ever till Rick was practically working with skeleton crews. He didn't have a day off for a month; then he got sick and tired. He told Judy to pack a lunch, they'd be getting out for a time. He'd seen as much of the Company as he wanted, if the whole shebang fell apart while he was away it was just too Goddam bad.

They drove round the long way to Indian Valley. It had always been one of Judy's favourite spots. It was a hot day, Rick pulled the car off the road under a group of trees. They sat and talked and ate the meal; then he leaned back and smoked a cigarette, and looked through the leaves to where he could see the Black Horse framed in the distance. The top of the mountain seemed to move as he stared at it, crawling forward against the clouds and not getting anywhere. Rick started to doze; he was feeling at peace with the world.

There was the most fearsome noise he'd ever heard. It wasn't like thunder, wasn't like anything he could think of. It filled the air, it was deep and hollow at the same time, a series of concussions that hit him like punches under the heart. There was nothing to see, just the mountain and the sailing clouds. He sat with the cigarette in his fingers and his mouth open. The row lasted maybe ten seconds, maybe twenty. When it finished Judy started to whimper. She said, "Stallion Jim. . . ." She ducked, like the sight of the mountain was burning her. It was the first time Rick knew she'd heard the story.

He shoved her in the car and started up. He had no idea what he was going to do, he just knew he was going to get

away from that place but fast. The noise had shaken him up badly, more badly than he was prepared to admit either then or later. He heard himself saying over and over, "Was a storm, honey, it was thunder, that's all. . . ." But he didn't even believe that himself. The din hadn't sounded like any thunder he'd ever heard. It had sounded just like it should; like the beat of huge, horrid hooves round the mountain. . . .

They got home, the phone was raising Hell. Would Rick Cameron go up to the Black Horse right away, Station Seven had exploded.

He didn't waste time explaining that transformer stages don't explode, he just put Judy back in the motor and drove down to Stan's place. Jeff was at home; he thanked God for that at least. She looked pretty white herself; Rick said things were under control, could she look after Judy while he went up the hill. He felt better after that; he knew his wife would be O.K. He drove for the Black Horse.

He didn't make good time. Traffic was stalled on the mountain, somebody said a tower was down across the road. Rick would have got through faster with a trouble wagon, but he'd only got his private car and no identification. In the end he gave up arguing. He drove through on the wrong lane and the Hell with everybody. He got up to Number Seven, the tower wasn't down, but she was leaning out across the road like she'd come any minute. The sky was full of cables. Rick left the car and walked.

It looked like half Saskeega had got there in front of him. Stan was there and Sheriff Stanton, they said old man Perkins had been up but he'd cleared off again. That suited Rick fine. He went and had a look at what was left of the stage. There wasn't much; a few bits of metal scattered around, some lumps of concrete, pieces of the insulator stacks. Where the transformers had stood was a hole. A crater. It was twelve, maybe fifteen feet deep and thirty feet across. It had an obscene look about it, it was black inside like the earth had been burned, and it threw rays and arms out across the road like a filthy star. Rick walked to the edge of it with Stan, stood looking down. He didn't

know what to think. He said quietly. "How do you read this, mister?"

His boss shook his head. "Only one answer. Somebody blew it. We been sabotaged but good...."

The linesman stared at him, grinning without humour. "No. Oh, no ... somebody blew it? You mean, they blew this thing up? You just see that hole, Stan, you know what it'd take to dig that out? You worked out what size charge you'd put in to make a hole like that?"

Stan looked angry. "So they didn't know what they were doing. They used a big charge."

Rick nodded. "Yeah, they did. They used a big charge. And that row I heard was the charge going off. Yeah."

He walked round the lip of the crater. Stan followed up. He said, "So it blew on its own. How's that, Rick, it just sort of blew up. Just like so."

Rick could feel the sweat starting out on his face. It was like he was going crazy. He said, "Transformer stages do not explode. I am a working stiff, I am not too bright in the head, I just know this, transformer stages do not spontaneously ... explode."

He'd never had a row with Stan. He didn't have one then, but it got mighty close. When things had calmed down a bit, the overseer said, "O.K., Rick, O.K. So we take first things first. What do we do?"

Rick was still glaring at the hole. He said, "Block that road, Stan, east at Saskeega, west at the end of Indian Valley."

"It's done."

"Relieving tackle on that downhill tower. Then get the traffic all through, get it clear. We can guy her then so she won't fall, if she does we'll have the line laying down right back to Saskeega. When we've secured her we go back down the hill and face the music. By then they'll be playing a real pretty tune...."

They got busy. Supporting the tower was a ticklish job, it was nearly night before they'd finished, and a storm was blowing up over the Black Horse. A queer fancy came into

Rick's mind, wedged itself there somehow so it wouldn't be driven away. The next tower downhill was the one Jim Halloran had died on. He kept thinking he'd look up and see him still up there, riding the wires like a big, ragged crow as the stalk was winched upright. When everything was tied off, the vehicles convoyed back down. Rick couldn't stop from looking in his mirror and seeing the red hood just behind and feeling glad he wasn't the last in line. He was still pretty badly shaken up, he just felt like that. Glad he wasn't the last in line. . . .

If he thought he'd had trouble over the suicides he soon found out that had been nothing. There was trouble and trouble and trouble. Saskeega was important, whatever happened there was important. Saskeega fed Sand Creek, and Sand Creek was part of the National Effort and that was very important. Nobody thought too much about sleep until the stage was rebuilt and the lines were in again. Stan and Rick were grilled by the FBI, they asked did they think the feeder had been sabotaged, they said the Hell yes, there didn't seem to be anything else they could say. Yes, somebody blew that stage, somebody that wanted Sand Creek shut down. And that was all that was needed. The state troopers were turned out, and after that Rick complained bitterly he needed a countersigned pass to get from his house across to his own garage and back.

A patrol crossed the Black Horse the night the stage blew, to check that the tower was O.K. and the tackles holding. The driver said later it was queer up there, the wind gusting so strong the tail of the car got nearly snatched off the road a couple of times. Nothing impossible in that; as Stan said, anything could happen on that mountain in a blow and most times it did. The other linesman acted strangely, wouldn't talk on the hill, just sat making bug-eyes up at the wires in the dark. He killed himself the same night, ran his car in the garage. That made six. . . .

Rick found out something about himself. He was scared of the Black Horse.

It was crazy, he knew that, he told himself it was crazy,

but he couldn't shake it off. The Black Horse was a hill. A lump of dirt stuck there in the way so they'd had to put the lines across it, give it a wire necklace. Rick told himself the lines were just lines, they carried supertension up from Saskeega to Indian Valley, across to Sand Creek. Just power lines, that was all. But some part of him insisted there was something else.

He'd get up nights, go to the windows and watch the green lightning-flicker over the mountain, listen to the war-drums of the thunder. That was the line where people died. That was where they took hold of bus bars, scalded themselves into mummies. That was where they climbed towers, reached out and got a good firm grip on Death. That was where transformers exploded, and blew half the mountain out doing it. That was the line to High Eight.

He'd never felt like that, never had a thing in his mind that was crazy but that he couldn't drive away. He tried to tell himself there was a Reason, there was always a Reason for everything, but that didn't help because then he'd try and imagine what the Reason looked like. He'd see it stalking up there on its own two legs, he'd see it walking empty roads under the lightning flashes and glaring down at Saskeega, scurrying home to a little white building, nesting down before the dawn caught up with it. That was how he got to feel, about High Eight.

They built the new stage. They costed it and ordered the parts and put them together, and tested and checked and corrected until it was all fine. Then they started the feeder again and Rick hoped he'd get some peace.

He did, for a couple of months. He got Judy to go away to her folks, she came back looking brown and well. They started going down to Stan's place again, had a lot of fun. And the Indian Valley line stayed like it should, it was just a string of well-behaved towers humping away across a hill. Everything was O.K.

Then Rick got a call that started it all again. This time for keeps.

He was over in his office one afternoon. It was a nice day,

the sun was shining and he was sitting up there with his feet on the desk and a cup of coffee in his hand. Then the phone rang. He picked it up. "Yeah, line maintenance, Cameron here. . . ."

A voice gabbled in his ear. "That you, Rick? For Chrissake come up here, Rick, come up for Chrissake, we got a tower m-mm."

Cameron frowned. "What? Say again?" It sounded like the phone had said, "We got a tower melting."

It had.

Rick didn't know what to make of one of his boys gone crazy, raving on the line like that. He said, "Er . . . Look Johnny, you on your own? Who you got with you, pal, who's with you?"

"Rick, for Chrissake. . . ."

"Take it easy, Johnny, you got Grabowski with you? You get him on the line, will you? and, Johnny, take it easy. . . ."

The phone swore. It said, "Damn it to Hell an' gone, Rick, I ain't shook my bolts, I'm at High Eight and the place is goin' crazy again and there's people all over, will you damn well come . . . ?" The line went dead.

The fear had a galvanic effect, it bounced Rick out of his chair and out of the office. He jeeped across to Main Block and burst in on Stan. He said breathlessly, "High Eight again, Stan, something wrong with a tower. Can you come?" The Controller didn't waste time answering, just grabbed his hat and ran after him.

There was an accident truck outside, they jumped in and Stan set the siren blaring. He drove for the gates scattering people right and left. Rick yelled at him. "There'll be Hell for this, the old man'll give us Hell, using a siren without a main alarm. . . ."

He shouted back. "If it's a phoney we give out we got a short on the button. If it's the real thing, best we keep it to ourselves. What the Hell they say's the matter?"

"Say we got a tower melting."

"*What?*"

Rick bawled, "*Melting*. . . ." Stan didn't ask anything else, just put his foot down and kept it there. They bounced through the gate and screeched onto the main road.

There was plenty wrong.

They passed Number Seven, everything still looked O.K. The truck swung round the last bend but one and there was High Eight, above and tiny in the distance. Rick said "Jesus Christ. . . ." He couldn't help it.

Strain towers are extra-heavy stalks put in to take the pull where the cables change direction. Last one before Indian Valley was just below High Eight, and like the linesman had said it was melting. There wasn't any doubt it was melting. Metal was dropping off the arms, running like solder under a torch, splashing down onto the rock in gobs a foot across. While Rick stared the whole thing sagged, shoved a spar towards the mountain like a man thrusting his knee out, bracing himself for a big yawn. Beyond the tower was a trouble wagon, and a little figure in Saskeega blue was running like Hell down the mountain. In front of him were the people.

The road was full. There were a couple of hundred of them, maybe more. They were formed in a ragged column, moving up the middle of the carriageway towards High Eight. All sorts of people. There was a garageman still in his soiled whites, a girl in a blowy dress. . . . And in front of them the tower was bending into crazy shapes and over their heads the wires were waltzing from side to side.

Rick slammed the siren in again and the truck came down behind them howling and bellowing. Stan was leaning out of the cab yelling at the top of his voice. "Get out from under the wires. . . . Get back, get off the road, *get out from under the wires*. . . ."

For all the notice they took the wagon might not have been there. Stan left it nearly too late to stop. At the last instant he trod on the anchors and wrenched the wheel round and the truck screeched and broadsided onto the rough. It dragged a plume of dust behind it forty, fifty yards, then it smashed its pan across a rock and the ride

was over. Rick banged his head on the screen, fell back and heard the cables part. Something slapped on the road behind the truck's tail, the Saskeega men curled up instinctively away from the cab sides, there was the rush and whimper of the arcing then the cutoffs killed the line. Stan got out; Rick followed him cautiously, feeling himself to see he was still in one piece. The Sand Creek feeder was out again. . . .

Boris Grabowski reached the truck. His face was as near white as it could get and his eyes looked as if they were bolting out of his head. He said, "Boss, I'm going bloody crazy."

Rick said heavily, "You and me both, Boris, you and me both." He looked up towards the strain tower. She was mostly all gone; there was a stump about six or eight feet tall, and the struts of that were twisted and blackened. What was left of the head had been dragged ninety, a hundred feet downhill, and all the road was a jumble of wires. The people were standing about in the middle of the mess. The cables had come down right among them, but they were still all on their feet, God alone knew how. The Saskeega men tried to talk to them, but it was no use. They started pushing them clear of the cables. It was hard work. The strangers stared straight ahead, walked when they were being shoved, stopped still as soon as they were left alone. "What we need," said Rick furiously, "is a bloody sheepdog."

He sent Boris down to phone for roadblocks and ambulances and lifting gear to clear the carriageway. Then he walked on up to High Eight with Stan. They got another shock. The people they'd seen had been only the second wave, the first crowd of zombies had got there before the lines parted. There were red smears on the door where they'd torn the locks apart. They were the folk Johnny had tried to tell about on the phone.

Rick went inside. Johnny was very dead. It looked like he'd tried to hold the folk back from the bus bars. He hadn't had a chance, they'd picked him up bodily and

shoved him onto the contacts. . . . Six had managed to die, a dozen more were hanging round the gear looking stupid, fumbling at the bars like something ought to have happened but hadn't. Rick hauled one of them up and shoved him away. He came right back and the overseer shoved him off again. He came back again and Rick hit him, he couldn't stop himself. He didn't feel it. He rolled across the floor, got up slobbering blood and started feeling for the contacts again. Rick let him be. It was like giving a kid a toy to keep it quiet. . . .

The only one of the victims that showed any sign of being human was a girl. She sat just outside the door and she was crying. Stan put his jacket round her shoulders. He said, "God knows what's with the others, but this looks like plain shock." He started talking to her. He found out her name was Allison Foster, she'd lived with her aunt a few miles out of Freshet. She said they'd heard the music. That was all. They'd heard the music. They'd got the car out and driven up, following whatever was calling them. They'd had a blowout on the trail, had to walk the rest of the way. She told Stan, the music had stopped now. It had gone away. Then she starting in crying again.

The Controller looked up and shook his head, and they heard the sirens going way off towards Saskeega. . . .

The mountain was cordoned. The road was closed to traffic from Freshet right to Indian Valley. It seemed every research lab in the country had a team up there scraping about. They even sent some people over from Cape Kennedy. What the spaceboys wanted with bits of the busted stalk, Rick couldn't figure. Stan said sardonically that maybe they thought the Company had little green men.

Just about everything got analysed, the tower struts, the insulators, the rock face, bits of the cables. If there were ever any reports Stan and Rick didn't get to see them. They were no wiser than they had been the day the thing happened. All they knew was one bright morning that tower melted. It couldn't have happened, but it did.

They re-rigged the feeder. A piece was blasted out of the rock, the new cables were brought inside the line of the old so the eggheads could keep their playground. Power was restored two days after the accident. The troops stayed put; Black Horse Pass was stiff with guards.

Within a week the people who'd been saved were all dead, and that started a national scare on its own. There was talk of putting the whole of Saskeega County under quarantine. That would have been done, but nobody could find out why the victims died. Wasn't anything physical, they just seemed to fade away. Nobody could do a thing. Rick heard the day the power went back on they had to strap them down to stop them walking to the Black Horse and doing the same thing all over. The girl Stan had talked to didn't seem too bad, they didn't watch her like they watched the others. They let her ram her fingers in a light socket. Somehow she kept them there till her heart stopped. . . .

Rick moved over to Stan's place for a time because he didn't like the idea of Judy being on her own any more. When she was with Jeff she wasn't too bad. About ten days after the trouble he got back from Saskeega one evening and Stan asked him to go down to the workshop. He'd got something he wanted to show him.

He'd got a nice little place rigged up at the bottom of the lot, a shed with a couple of lathes and a milling machine. The thing he wanted to talk about was standing in the middle of the floor. Rick stared at it. "What'n Hell is it, Stan?"

He said, "Take a look. Guess at its operation."

Rick looked. The device was about four feet tall, a square box set on thin, dural legs. Most of the housing was taken up with circuitry. Rick was no electronics man but he knew an oscillator pack when he saw one. There was a metal cone speaker mounted above it on a horizontal baffle, and on top of that a thing that looked like the element of an electric fire. Over that again was a fine wire-mesh frame.

Cameron shrugged. "Lower part's obvious. Rest looks like

it'd be good for warming the house. What's it supposed to do?"

Stan said, "It's a bugtrap."

Rick was fogged. "What does it trap?"

"It's set for 'skeeters at the moment. Give me a hand with it, I'll show you." They lifted the machine outside and Stan plugged in a wander lead from the shop distributor board. He pointed at a line of potentiometers on the chassis. He said, "You get a sort of list comes with it, you set these things up for your homing frequencies. Composite note."

Rick had read something about that somewhere; how the females of certain insects emit a note to attract the males, or the other way round. He wasn't too sure about that, but the principle was obvious. He said, "You mean the pack generates the call frequency, the 'skeeters fly in. . . ."

"And land on the hotplate over the sound source. Quick and easy. And it works, it works fine." Stan switched the thing on. There was no audible sound; the side panels just got a sort of velvety feel, that was all. The elements started to glow orange-red; within seconds something dropped down onto the gauze, wriggled and vanished. Then another and another. Soon a stream of insects were flying down to incinerate themselves. Stan switched off. He said, "That's enough for a demonstration. I don't even care for killing 'skeeters at the moment, I'm beginning to know what they feel like."

It took a few moments for the implication to sink in. When it did, Rick felt like he'd been kicked in the gut. He said, "Stan, if you're suggesting what I think. . . . It's crazy. And it's too bloody horrible for words. . . ."

Stan shrugged. "I didn't suggest a thing. I showed you an insect trap, you made your own comparisons." He picked up a gauze frame. "I left the thing running last night. This was the result." Rick took it from him. It was like he'd expected. The thing was coated with insects, black drifts and skeins of them, He chucked it down and Stan walked away.

Rick followed him. Somehow, although a thing that had

been in his mind for a long time had been verbalized, he still felt he had to argue. He felt mad at Stan for saying something he was so scared might be true. He said, "Stan, if you expect me to go along with a crazy thing like that——"

The other man swung round on him. "Christ, Rick, can't you play this quiet . . .?" He said, "Look, I don't believe." He spread his hands. "I can't believe. But I've followed this thing through and there's only one answer satisfies my logic. I can't *believe* that answer. But I also know, I *know*, Rick, that what you saw that machine do, is a model of what's going on at High Eight. This I swear before God and His angels." He ducked back into the workshop.

Rick stepped after him helplessly. Stan opened a cupboard. There was a bottle of Scotch and a couple of glasses. He got the whisky down and poured a couple of slugs. Rick picked his drink up, and the glass chattered suddenly against his teeth. He set it down and looked at it. "Now I know I'm going crazy."

Stan rubbed his face. "Rick, listen and hear me. I may not have the chance to repeat what I'm going to say. You can't explain the Black Horse, I can't, none of us can. So we'll take the things that have happened as pointers and see what they can show us. If we see something outside our technology, that's a pity. Because like the guy said, once you've eliminated the impossible whatever remains, however improbable, is the truth."

He took a swig of whisky. He said, "We'll eliminate sabotage. If you wanted to wreck our lines, O.K., but how would you melt a tower? And we'll eliminate the chance that we're all asleep and dreaming this, I cut my face shaving this morning, I bled. . . . We'll also discount the idea that we've suffered a series of unconnected mishaps because a probability of that order is strictly in the monkeys-play-Beethoven class. We'll take the facts as interrelated events and work from there.

"An old hobo died. Then there was the farmer. Then the boys in the chopper, they flew nearly straight at High Eight. And Halloran up on the wires. Then the people we saw the

day the tower melted. Now, I know and you know, Jim Halloran wouldn't have killed himself. It's like the guys said, he was pulled up there. The zombies didn't kill themselves *consciously* either; you know that, you were with me, you helped drag 'em off the lines. They weren't conscious of a damn thing. I don't believe any of the deaths have been suicides, except maybe the old tramp. People have been drawn to the lines, in particular to High Eight, and there hasn't been a damn thing they could do about it. To me that suggests a force, a Will if you want to think of it like that. Something stronger than humans, something that can cut across the basic instinct to survive, make you go up there and . . . char yourself into a union with it. And the figures say something else. First it was one, then two, then three, then a hundred. The Will is getting stronger. So I maintain it's a process of *feeding*. . . ."

Rick said hoarsely, "For the sake of God . . ."

Stan kept on talking, overrode him. "It's very strong now because it took the ones that died in hospital. It's strong and it's mean. It's made mistakes in the past. Bad ones. But it won't make any more. What happened to Station Seven we shall never know. Or the tower. I'd say that last time it got over-keen. It was hauling in its biggest batch to date, it got careless, allowed too big a concentration of itself in one place. Because it *can* concentrate and disperse. It can adjust our voltage to what it needs. This I've proved."

Rick said, "But our juice——"

Stan stopped him savagely. "It isn't our juice. He . . . it . . . uses the current somehow as a carrier. It can work the voltage the way it wants. For instance, it can keep surges away from the trip gear when it doesn't want the hotplate turned off. They read on the dials, they read every place, but the lines don't pull out."

"That's crazy——"

"Rick, you don't know about this because it was done behind your back. For that, I'm sorry. I put recording voltmeters on that line. One on the output at Saskeega, one in High Eight, one at Station Seven, half a dozen more in

between. They were set up one night and taken down again before dawn. I got the rolls here." He turned on a shaded lamp and opened a drawer. He handed Rick the graphs. The overseer stared at them. It seemed to him in that moment the shadows in the workshop started to darken and crowd. Theories were great, but they were still just playing with words, this was something you could touch. Rick was a working stiff, he believed in something he could touch.

The line up to the Black Horse was full of knots and snarls. The graphs showed it. There were pulses in the voltage, peaks and zeroings. There were rhythms where something had raced all night up the wires and back between Saskeega and High Eight. Something impossible, something malevolent, something terribly strong. Allison had talked about music. This was the notation of the tune she'd heard. . . .

Stan said quietly, "I ran the same test in Indian Valley. Beyond High Eight the voltage doesn't move. The lines are clean."

Rick could only whisper. "What in Hell is it? You know what in Hell it is, Stan?"

He shrugged. "How can I answer that? How can anybody? Maybe it's the old man, the hobo. Maybe he somehow got caught in the lines. And he's lonely, wants some company. . . . Maybe it's something that blew in with the cosmic rays, maybe we generated it ourselves from cobalt and hydrogen, maybe there was a second Creation down there in the windings, deep in the darkness and warmth, and this is the new Adam. Demon or spirit, Stallion Jim or AntiChrist himself, I don't know. But I know why it uses our lines, why it's sitting up there in High Eight."

"Why?"

He said, "Use your head, Rick. We're the biggest feeder into the Sand Creek Pool. And there's the gear on the hill, the Doomsday units. Whatever we think, whatever happens, those lines are going to stay intact. The thing could flow off, it's got a whole country to travel in, hunt in. It must have moved when it blew the stage, it must have got

out when the tower went. But it comes back each time to where it knows its safe."

Cameron was just beginning to see possibilities. He had to lick his lips to make his voice come. "Stan," he said. "what's going to be the end of this. . . ."

The Controller was standing in the half dark outside the circle of lamplight. Rick saw him shrug. He said, "This is still supposition. But the way I see it, there need be no end. Look at the lines, Rick, think about them. Think about them the way Judy does. Think how they go out from the power companies to the substations, how they split into street mains, how the street mains split into the risers. Think about how they wind themselves through towns and villages, into shops and movie houses and theatres, factories, farms, hospitals. . . . A forest, that's what the lines are. A million trees on the same trunk. And if those lines go bad, and it's starting here at High Eight . . . they could touch us all. There'd be no getting away.

"Nobody would realize when it really started to pull. Maybe it would take the scientists, the politicians, anybody who could understand it, know what it was trying to do. Maybe we'd start a few wars, help it on with the job. One thing's certain; until the very last of us went, Saskeega would still be manned, those lines to Sand Creek would be alive. And after that, when there was nobody left. . . . Who knows? Perhaps Saskeega would still be manned. . . .

"If I wasn't an engineer, if I wasn't works controller for Saskeega and if I *believed* this, I'd get out. I'd go live in Tibet. That way I might manage to die apart from it. But I'm not a free agent. I have to say this is rubbish, this is all fools' talk. I have to get on with the job."

He lit a cigarette. The sudden flare of light was startling. Rick saw his face for a second. He looked worried nearly to death. The overseer said suddenly, "We can kill it, Stan. Cut the lines at Saskeega and beyond High Eight, quarantine it, starve it to death. . . ."

Stan laughed. He said bitterly, "Kill it? Can you see that happening, can you see me running to old man Perkins, to

the Government? What would I say, cut the lines over the Black Horse, cut 'em each end because the Devil's in the wires and we got to starve him out? Can you see me doing that? And can you imagine them listening? I told you it was smart. It's damn smart. There's no way out."

Rick said, "Take it in your own hands. You know what's happening, you've sold me on it.... I'm with you, my boys'd do it...."

Stan was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "I'll forget you said that, Rick. But I'll give you this warning. I forbid you as your superior to do anything that would prejudice the running of Saskeega Power. I'm still Works Controller, and, by God, if that's my job I'm going to see it keeps on getting done. You clear on that, Rick?"

Cameron shook his head. It was like he couldn't think straight any more. "You can't just let it build, Stan. It's too bloody awful to think about. If this thing gets started...."

Mainwaring shook his head. "Rick, I'm in a vice. I'm caught in the same trap as everybody else. It's the sort of trap only the human race could have invented for itself. It could have sprung any time. It's chosen now. We're hooked on our own technology.

"Those lines have got to stay in. We *need* 'em. We're dead without them. Could be we're dead with them as well, that's just too bad. But we can't turn the clock back. We can't scrap electricity just because it's turned mean.

"I've told you what I *know* is true. But I didn't tell you I believed it. This is one of those times when knowing and believing are two different things. I can't let myself believe this because of what I am at Saskeega. I can't believe it on a personal basis either because it represents the descent to what I've been taught to regard as unreason. I can't take a fall like that."

He walked across the shed and turned on another light. Then another. Then he started one of the lathes. He said, "I stand or fall on what I've told you. I'm about to prove it one way or the other."

Suddenly, Rick was scared. "Stan, what the Hell...."

He turned on the other lathe, the drilling machine. He looked round but there was nothing else left to start up. The whole place was humming and clacking, light streaming out across the lawn in the dusk. And far-off was the Black Horse, a shadow in the night. The mountain looked ten miles tall. Stan said, "This filth can come down the wires. It got to the people in hospital. It got to the girl Allison. It made her do something I still shudder to think about. So it could be with us now. In the lamps, the lathes.

"I say the Thing, whatever it is, is logical. So far it's moved in steps that can and have been explained. Being logical, it knows I'm the only guy understands it and can order its death. I've absolved you from responsibility and also for the moment from risk by giving you the orders I did. So if it wants to stay alive it's got to take me. And it's got to move fast." He put his hand on the housing of one of the lathes and looked at the mountain. He said, "I'm challenging you, you bastard. And whichever way you move you're through. Because if I go off the book people will finally know you're real, and they'll know how to carve your heart out. . . ."

Nothing happened. The mountain hung in the sky like a cloud and the lathes turned softly and the belts went click-click-click over the pulleys and that was all. They waited; then Stan shut down the gear and Rick followed him back to the house.

They heard a late night newscast. The news was weird. Throughout the States ten thousand people had been reported missing from their homes within the last twenty-four hours. The FBI were conducting nation-wide enquiries. An airliner had crashed in the Rockies, nearly five hundred miles off course. A cowboy, riding a boundary miles from anywhere, had seen a strange thing. He swore he'd met an army of ragged, empty-faced folk who swarmed past without speaking, pushed on to God knew where. There was a lot more stuff like that.

Stan hunted out some maps and did a little plotting. The course of the aircraft, the sightings of wandering people . . .

he wound up with a set of lines. They all pointed to one place.

Rick felt he couldn't believe his eyes. But he had to believe. He said, "Stan, by God, it's moving. It's started to move. . . ." Stan just sat and shook his head. He didn't answer.

They talked the girls into going east. They couldn't say what they were afraid was happening, they just told them, over and over, there was something badly wrong. They had a hard job convincing them, but they gave in finally. Stan left it that Judy would drive out in the morning, he'd follow on as soon as he could. Then they tried to get some rest. Rick was up at dawn. It was pretty early, but Stan had beaten him to it. The garage was empty, he'd already gone to Saskeega.

Rick drove up to his own place. Everything was quiet. He changed, hunted out an old cutthroat razor and had a shave. He didn't fancy using his Remington. Then he went and stood outside where he could see the valley, the mountain beyond, the lines moving up there like cobwebs miles away. He kept thinking he ought to be packing, they all ought to be getting out. But it was still too crazy. It was like throwing away job and future and home and all the folk you knew because one night you'd had a bad dream. It was all so peaceful. The air smelled good, there just couldn't be a Thing in the wires that was fixing to kill everybody on earth. . . .

He drove down to Saskeega. There were troops on the road, everything was confused. Nobody knew for sure what was happening. He saw tanks, and there were guns pointed about. Nowhere to aim them. He heard somebody ask if they'd started another war.

Saskeega was empty. Deserted. It was crazy. Rick could hear the noise of the turbines, the roaring the place always made. The power was going out, but the station was running itself.

A siren was howling someplace, but even the siren sounded sort of lonely. Like there was nobody to shout to

and it knew it. Rick went into Main Block, got to the old man's office. The door was swinging open, his chair was overturned, there were papers scattered about the floor. Like he'd jumped up suddenly and run out like a mad thing. There was no help there. Rick drove across to West Power.

The sun was well up now, it was going to be a hot day. He got out of the car, ran across the macadam. His footsteps were the only thing there was. He got to the control room, Donnell was there on his own. Rick asked where the Hell were the shift staff, why hadn't he yelled for help. He was sweating, looked half crazy. He'd tried, phones wouldn't answer, he couldn't leave the place on its own. Voltage had been jumping over the Black Horse, the trips hadn't pulled the line. Mr. Mainwaring had been in, Mr. Mainwaring had driven up to High Eight. He'd said he would call from the pass. He hadn't called yet. . . .

Rick looked at the dials on the main panel, they were reading steady. The building was pulsing. Wasn't what you could call a noise, it was the feeling of a dozen turbines threshing power into the lines, driving it up and away over the Black Horse. Donnell couldn't keep still. The wires were bad, they'd gone bad again, something was far wrong. He'd buy his lot if he let the line burn out, he'd buy his lot if he pulled the plug without an authority. Would Rick authorize him, would he clear him to close the line?

Cameron swore at him. It was Donnell's baby, not his. The engineer looked like he was going to burst out crying. He started patting panels and controls like he couldn't believe anything was real any more. The phone rang.

Rick grabbed it. But it wasn't Stan, it was Judy. Somehow the call had got through, they couldn't have all been dead in the exchange . . . Judy on the line, wanted to know were things O.K.? She was packing, they were getting on the road, were things O.K.?

Donnell was yanking Rick's arm. Muttering something about music. He knocked him off and he started to yell. "The music, Rick, it started again, was the music last time, I saw those dials move, we all did, couldn't do a thing, just

had to hear the music. Christ, Rick, the music . . ." He was down on his knees, groping about. Donnell was through.

Rick stood feeling the power through the soles of his shoes and there was Judy on the line and he didn't know what to do, couldn't think any more. The voltage was going to waltz again and he couldn't think. He said, "Look, Judy, get this and get it good. Things aren't O.K., there's something crazy happening. Just get out, Judy, make it fast. . . ." Then it hit him. She was packing, meant she was calling from home. They shouldn't have gone back up there, he wanted them away and clear. He yelled at her. "Judy, *get out of that house* . . .!"

"What——"

He gagged, but it had to be said. "Judy, the lines. Like you said, there's something wrong with the lines. Judy, don't go near any lines. Don't try and cook, don't use any lights, don't take any more calls. Just get out. Tell Jeff that's from Stan and me. Tell her we'll come soon as we can, tell her I'll bring Stan along, I'll bring him if I have to carry him. But *get out*! You got that, Judy, you got that O.K.?"

"Ye-es. . . ."

"Well, be a good girl, finish that packing and get out. Shoo, scat. . . . I'll see you soon as I can. . . ."

He put the handset down, ran to the line phone. Donnell was yelling. "I heard it last time, Rick, couldn't tell you, couldn't lose my job, you'd have said I was crazy, couldn't say what I heard. . . ."

He said, "For Chrissake, *get out of the way*. . . ." He got past him, got to the phone. He rang High Eight. Nobody there. The static on the line was horrible, it was wailing and gibbering at the same time, it was like hearing a mad army. He'd never heard static like that before. He yelled, "Anybody there? Come on, come on somebody, are you there . . . ?"

He thought he heard a handset being picked up. "Stan, that you? You up at High Eight?"

Something like a groan. It sounded like a groan. And a

word, all threaded through and underlaid with static. Sounded like, "Can't . . ." Then there was nothing.

Cameron banged the receiver rest. He yelled, "Stan? Stan, you there? West Power to High Eight, *are you there . . . ?*"

High Eight answered. They both saw it, saw every dial on the board kick its stops as the voltage jumped up there on the mountain. . . .

Rick made a noise like a horse neighing. He jumped at the board and pulled the line, killed it stone dead. Then he ran for the car.

There was a shortcut onto the mountain, missing Freshet. A rough road, barely more than a track. He took the car on that and held her flat out, squealing her into bends, breaking off into the rough, smashing her chrome chops on boulders. He was trying to break her up like he was busting up inside. When he got to High Eight the lines were live again. Somebody had authorized Donnell to put them back in. Or they'd put themselves back in. It didn't make any difference to Rick. Didn't make any difference to the folk who had got there before him either.

All through the night they'd been coming, the poor folk, the first of the ragged armies. . . . They were piled round the bars, the transformers were singing there shoulder deep. And there were black skeins round the walls like the bugs in the trap, and overhead in the wires like a crop of filthy fruit. There'd been a cordon of troopers round the hill. It was hard to tell, but it looked like the guards were mostly underneath.

Rick started to laugh. A thin noise, wild and high. Laughing at the people, at High Eight, at what he'd seen there, at what he'd promised Jeff. He'd said he'd bring Stan. If he had to carry him. But he couldn't carry him. He couldn't move him, he'd have broken, he was too brittle. . . .

He went back down the mountain. He never knew how he reached the bottom. He had to run the last half mile. He'd busted the car, she was seized solid.

There was a big line store about a mile from Number Seven, they'd set it up when they did all the work on the

hill. Rick was lucky; when he reached it one of the Company trucks was standing outside. There was nobody around. He broke the door open, loaded what he wanted in the back of the wagon. When she wouldn't take any more he started up and went for Freshet like a bat from Hell. He couldn't think any more. He just wanted to see Judy had got away, he wanted her clear.

He drove into trouble. A roadblock. It hadn't been there when he'd come down. There were poles across the road, he could see the army moving about behind. He stopped the truck and a soldier came over. He had a carbine in his hands and looked like he'd been told he could use it. Rick yelled at him he was Saskeega maintenance, he'd got an urgent job. He shoved his pass under his nose and the man fetched his sergeant.

Cameron felt he was going crazy. What he'd got wouldn't keep and he knew it. The sergeant came across. He was scared. He had a big, pasty face and the fear was in his face, he smelled of fright. He wagged his thumb at the truck. "Down, bud. . . ."

Just along the road Hell started breaking loose, shots and screams. A column of people was coming along. Soldiers firing over their heads, trying to turn them. It wasn't making any difference, they were walking like they didn't hear.

Rick jabbed the throttle and let the clutch go. He heard the smack as the shoulder of the truck shoved the sergeant's face out of the way then he was through the block, bouncing and skidding on the timbers and poles and scattering men every which way. Something rattled behind him; blue sky opened up over the windshield, then he was clear. They never came after him. It looked as if they had their hands too full.

Rick got to his place, Jeff's car was still in the drive. He rammed the truck in alongside and got out. Something made him look across to the garage. The port was up, his wife's old Pontiac was gone. He tried to tell himself, it's O.K., they took the Pontiac instead, it's O.K., but it wasn't any good. He felt fear. It was like a hand round his heart

squeezing it until it could get no smaller, no colder. He walked slowly into the house. He called, "Judy . . . ?"

Nothing. No answer. Water running somewhere and another noise. He followed it. Came from the lounge. He walked in. There was a hairdryer lying buzzing on the carpet, a cord up to the wallplug.

Jeff was in the kitchen, of all the crazy places. Sitting over the sink with her head down. Cameron lifted her. Blood was all down the side of the sink, spattered, red and pink, a pink fan spreading to the plug. Her face was gouged, hair to chin. Like she'd been clawed by a mountain cat. She'd gone to the sink to try to stop the blood but she couldn't, she was hurt too bad. He let go of her, wasn't anything he could do. He stood there and knew he couldn't go crazy, not just for a while.

He knew what had happened, he could see it so clearly. Judy did what she said, she kept off all electric things, but she forgot the drier. She bathed and changed and then she started the drier and let High Eight talk, held the motor right up by her face so she could hear it clear. He should have remembered, he should have told her about the drier. . . .

. Jeff tried to stop her. When she heard . . . whatever it was you heard, she went out and got the Pontiac and Jeff tried to hold her and she beat and beat and tore her face apart. . . . But it wasn't Judy that had done that, it wasn't his Judy, it was a Thing that already belonged to High Eight. . . . And that was where she went, she left Jeff on the ground and drove up the road, and God can you hear me, *she drove to High Eight*. . . .

He should have done what she said. He should have taken her away, she was always so scared of the lines, she knew one day she'd have to go to the lines.

It had taken Stan and it had taken Judy, it had taken everything he had. It had to take him. It knew he hated it, it knew he could kill it. It was up there sulking, deep in the windings, it was full and lazy, but it knew it had to move because he was coming to kill.

Rick tried to hold his mind on what he had to do. On his back he had a box of caps, the truck outside was loaded with blasting sticks. Linked charges on the tower heads each side of High Eight, blow the lines and pin it. Then flatten High Eight, burst its foul blue heart.... But he wasn't going to make it. He had the caps ready, he was checking them, but he knew he wasn't going to make it. He didn't want to make it because he'd have to go inside, he'd have to pick Judy off the wires....

It hit him, on the dot.

High Eight calling....

He reeled, hand to his head. It was like all the sound there ever was. Like music but not like music. Like the wind in trees. Like voices. Like Mom and Pop. Lovely and lovely and ugghh....

*Ugghh....*

*Like Judy....*

It didn't take him all at once. It tried, but it couldn't. It had to rack up and down, and slide, move and slide, look for him, pinpoint....

He was moving again, draggingly. The caps in his hand, blasting sticks in the truck, and the wind in the trees soughing, Judy calling and not to let go of the caps don't ever forget . . . and up ahead on the hill, movement. A shifting and crawling. A motion that was no motion. Molecules that were not molecules forming and dissolving, bubbling, frothing....

And for the first time, *fear*....

# STAR LIGHT

*by*

ISAAC ASIMOV

*Herewith a little-known vignette from popular scientist-author Isaac Asimov, whose short stories and novels are among the best in the genre. Renowned for his theories on robotics, his novel concerning the robot detective R. Daneel Olivaw in* The Caves Of Steel *was dramatized on BBC TV 2 during 1963.*

# STAR LIGHT

ARTHUR TRENT heard them quite clearly. The tense, angry words shot out of his receiver.

"Trent! You can't get away. We will intersect your orbit in two hours and if you try to resist we will blow you out of space."

Trent smiled and said nothing. He had no weapons and no need to fight. In far less than two hours the ship would make its Jump through hyperspace and they would never find him. He would have with him nearly a kilogram of Krillium, enough for the construction of the brain-paths of thousands of robots and worth some ten million credits on any world in the Galaxy—and no questions asked.

Old Brennmeyer had planned the whole thing. He had planned it for thirty years and more. It had been his life's work.

"It's the getaway, young man," he had said. "That's why I need you. You can lift a ship off the ground and out into space. I can't."

"Getting it into space is no good, Mr. Brennmeyer," Trent said. "We'll be caught in half a day."

"Not," said Brennmeyer, craftily, "if we make the Jump; not if we flash through and end up light-years away."

"It would take half a day to plot the Jump and even if we could take the time, the police would alert all stellar systems."

"No, Trent, no." The old man's hand fell on his, clutching it in trembling excitement. "Not *all* stellar systems; only the dozen in our neighbourhood. The Galaxy is big and the colonists of the last fifty thousand years have lost touch with each other."

He talked avidly, painting the picture. The Galaxy now

was like the surface of man's original planet (Earth, they had called it) in prehistoric times. Man had been scattered over all the continents, but each group had known only the area immediately surrounding itself.

"If we make the Jump at random," Brennmeyer said, "we would be anywhere, even fifty thousand light-years away, and there would be no more chance of finding us than a pebble in a meteor swarm."

Trent shook his head. "And we don't find ourselves, either. We wouldn't have the foggiest way of getting to an inhabited planet."

Brennmeyer's quick-moving eyes inspected the surroundings. No one was near him, but his voice sank to a whisper anyway. "I've spent thirty years collecting data on every habitable planet in the Galaxy. I've searched all the old records. I've travelled thousand of light-years, farther than any space-pilot. And the location of every habitable planet is now in the memory store of the best computer in the world."

Trent lifted his eyebrows politely.

Brennmeyer said, "I design computers and I have the best. I've also plotted the exact location of every luminous star in the Galaxy, every star of spectral class of F, B, A and O, and put that into the memory store. Once we've made the Jump the computer will scan the heavens spectroscopically and compare the results with the map of the Galaxy it contains. Once it finds the proper match, and sooner or later it will, the ship is located in space and it is then automatically guided through a second Jump to the neighbourhood of the nearest inhabited planet."

"Sounds too complicated."

"It can't miss. All these years I've worked on it and it can't miss. I'll have ten years left yet to be a millionaire. But you're young; you'll be a millionaire much longer."

"When you Jump at random, you can end inside a star."

"Not one chance in a hundred trillion, Trent. We might also land so far from any luminous star that the computer

can't find anything to match up against its programme. We might find we've jumped only a light-year or two and the police are still on our trail. The chances of that are smaller still. If you want to worry, worry that you might die of a heart attack at the moment of take-off. The chances for that are much higher."

"*You* might, Mr. Brennmeyer. You're older."

The old man shrugged. "I don't count. The computer will do everything automatically."

Trent nodded and remembered that. One midnight, when the ship was ready and Brennmeyer arrived with the Krilium in a briefcase (he had no difficulty for he was a greatly trusted man) Trent took the briefcase with one hand while his other moved quickly and surely.

A knife was still the best, just as quick as a molecular depolarizer, just as fatal, and much more quiet. Trent left the knife there with the body, complete with fingerprints. What was the difference? They wouldn't get him.

Deep in space now, with the police-cruisers in pursuit, he felt the gathering tension that always preceded a Jump. No physiologist could explain it, but every space-wise pilot knew what it felt like.

There was a momentary inside-out feeling as his ship and himself for one moment of non-space and non-time, became non-matter and non-energy, then reassembled itself instantaneously in another part of the Galaxy.

Trent smiled. He was still alive. No star was too close and there were thousands that were close enough. The sky was alive with stars and the pattern was so different that he knew the Jump had gone far. Some of those stars had to be spectral class F and better. The computer would have a nice, rich pattern to match against its memory. It shouldn't take long.

He leaned back in comfort and watched the bright pattern of starlight move as the ship rotated slowly. A bright star came into view, a really bright one. It didn't seem more than a couple of light-years away and his pilot's sense told him it was a hot one; good and hot. The computer would

use that as its base and match the pattern centred about it. Once again, he thought: It shouldn't take long.

But it did. The minutes passed. Then an hour. And still the computer clicked busily and its lights flashed.

Trent frowned. Why didn't it find the pattern? The pattern had to be there. Brennmeyer had showed him his long years of work. He *couldn't* have left out a star or recorded it in the wrong place.

Surely stars were born and died and moved through space while in being, but these changes were slow, slow. In a million years, the patterns that Brennmeyer had recorded couldn't——

A sudden panic clutched at Trent. No! It *couldn't* be. The chances for it were even smaller than Jumping into a star's interior.

He waited for the bright star to come into view again, and, with trembling hands, brought it into telescopic focus. He put in all the magnification he could, and around the bright speck of light was the tell-tale fog of turbulent gases caught, as it were, in mid-flight.

*It was a nova!*

From dim obscurity, the star had raised itself to bright luminosity—perhaps only a month ago. It had graduated from a spectral class low enough to be ignored by the computer, to one that would be most certainly taken into account.

But the nova that existed in space didn't exist in the computer's memory store because Brennmeyer had not put it there. It had not existed when Brennmeyer was collecting his data—at least not as a luminous star.

"Don't count on it," shrieked Trent. "Ignore it."

But he was shouting at automatic machinery that would match the nova-centred pattern against the Galactic pattern and find it nowhere and continue, nevertheless, to match and match and match for as long as its energy supply held out.

The air supply would run out much sooner. Trent's life would ebb away much sooner.

Helplessly, Trent slumped in his chair, watching the mocking pattern of star light and beginning the long and agonized wait for death.

—If he had only kept the knife.

# HUNGER OVER SWEET WATERS

*by*

COLIN KAPP

*Colin Kapp, a young British scientist and fast becoming one of our most popular s-f writers, presents a story which should delight all those who demand more* science *in their fiction. In short, how to build a boat without wood, metal or tools—providing that you live on a planet where the sea water is suitable for ion-exchange.*

# HUNGER OVER SWEET WATERS

EVEN the transcendental scarlet did not obtrude, so exquisitely did the colours harmonize with and complement each other, the subtleties of tone quieting the gaudiness with soft and mellowing hues to produce the nearest thing to visual perfection that Blick had ever experienced. Certainly he had never before seen the rock faces so beautifully adorned.

This was partly the effect of the season, and partly the effect of a new current stirring through the rocks, whose movement seemed to excite an increase in the speed of the life-cycle of the magnificent flora, initiating a kind of avid thirsting to contribute the finest consummative blossoms to the orgy of summer on Hebron V. And for uncounted hectares, infinite and beautiful, the garden of sweet waters continued to the far horizon.

The apparent solidity of the panorama was almost entirely illusory. The rocks of highly foamed siliceous slag had a density of only point seven six against a density of one point three for the mineral broth on which they floated. Apart from the random and still ill-understood currents, the normal drift was slow, caused by planetary rotation and the drag of the solitary satellite, and was of the order of a mere kilometre per hour in this latitude. However solid and static the scene might appear at any one instant, the continuing migration of any salient points which might occur on the landscape soon dispelled any illusions of permanency. Only the floating process stations and the flexible railway which ran on a line of floats for nearly two hundred kilometres to the Base on Lamedah, the planet's only significant land-mass, were chain-anchored to the deep bedrock of the core.

On this day, however, the usual northerly movement of

surface water was being reinforced by a more rapid current, and the scenic drift was probably approaching three kilometres an hour, an almost unknown occurrence. The effect was mesmeric, since, lacking a stable visual reference point, the station itself appeared to be in motion, ploughing through the gardens of infinitely coloured delight as a ship passes through the sea, the rocks turning and dividing about the utilitarian rafts and reforming to an apparently solid terrain on having passed the obstacle. The delicious and delicately gaudy flora which abounded on the oceanic floating garden was equally adaptable and divisible, being mainly soft and pithy, with trailers having no great tensile strength. Only a few of the trailing roots and membranes fouled the rafts in passing, and even these were eventually swept aside by the attrition of the rocky drift.

Blick was suitably impressed. The multiple passions which had driven him ultimately to this far and obscure corner of the universe still left him with a restless dissatisfaction, which the motion of the drift did something to relieve. He smiled wryly at some introspective pattern of reflection. Curiously, a passion for anonymity and loneliness were not the factors which had led him to become anonymous and alone in this most lonely and anonymous of places. This was an irony of life he could never explain, even to himself.

The fact that he was at this outpost at all was, he knew, entirely his own doing. He had pioneered the technique of ion-exchange concentrate "mining" on Hebron V, and could by now, had he chosen, have occupied a safe and high administrative position in the company. But by a combination of obstinacy, assumed eccentricity and a carefully pre-calculated lack of responsibility, he had excused and manoeuvred himself out of the desk work and the salary and returned to this outpost laboratory and his thoughts. Metaphorically, the Company had shrugged its shoulders and calculated that he was the only loser, and since Blick always returned good value for money spent, he was left to have his way.

Glancing at the multiple hands of his wrist chronometer he turned, for perhaps the hundredth time, to scan the railway line which crossed the ocean on the incredibly fragile-seeming chain of floats and supporting girders. On Hebron V the railway meant so much more than transport; it meant power, communication and life itself. Without the usually punctual daily train not only was his work hampered to the point of uselessness, but he and the occupants of the other stations were left in an intolerably dangerous situation. Currently, the train was fourteen hours overdue, and the multiplex communication line had ceased to function.

He smiled again his wry, habitual smile and turned his attention back to the rafts of the station chained in loose association, from the broad backs of which rose his precious tanks and pumps and the tall resin columns of the ion-exchange installation. Methodically, almost absent-mindedly, he checked the gauges and adjusted the flow rates one by one. The pump on plant eighty-seven was labouring badly, so he made a note to clear the filters, and closed the unit down. This done, he returned to the laboratory and began to run analyses on the various concentrates entering the tanks.

The analysis results were moderately good, with platinum-group metals from the deep pickup particularly high, but the yield from the resin beds selective to the heavier trans-uranic elements was disappointing, and scarcely justified his request to the Company for the recent "drift" of the station two kilometres south of its original position. The "top-stream" water was again the frequent mixed mineral stew, and he noted to limit his intake of this solely for the production of the process water he needed to keep the other columns in operation. Only from the "midi" stream was the output high with his staple product—copper. The midi pumps were bringing up a good quality liquor, mainly sulphate radical and organo-complex, and by using sulphuric acid to regenerate the ion-exchange resins he was producing almost completely pure copper sulphate for transfer to the storage tanks. Out here on the Rim, where copper had nine

hundred times the value of gold on Terra, this was a useful achievement, so he plotted his influent depths and went out again to sound the height of the midi current.

It was then, as he was crossing the broad raft decking, that he perceived the next hint of trouble. So used were his ears to the whine and throb of his pumps that he could almost tell their individual performances by their contributions to the total *mélange* of sound. Had his ears not been so critical he could have missed entirely the almost imperceptible break in their rhythm. In fact, so short was the period before recovery that the circuit-breakers did not have time to react before the current was restored and held them firm.

Scowling, he forgot his intended mission and turned back to the power room, where the current from the cable, which picked up from the railway line, was divided and the power suitably transformed to provide the complex needs of the station. Nothing appeared amiss; the meters exhibited no more than the usual slight hunting, and all the breakers and isolators were cool and firm. This led him to assume that the fault had lain with the supply and not with his own installation, and he raised one eyebrow at the implication.

The electricity supply was fed into the conductors, which also served as the railway lines and the multiplex communication feeder, at Station Sixteen, about a hundred and fifty kilometres north down the precarious chain of floats which was their only link with Lamedah. Since the supply itself was an MHD-oscillating atomic-plasma reactor, and therefore not itself likely to be subject to random variations in output, the fault probably lay either with the associated equipment at Station Sixteen or, more possibly and more potentially disastrous, with the railway line itself.

Blick had never had any illusions about the seriousness of a major catastrophe affecting the functioning of the line. Economics alone had dictated that three parallel bars of steel-clad gold should span the two hundred kilometres from the Base on Lamedah to Station Sixty, carrying power,

transportation and communication simultaneously along the chain of PTCFE floats which was the sole and dubious umbilical cord feeding the sixty stations of the line. Max Colindale, the general manager of Transgalactic Mining and Minerals, had a whole file of Blick's comments on the arrangement, and the heading on the file, had he seen it, would have caused Blick's immediate resignation.

With the 'plex gone, the only remaining communication device was a sound-powered circuit to Station Sixty, which had originally been installed by the construction team for the purpose of comparing drift velocities. Station Sixty, at the end of the chain, some five and a half kilometres distant, was now used only as an ecological field laboratory under the control of Martha Sorenson, the planetary biologist. For purely personal and emotional reasons Blick's hands were trembling very slightly as he dragged the instrument from the rear of the desk. It had been a long time since he had used it last. After a brief moment of hesitation he cranked the instrument and then sat back with the handset, and was relieved to hear the click signifying contact established.

"Martha?"

"Who else did you expect?" Five words only, but the inflections of the voice carried even over the restricted frequency range of the instrument. Association did the rest.

"Blick," said Blick unnecessarily, knowing as he said it that the circuit did not and could not possibly communicate with any other two people.

Understandingly, she allowed him the seconds necessary to recover from his slight confusion, so he continued: "Look, there's something wrong with the line between here and Base. The train is seventeen hours overdue and I can't raise Base or anybody on the 'plex system."

"I know," said Martha. "I tried to send in my reports on the telefax, but the system's completely dead. The

power's erratic, too. What do you think's gone wrong, Blick?"

"The power's fed into the line at Station Sixteen, but the 'plex continues through to Base. That suggests trouble at or near Sixteen on the Base side. If I remember rightly there's a submarine valley across there somewhere."

"Yes, the Anapolis deeps. I did a bio-survey in that area last year. There's a lot of high-velocity current layers in that area. Perhaps one of them surfaced."

"Perhaps. That could be nasty if the line's been broken completely. There's no construction team left onworld, and Base-maintenance aren't equipped to handle anything that big."

"You think this might be big?" she asked.

"I'm afraid it might. A swamped float should only take a few hours to replace, but seventeen hours needs some explaining. If it is a big break it could take weeks to repair, and if it needs supplies or help from offworld it could take a month before they can get to us out here. How're you fixed for food?"

"About three days, if I eat the tins I've been avoiding."

"Roughly the same here. Look, if the situation doesn't change before nightfall I suggest we place ourselves on an emergency footing. The sooner we do that the longer we will be able to last out if we have to."

"That makes sense," said Martha, "but surely they could reach us somehow before then? They've plenty of boats at base."

"Only lightweight stuff, and no use for working against the rock-drift at this time of year. The best they have available is capable of not much above five kilometres per hour against the drift, and we're two hundred kilometres south of Base. In their region, the prevailing current is about seven kilometres per hour just now and moving north-north-west, so they couldn't reach us if they tried. And if a high-velocity streamer has broken surface across the Anapolis deeps we must assume it's westerly bound, and that makes the situation completely hopeless."

"You're right, of course," said Martha. "I'd never stopped to think just how precarious our situation was out here."

"I did," said Blick. "I had a row with Max Colindale over it, and nearly got my contract cancelled for my pains. It seems I was up against something called statistical probability, which proved to his satisfaction that my chances of dying of starvation out here were far slighter than my chances of dying anywhere else in the galaxy from all forms of fatality combined. Therefore, what did I have to complain about? He was doing me a favour, no less."

Martha began laughing. "Poor old Blick! I can just imagine your reaction when he told you that. I never could really understand why you came out here in the first place."

"Can't you, Martha?" Blick's voice was quickly sad.

She stopped laughing suddenly. "Yes. I do know, Blick. But it was a stupid thing to do. We both know there can never be anything more between us—not while you have a wife and family who love you as dearly as yours do. I've been too much hurt by the same sort of situation myself, remember? You can't ask me to be instrumental in bringing that sort of hurt to you or them. You're too damn nice, the whole bunch of you."

"That's my trouble in life," said Blick, "being too damn nice and getting involved with people who are too damn nice. It's a positive fault. It's the uncharitable, the inconsiderate and the conscienceless figurative bastards of this life who get all the breaks."

"I know what you mean," said Martha seriously. "You don't know how many times I've had that argument with myself. There've been times when just one more hurt dealt out by life could have made me quash my scruples and come to you, regardless of the consequences."

"Thank you for that crumb, anyway," said Blick. "I'll call you again before nightfall unless anything happens before."

He broke the connection and leaned back, thankful for the first time that the sound-powered phone did not have

the video circuits provided by the 'plex. He did not want anyone, especially Martha, to see him in his present mood.

The power held out until mid-afternoon. The impending failure was heralded by two staccato interruptions, which dropped out all of the small automatic circuit-breakers on Blick's installations before picking up again. Blick did not bother to restart the stalled equipment, but merely went round and closed the valves isolating the columns from the water, regenerant and concentrate tanks. There was no point in producing further concentrates to meet a delivery schedule for which no transport was likely to be available.

The 'plex system remained dead. Blick briefly considered breaking the equipment open and recovering components sufficient to build a small morse transmitter. Having considered thus far he realized that it was not a transmitter he needed but a receiver. Base would already be acutely aware of the position of the stations along the chain, and it was information from Base that was needed, not the reverse. Certainly, he had neither the knowledge nor the facilities to build a receiver capable of rendering intelligible the complex compressed-information transmissions of the Base deep-space transmitter, even if ionospheric scatter were to deflect sufficient of it to make the transmission available in this region.

The final failure of the power rendered even these speculations sterile. This time there was no instantaneous break in the current, but a slow tail-off both in potential and frequency which Blick recognized as the result of the damping of the MHD reactor until the oscillations ceased and the plasma was extinguished. This particular mode of shutdown suggested an emergency measure to ensure the safety of the reactor rather than a calculated engineering shutdown.

Looking northward down the chain he could see nothing of interest save for the perspective convergence of the rail-

way lines, which being curved by a more than usually western component in the drift, cheated him of his habitual thoughts of the spacing of the rails approaching the infinitely small but never quite attaining it. Shorn of the noise of the pumps the station was enfolded by a vast silence, and the blank, orange-tinted sky seemed to move oppressively lower. He became aware for the first time of the slight bump and drag of the rocky foam along the edges of the rafts and the skitter of small fauna on the rocks hurriedly avoiding the upset which was caused to their own small and insubstantial worlds.

Returning to the cabin, he was about to crank-up the sound-powered phone to Station Sixty when the instrument rang under his fingers, giving him a shock which he experienced as more physical than psychological.

"What are we going to do, Blick?"

"Currently, there's not much we can do except wait. Now the power's gone I think we can safely assume there's a major break in the line and that it's going to take a long time to repair. Perhaps the Base engineers can handle it, but I doubt if they can even get across without a cushion-craft of sorts, and that'll have to come from outworld somewhere. I rather fancy it'll mean a heavy engineering crew being brought in from Delta Five."

"But that may take a month!" Martha tried to adjust to the situation. Blick did nothing to soften the edges of the blow.

"Yes," he said. "Just that. Perhaps they can get emergency supplies through to us, perhaps not. It'll depend on whether they can cross whatever gap there is, whether they have a locomotive on this side of the break and whether they themselves can restart the generator for power to drive it here. Given so many unknowns and a complete lack of information our only course is to immediately prepare for the worst."

"Then what do you suggest?" asked Martha.

"First," said Blick, "that we move you down here and pool such foodstuffs as we have available. We'll work out

some sort of rationing system which will give us a chance of surviving for a maximum period."

"Whoa!" said Martha, laughing. "Whose welfare are we interested in? I don't really see how mine is going to be improved by moving into your cabin, and I can diet here as well as anywhere. Apart from the social prospects, give me one good reason why I should be any better off at your station than at mine?"

"In a word," said Blick, "water. Your supply is limited to your tank, and that was due to be refilled by the train that didn't arrive. I'd guess that only gives you a maximum of two day's supply in hand unless you give up such luxuries as washing, in which case you can last out for about a week. Here I can use my resin columns to produce as much pure water from the sea as we're ever likely to require. Stay there if you like, but remember where to come if you get thirsty."

"I might even do that if you can twist your crazy columns into producing gin, but if you think I'm going to walk five kilometres just for a drink of water, you don't know Martha Sorenson."

"How much water have you got, Martha?"

She was silent for a moment. "None, and you damn well know it, Blick."

"Uh! I'll come and give you a hand with your supplies. Shall I come tonight or in the morning?"

"Best make it the morning, Blick. I've something I must sort out before I leave."

"Such as?"

"Me," said Martha, putting down the phone.

The only way to reach Station Sixty was to walk the distance over the awkward railway decking. When he arrived, Martha had already packed and was awaiting him. Sensibly, she had limited the load to the very minimum of personal effects plus all the food which was available, though of the latter there was appallingly little. Their re-

union was sincere if undemonstrative, and inhibited by a reserve which neither of them would have cared to explain.

Although they had spoken briefly over the 'plex system they had not seen each other for eight months, and Blick felt a slight stab of pain on noticing that time had touched the first traces of tiredness and hardness to a face he could remember as nothing but youthful and vital. He realized these things only by comparison with memory, and when he looked again he could find nothing but a slightly enhanced maturity, and the intensity which was the essential Martha was undimmed. Nevertheless, something inside him shed a small, bitter tear of regret.

The railway decking had not been designed for pedestrian traffic, being mainly of open-span alloy girder, difficult and dangerous to traverse on foot, and necessarily Blick had to shoulder most of the load. Martha experienced difficulty with even one small case over the five and a half kilometre stretch, and finally he took even this from her. Both were aching and exhausted when the ordeal was over.

At the cabin of Station Fifty-Nine she rested for a time while Blick began to prepare a light meal, for they had neither of them breakfasted. Presently Martha got up and began to prowl around the cabin, examining the personal touches and curios which Blick had added to the structure. Blick was an individualist, moody and uncertain of even himself, and his untidy, enigmatic intelligence and unorthodoxy was everywhere portrayed in the bric-à-brac and sentimental and scientific miscellanea, which he had allowed to spread about his living quarters. Finally, on the desk, she found the frame with the photographs of his wife and children. He saw her looking at it, and took it from her and laid it face down, deliberately. She put it back firmly into its place, and faced him.

"You know, Blick, that's the first time I've ever seen you even think disloyally towards your wife."

He wiped an unruly lock of hair back from his forehead. "It's a curious thing, Martha, but in all the time I've loved

you I've never even felt disloyal. What I feel for you and what I feel for her are just not the same kind of emotions at all. What's the expression? *'When love has changed to kindliness'*? That's all there ever was between her and me—oceans of kindliness. I even thought that was what love was, until I met you."

"And you still love me that much?" The question was one of interested compassion.

Blick nodded. "I may be a bloody fool, but at least I'm a consistent bloody fool."

"You shouldn't go on tormenting yourself, Blick. Time and again I've told you to forget me."

"Forget?" He smiled wearily. "And just what the hell do you suppose I've been trying to do? My God, if only I could forget you that easily!"

She scowled and turned to the window. "No, and in a way I'm glad. I can't forget you either, Blick. It just goes to show that the deserving don't always get what they think they deserve."

On the decking of the raft she looked about in bewilderment at the tanks and the tall columns and the maze of valves and pipework which constituted the installation.

"What do you do here, anyway, Blick?"

"We pump up selected metal-bearing liquor streams from the sea, and using ion-exchange techniques we partially separate and then concentrate the metal salt solutions for subsequent metal extraction and refining at Lamedah."

"Ah, that accounts for the tank wagons on the railway. What precisely is ion-exchange, anyway?"

"Nothing new," said Blick. "It's been used in regenerable water-softeners for donkey's years. Basically, the columns are full of minute beads of special resins. These resins are insoluble, but contain free anions or cations, according to type, and these free ions are capable of being exchanged for other ions from a solution with which they are in contact. The process is reversible, so that by suitable chemical treat-

ment the first ions may be replaced in the resin and the ions which the resin has taken up are displaced and can be collected in the form of a salt concentrate."

"Whoa!" said Martha. "You've got beyond me there. Translation, please."

"I'll give you a simple example," said Blick, "which will also show why we use the system. This is the copper region of Hebron V, and some of the current streams carry a fairly pure but dilute solution of copper salts in water. Factually, the copper concentration in these streams is so low that to attempt to extract the copper from the stream by the usual methods of cementation or electrolysis would be a costly and inefficient business. But if I pass the dilute liquor through a cation resin column, the copper ions will remain in the resin bed while the radical with which it was combined will pass on out of the column, together with whatever ions the copper has itself displaced—in this case, hydrogen."

"I see, so that you finish with a column of resin containing all the copper ions?"

"Essentially, yes. If I then add fairly strong sulphuric acid to the column, the copper is itself displaced, combines with the sulphate radical, and comes out of the column as a concentrated solution of copper sulphate, in which form it is supremely suitable for electro-refining. The act of passing acid through the column returns the resin to its original form, and the whole cycle is repeated. In the course of electro-refining at Lamedah, even the sulphuric acid is recovered and returned here for re-use, so that material wastage is little. Virtually, we get our copper for little more than the cost of the electricity we use for pumping, transportation and refining."

"No wonder Max Colindale can afford such big cigars! Does the process work for any metal?"

"Most. Different resins are broadly selective to certain groups of ions, and we're learning how to tailor them for greater selectivity. By careful choice of resin we can isolate and concentrate one metal preferentially to the others,

although some mixing does take place, especially when working a contaminated stream."

"And you can recover the concentrates merely by regenerating the column?"

"Mostly. Some, like the one which is receptive almost exclusively to gold, can't be regenerated, so you recover the gold by burning off the resin. The same applies to the platinum-group specific resins and the newly developed one for the transuranic elements. But generally, regeneration suffices, and you've even some choice of regenerant to produce chloride, sulphate or whatever happens to be the most convenient salt form."

"It seems incredible," said Martha, "that just a few tubes and pumps can do all that."

"That's only the start," said Blick. "We're working now on using selective ion-exchange membranes coupled with electro-osmosis and electrochromatographic techniques to provide a complete separation of any elements present in a solution. The process is analogous to the one we suspect occurs deep in the ocean belts, the natural mechanism which produces the metal streams from the mineral mixture of the ocean. If we bring it off, we'll be able to design one plant which can take the mixed mineral liquor and split it down completely into its separate pure salts. No more hunting for reasonable concentration metal streams—just sit back and keep pumping."

"You love this work, don't you, Blick?" said Martha, caught by his enthusiasm.

Blick shrugged. "It's an outlet," he said. "Something on which to sublimate your energies when you can't get what you want. And you do know what I want."

She frowned and turned back a little.

"You're not being very fair to me, Blick."

"I know," said Blick. "Sometimes I even surprise myself. I wasn't built to handle emotions as big as this. I never quite know the correct way to respond."

"You're very sweet," she said. "Especially when you're

looking so lost. If I ever do change my mind I'll be sure to let you know."

"You know I've no power at all to resist you?"

"That's why I'm trying to be strong for both of us. You can't jeopardize your family's whole future, Blick, for a few hours pleasure. You'd never cease hating yourself and me. It's far too great a risk for so small a return, however much desired."

"Don't get me wrong," said Blick. "Except when I'm doing a tour of duty here, I am starved for neither love, affection nor sex. I lead a normal, happy, married life, and even if I didn't there'd be a lot more gratifying ways of spending a leave than pining after you. But my private and permanent hunger is more specific: I need you, and you alone, and there's nothing and nobody else can satisfy that craving. You do more to me with a word or a smile than can anyone else by any human act. Thirsting for you isn't a whim, it's a primary fact of life."

Taking out a packet of cigarettes, she took one for herself and tossed one to him. Blick produced a match. She steadied his hand with hers as he gave her a light, holding it just a little tighter and just a little longer than necessary. He held on to the match ruefully until the flame was licking at his fingers, pretending not to notice the hurt until at last he was forced to let the match drop.

"Burned my damn fingers!" he complained lightly. The joke was an old and private one, but still worth a wry smile. She stepped back and tossed her head amusedly.

"What would you expect if you persist in playing with fire?"

He looked at her with an expression halfway between passion and misery. "Fire," he said. "You don't know just how apt that word is. Martha, just for once can't we . . . ?"

"No, Blick. Not even once. If a real affair between us ever got started we'd both get in so deep we'd neither of us be able to pull out again. You're already too far involved emotionally to have responsible regard for the consequences, and once I'd got you I'd never let you go again. I

couldn't. In love I need security—for want of a better phrase—a sense of permanency. I need to give as well as take, and Blick, darling, I've so terribly much to give!"

He looked at her wildly for a second or two.

"Then give!" he said. "Please, darling . . . !"

"No, Blick. It wouldn't be fair to her or them. One day perhaps I'll get the better of my conscience, but until then . . ."

"But where's the harm? We're alone and likely to remain so for some time. Nobody's ever to know."

"We'd know," said Martha. "You and I. Isn't that enough?"

"Damn!" said Blick. "In all my life I've never heard of anything quite so bloody—mature!"

Then came the days of waiting; the seemingly endless scanning of the line, trying the 'plex, hoping for the impossible sound of engines of skimmer or cushion-craft or boat. Despite their rationing, the food was completely gone on the tenth from the day the train had been due, and the last miserable crumbs were consumed at breakfast.

The next few days were agony until the pangs of hunger subsided into the emptiness of continued starvation. For Martha the ordeal was hard, since she had little enough reserves to meet a continuing lack of food. For Blick it was a major hell, for, although he was in better shape to meet the deprivation, his mental anguish at seeing Martha suffering carved deeply into his emotional make-up and woke him in the night with sad, gaunt fears.

And no help came.

For nine more days they were completely without food —nine days so eternally alike in the wretchedness of watching and waiting and hungering that it was difficult to separate them one from the other even in retrospect. Then Blick broke out of his semi-introspective study with a remarkable attitude of purpose.

"It's no good, Martha. We've got to get away from here

somehow. I've no doubt they're doing their best at Base, but they're certainly now waiting on equipment from Delta Five and seven days time is the minimum time in which it can arrive. You can then add several more days to that before they can get through to us. We aren't going to be in very good shape by that time, especially you. It's a risk I daren't take."

"How about walking down the line as far as we can?"

"Walking's not possible on some of the sections, and anyway, it can't solve a thing unless we can cross the break. I don't fancy struggling a hundred and fifty kilometres in our present condition just to have that point underscored. And here we do have shelter, water and a few facilities we won't find in many places down the line."

"So what's the use of talking about getting away?" Lack of sustenance was a condition now bringing her consistently to the verge of anger. She regretted her tone almost immediately, knowing Blick's resourcefulness and his tendency never to engage in idle discussion. But Blick was unmoved.

"We could do it in a boat," he said. "The drift is correcting back to North, so the current across Anapolis is probably submerging again, but slowly. If the trend continues, the drift will be almost straight and continuous from here to base waters in a few days' time."

"That won't do us much good without a boat. Are you sure we can't free one of the rafts?"

'Not a hope. I've spent days trying just that. They're on welded chain and chain-anchored right down to the bedrock. Even if I had the tools, I still couldn't get one free because the lugs are below the water-line. Nobody but a well-equipped diver could hope to release one. No, the answer is a boat."

"So where do you propose to get a boat, Blick?" Despite herself, she felt the intolerance returning.

"We make one," said Blick. "I'm not very sure how at the moment, but there just has to be a way, and if there is, I'll find it. I tried to cut open a storage tank, but with the tools

available, it's completely hopeless. Nothing that's loose or unscrews is the slightest use, and the only things promising are welded down. So what I need is a way of constructing a boat without tools and without any raw materials. And this I have to achieve in a few days or watch you starve to death."

She looked at him appealingly. "Don't torture yourself, Blick. You've done everything humanly possible. Succeed or not, you're still the most wonderful person I've ever known."

"And while we're still in the mood for compliments, did I ever tell you I think you're the most marvellous creature in the universe?"

"Often."

"That's what I thought," said Blick sadly. "Hell, that I should ever be able to forget *you*!"

For a long moment their eyes met, then he went out of the door stroking his chin thoughtfully. A few moments later, he was back, excited at a new idea.

"Martha, did you have any wax up at Station Sixty?"

"Wax? Yes, there's about a hundred kilos up there as it happens. I spent the spring making mock nests to encourage mating in some of the local fauna."

"A hundred kilos should do it easily. I'm going to get it down here, I'll be back in about five hours."

"Carrying a hundred kilos of wax?"

"It'll float," said Blick. "I'll bale it up and drop it over the edge on a line and tow it."

"Yes—you would! What are you up to, Blick? This isn't the mating season, even for the locals."

"Perhaps not," said Blick. "I'd not given their personal troubles a thought, but I've just realized I do have almost all the raw materials I need to build a boat."

"You have?"

"Yes," said Blick. "Copper sulphate solution—thousands of gallons of it."

"I may be a bit dense," said Martha, "but I don't see how you can build a boat . "

"Wax," said Blick. "That's the thing I need. Look, I've got to hurry if I'm to get it down here before nightfall."

"If you think you can build a boat out of wax you're crazy."

"Wouldn't dream of trying it," said Blick. "I'll explain it all later." He turned to go.

"Blick!"

"Yes?"

"Take care of yourself, darling. We couldn't bear to lose you."

She regarded the wax critically. "I still don't see what you're going to do with it."

"I'm going to mould the hollow form of a boat, a mould in which the boat is to be made."

She shrugged. "I suppose you know what you're doing."

"I'm doing the only thing I see possible, Martha. Now roll up your sleeves and lend me a hand. This boat is going to take days to make and we don't have many days in which to make it."

The morning was a dull, orange overcast, and the primary sun was visible only as a dull, red-tinged glow against the featureless pattern of sky. There was no great warmth in the day. She picked up a block of wax and examined it. It was unyielding and brittle.

"You can't work this stuff, Blick. Not without heating it."

"Wouldn't dream of trying to," said Blick, infuriatingly. He was busy marking measurements on the decking. "Get yourself a few plastic buckets and put a block of wax in each, and then stand them in one of the low tanks along the front there. A little water and some concentrated sulphuric acid mixed in the tank will give us all the heat we need."

"You think of everything, don't you? Are you always so damn clever?"

"Except at love," said Blick.

She went away quietly, in search of buckets.

By mid-day enough of the wax was softened for the work to begin. Martha learned to operate the appropriate water and acid valves on the tank and kept the flow of pre-heated wax blocks moving. Blick, with an assortment of unorthodox tools, deftly worked the blocks together and slowly built up the mould shape, burnishing the inside surface by rubbing, in order to make a smooth and waterproof seal. Occasionally, he passed a thin wire from inside to outside and sealed it into place. She watched his quick, capable hands with fascination as they rapidly acquired new skills in this unfamiliar craft, and knew then just how much meaning and expression Blick was capable of transmitting by a single grasp of the hand. The idea made her own hands tremble, even more than the reaction to hunger.

By nightfall the job was done. The mould, that for a reasonable-sized, if unorthodox, craft for two people, was complete. Blick solidly cursed the loss of light which robbed him of the opportunity of proceeding to the next stage of his plan, but with no power to supply artificial lighting, the cessation of outside work was unavoidable. He then fashioned two crude candles from wax and retired to the chemical laboratory, where he spent several hours carefully weighing and mixing chemicals. If he slept at all, he must have slept briefly at his bench, for Martha had the cabin to herself, and, when she awoke at first light, Blick was already at work out on the rafts.

He had stripped a lot of wiring out of the cable channels and was engaged in extensive alterations to the control circuitry, looping and re-routing conductors in a fashion which proclaimed the immediate and extremely temporary nature of the modifications. She went and stood by him for a while, but realizing she could not hope to be useful in a scheme in which even Blick was extemporizing, she went back to the cabin and drew him a glass of water and took it to him.

Blick acknowledged her action with a brief nod, and carried on without stopping, working his way down the cable channels past each column in turn, cutting and join-

ing wires at a speed which showed his complete familiarity with even minor details of the layout of the installation. He finished, ultimately, with a pair of heavy wires long enough to reach the boat mould, one of which wires he joined to the outer ends of the fine wires embedded in the mould of the hull.

"Phase two completed," he said.

"Now tell me what you're going to do?" she asked.

"Electroforming," said Blick. "Heavy electroplating, if you like. We're going to chemically silver the inside of this wax boat-form to make it electrically conductive, then fill it with slightly acid copper sulphate solution and electroplate a sufficiently thick layer of copper out of the solution to make a boat."

She grasped his arm. "Can you really do that, Blick?"

He shrugged. "With luck. Our difficulty is in trying to make something of this size and under such extremely crude conditions. And we've only got one chance!"

She was still worried. "But, Blick, you need electric current for electroplating. We don't have any current. The power's all off."

Blick looked at her sagely. From behind his fond eyes a touch of his patient genius looked also. "I must confess that had me worried too. We've no incoming power and no batteries, and on the face of it, the whole project was stillborn. Had I been alone, I think I might have left it right there, and just laid right down to die. But, oh God—not you! Here's an indication of how you inspire me, Martha—I cracked the problem, and in a way you won't find in any of the textbooks."

"Go on," she said, watching his face intently. The relief on his brow now that he had a definite plan of action was a wonderful thing to see.

"There's a way of making an ion-exchange column act like a battery—not a very good one, I'll admit, but there's plenty of columns to do the job. I've modified the circuits to give us the sort of potential and current we need, and we've got a good supply of both acid and copper concen-

trate in the header tanks. By the alternate running of these columns, reversing polarity where necessary, we shall just about have the current we need to do the job. I'll guarantee this'll be the first boat ever to be electro-formed by power from ion-exchange columns—and, come to think of it, it'll probably be the first electro-formed boat, anyway. The whole idea is too damned ridiculous for words . . . !" For a short instant his humour became dominant.

"I love to see you smile, Blick," she said. "You should do it more often."

"Can't," said Blick. "Too many sorrows and frustrations, and they're all named Martha."

"Don't say that, Blick. You make me regret I ever met you."

"Then don't! Every man needs one consuming passion in his life to force him to know himself, to drive him to explore the uttermost antipodes of feeling and to lift him a little out of the ordinary. Some choose money, some art; some choose religion, or martyrdom even. I chose you, and I'm damned if I'd swap my passion for any of those lesser substitutes."

"I suppose it never occurred to you that I'm a very ordinary person really? Not worth all that at all."

"No," said Blick, "because for me it isn't true." He looked at her, and his eyes were full of adoration. "My God, there's no phrase to describe the impact you have on me! Words alone can never tell how much I love."

He turned to go, but on a sudden impulse she called him back.

"Blick! Darling, in case we don't get out of this there's something that I have on my conscience and I'd like to say it now."

"You don't need to," said Blick. "I think I already know it."

"Let me say it, anyway. You see, Blick, you're so naïve and wonderful you shouldn't be allowed out on your own. You think that love is something made in Heaven, or wherever. It isn't. When all this started between us it was

because I made a deliberate play for you, built up that love in you, teased and withdrew until you were so involved emotionally that you had no option but to follow. I did that to you, Blick, and I did it not for love but because I was curious, because I was hurt and because I needed the type of admiration and depth of affection which your sensitivity seemed able to provide. I was using you as a means of salvaging my self-respect, and to avenge myself for the hurt that life had given me."

"Go on," said Blick.

"I never intended to become much involved myself, Blick, because you didn't have the freedom to give me all the things I lost when my own marriage was shattered. Yet you were that receptive I was sorely tempted to use you even as a means for stealing back from life all that life had stolen from me."

"But you did become involved?"

"Yes. I either misjudged myself or I underestimated your damned constancy. I became involved myself, and for that reason, I couldn't do to your marriage what somebody else had done to mine. But I still hurt you. I'd no idea you'd get into it so deeply and for so long. But the bitchy part is this—I've never allowed you to forget. I created that love in you, and, ever since, I've fed it, always leaving one hint of promise never to be fulfilled. It made me feel . . . somebody . . . to have that kind of devotion. I needed your love, Blick, and I still do. But can you forgive me for what it's cost you?"

"It's not a question of forgiving," said Blick very gently. "You've given me some of the best and most of the blackest hours of my life, but I wouldn't have missed one of those hours for anything. You see, it's in me to love that deeply, and only someone as hurt and human and as lost and desirable as you could satisfy that need. And, oh God . . . I've loved you as nobody ever loved anyone before!"

He walked deliberately away to the chemical laboratory, where the silvering reagents he had prepared during the night stood ready for use. She stood for a long time engaged

in silent mental conflict, looking at the boat mould and then at the sweet waters of the floating garden, and finally in the far direction of the Basė on Lamedah which was synonymous for her with the influence of the worlds outside. Then she picked up one of Blick's improvised tools he had used for working the wax and inscribed something on the mould wall on the side where it was not too easily seen.

The critical stages were twofold: first, the silvering of the wax to render it conductive; and, secondly, the first deposit of copper on the only molecules-thick layer of silver without disrupting the silver, since any disruption would have meant a fatal flaw in the subsequent deposit and a useless boat. Knowing too well what was at stake, Blick applied three successive layers of silver to the inside of the mould before he was satisfied, carefully recleaning some areas before repeating the operation. Fortunately, the first deposit of copper, from a low-acid solution, took without fault, and the inside of the mould assumed the uniform and beautiful salmon-pink coloration of freshly deposited copper.

Then the work began in earnest. Since Blick was using pieces of lead as anodes and the only source of copper metal was that contained in the copper solution, it was necessary to arrange an influx of new liquor from the header tank. He arranged a constant slow feed through a pipe, and the excess liquid in the mould was allowed to discharge itself over the top edge and drain away through the decking.

To enable the speed of copper plating to be increased without detriment to the quality of the deposited metal, Martha was stationed with a length of plastic pipe as a paddle to keep the solution in motion, while Blick busied himself with his columns, controlling the flow of concentrate and regenerant by manually operating the valves, which necessitated climbing the columns individually. By

nightfall, Martha was almost dropping from exhaustion, and Blick made her go and rest. He himself carried on far into the night, relying on memory when sight was of no avail, and in the morning she found him asleep and exhausted on the decking.

The day following was a trial for both of them, for they were now in no condition to expend the energy which the job required.

Martha paddled the mould listlessly, and Blick continued to climb his columns, but more slowly and less surely than before. The thickness of deposit so far achieved was difficult to gauge, but they knew that whatever they achieved by nightfall would have to suffice. They would be in no condition to continue for another day.

And with the coming of dusk, Blick fell from a column. He did not hurt himself severely, but his foot and ankle swelled to a point where he could not fit his shoe, and made further climbing impossible. Martha volunteered to carry on, but he refused to let her take the risk.

Under his direction, she stopped the solution flowing to the mould and syphoned the liquid from it. She then part-filled the mould with water and Blick added concentrated sulphuric acid until the acid liquor was hot enough to melt away the wax of the mould, which dropped obligingly away through the decking. Then, leaving the slight flow of the little remaining water to rinse the acid from inside the boat, they lay down together in the cabin, too exhausted to do more than lightly press hand to hand in the hungry darkness.

In the morning, the result of their labours appeared amazing. The boat shone silver and brilliant on the decking, its exterior mirror-like from the burnishing that Blick had given the mould, the silver coating itself protected from tarnish by the miniscule film of wax that still clung to the surface. Inside, curiously, the bare copper had tarnished only slightly to a uniform and perfect gold. Under other

circumstances they would have been delighted with such a rare craft, but Blick knew how perilously thin and brittle was the unorthodox hull, and his sense of unease communicated itself to Martha, cruelly sapping her last hopes for survival.

Nevertheless, Blick proceeded with the launching. This he accomplished with the hoists used for positioning the pump pickup tubes, but using the hand-winching mechanism in lieu of the power drive. A crude wire sling supported the vessel as it was inched up and over the rail into the water. Both held their breaths very tightly as the craft settled between floating boulders, and were grateful when it rode between high and undamaged. Blick threw a mattress into the bottom to distribute his weight, then entered cautiously. Miraculously the thin shell of the craft held true, so he beckoned Martha down also, and still the precious hull did not crack or buckle.

Martha held the boat against the pressure of the drift while Blick loaded the equipment he wished to take: two small mixed-bed resin columns from the lab to ensure their supply of drinking water, two cushions, some black plastic sheeting, a few glass beakers, two bottles of chemicals and a stick.

"This is it, Martha!" he told her. "You know just how slight our chances are."

She nodded but did not speak. Instead, she grasped his hand and pulled him into the boat. She continued holding his hand until it was necessary for him to fend the boat away from the rafts and push it farther out into the rocky drift.

As Blick had predicted, the direction of the drift had now swung back to almost due north, and followed the line of the railway sufficiently closely that in daylight they were able to keep it in view. From the incidence of the stations which they passed, Blick estimated their speed at about two kilometres per hour at the start, although their speed was obviously increasing slightly and their direction would gain a westerly component as they grew nearer to Lamedah. At

some point they would be swept back across the route of the railway and become part of the great surge that passed westward into equatorial waters. Blick's one hope was that they would drift near enough to Lamedah or one of its outposts to be able to attract help. If not, they would die, anyway. There was nothing else they could do.

The most fantastic characteristic of the voyage was the complete sense of stillness and lack of movement. The ever featureless orange sky offered no points of reference, and they themselves had become part of the measureless tide and moved with it in perfectly uniform motion, so that the impression was one of remaining completely static. Only the supports and floats of the railways, sailing wanton and awkward through the brittle panorama, reassured them of their slow movement to potential rescue.

Occasionally, Blick prepared some water through one of his columns and passed it to Martha. On noticing an unusually sweet taste in some, she enquired what was in it. Blick held up the bottle.

"Dextrose," he said. "It'll help you some. Unfortunately, we've precious little of it."

"Make sure you share it equally, Blick," she said. But she noticed that whereas her ration occasionally contained the slight haze of undissolved sugar, his always looked completely clear, despite his reassurances to the contrary.

The night was a long one. Both slept only for a few wretched hours, then sat and stared at the featureless darkness with tired, unsleeping eyes. After a seeming eternity, the dawn dragged itself across the sky and they were able to see the railway again, but were now too far away to see much detail. Blick had calculated their progress at this point as about fifty kilometres, but the only station which they saw which was sufficiently individual to be identifiable appeared to be Number Thirty-seven, which would mean they had covered over seventy kilometres, about a third of the total distance.

Heartened, they endured the day, creating a temporary shelter from the occasional sun with the plastic sheeting

and stick. But this was their fourteenth day completely without food, and this, added to their previous ten days of rationing, was taking its drastic toll. Martha, especially, was weakening seriously, while Blick's foot and ankle were still troubling him. The night was welcome only because it marked a period of time synonymous with a certain progress towards their goal. A divergent westerly stream was beginning to move them back towards the railway, and Blick was under no illusions as to what could happen to the craft should the rocky drift carry it against a float or drag it down the length of a station float in the darkness.

Accordingly, he crouched in the bow with the stick protruding foremost from the boat, poised painfully on his knees, hoping that if they touched some obstacle in the darkness the shock would warn him in time to avert more serious consequences. Shortly, though, he slipped into a state halfway between sleep and delirium, and somehow the stick was lost overboard among the accompanying rocks and was not seen again.

He awoke in panic to find the sun high and the railway nowhere visible on any quarter. He guessed that they must have passed beneath the railway in the night on a westerly stream and were now hopelessly in open water and out of sight of the installation. So unexpected was this blow to his calculations that he sat staring stupidly at the horizon for what seemed hours, not caring to try to break the news to Martha, who still slept fitfully in the stern. For the first time he began to abandon hope, for he knew the absolutely negative chance of their ever being traced if their drift became merged with the great equatorial streams which circled the planet.

A curious false-parallax movement of their rocky environment suddenly warned him that the drift was breaking and diverging as it met a local surface current, and this decided him to use the last weapon in his pitiful armoury. The second chemical bottle contained a fluorescene derivative, a brilliant fluorescent dye which he had used occasionally to follow the path of a particularly valuable metal

stream. Still with the chemist's ingrained reactions, he scooped a little water from the rocky sea in a beaker and added a minute quantity of the chemical. It satisfactorily developed its full colour with the characteristic yellow-green fluorescence for which he had hoped, indicating the suitable alkalinity of the stream. Then, little by little, he emptied the dye over the side, watching it spread around them in a pool of increasing width, gradually coating their rocky, tumbling neighbours as the new current forced a rearrangement, and staining a brilliant trace away to their left as uncertain swirls carried it out and away in the direction they, too, would have to follow shortly.

He became aware that Martha was awake and watching him, but she said nothing, and he had nothing he wished to say, so he passed her some water with the remainder of the dextrose in it, and turned back to his task.

The day grew hot and he lost track of time. He could look at his chronometer, but his mind refused to draw any conclusions from five coloured hands and a set of numerals. In any case, one hour was as much like another as to render even the concept of time untenable. He simply lay and stared at the orange-tinted sky and dreamed featureless dreams to match his mood and his wretchedness.

A spear of light crossed his consciousness, but it took him several seconds to realize that the phenomenon was being perceived by his eyes rather than his imagination. Then his analytical faculties came back into play, and suddenly he was looking at the great sodium-ion trail of a spacecraft making a planetary touchdown, and probably not more than thirty kilometres away.

Hope lashed him out of his reverie. A spacecraft could mean only one thing: a rescue contingent from Delta Five had landed. The only possible place for such a landing was Lamedah, and to judge from the distance and the direction, help was not impossibly far away. Certainly a cushion-craft or skimmer would have been brought crated ready for assembly, and it would take some time, but with a reasonable search pattern they still had a slight chance of locating

one small boat amid the rocky, flower-strewn drift. He regretted now having used all the dye too early, for it was becoming dispersed though still at the moment giving a reasonably wide and clear indication of their position. He watched the ion trail slowly fading in the upper atmosphere, and wished bitterly that he had some means of propelling the craft in its direction, or at least halting its motion with the drift, although cold reason assured him the fragile hull could never stand against any relative motion between it and the floating rocks in which it was immersed. He could only sit and hope.

Whether Martha had followed these developments or not was uncertain, for she had drawn in on herself and had become quite still and rarely spoke. Her face was full of a passive resignation born of a strength of character which would not allow her to bend or break. Whether she was suffering for herself or for him, he could not tell, but the agony in her eyes was something more than physical. There was no comfort left that he could offer her, save to hold her hand occasionally and to smile when he could manage.

Several times he thought he heard the drone of engines, but he finally convinced himself that these were a delusion, and with the slowly drawing curtains of another night he lay back with her and forgot even to hope. By morning the dye in the water and on the rocks would be too far dispersed to attract attention from any distance, and they would certainly be well into the drift towards the equatorial stream and beyond all thought of rescue.

When the shock came in the darkness, he was all but helpless. Dazed, disorientated and incredibly weak, he almost plunged over the side while attempting to ascertain the situation. The boat was grinding dangerously against something solid, perhaps caught between two points, since its position did not seem to change. The same uncertain anchorage lifted the bows slightly out of the water and formed an unstable pivot, causing the craft to rock wildly

with his movements. The darkness was impenetrable, affording him no opportunity of seeing the impossible obstruction.

He carefully worked his way forward to explore the object against which they were so dangerously halted. What he felt with his hands provided a considerable psychological shock, for he found himself grasping a Terran-made girder rising above a sunken float. This was almost certainly part of the wreckage from the break; perhaps a section broken off and isolated, or perhaps connected to a continuing section of the railway. There was no answer as to which was true, nor any obvious course of action. If it was isolated wreckage he had encountered, it would be futile to mount it, since it would offer precisely no advantage over their present predicament. But if this was the Base end of the break which he thought they had passed . . . then this was the way to salvation.

In an agony of indecision he attempted to climb up the girder-work a couple of steps in the hope of clarifying the situation. He had scarcely started when he realized what a difficult and dangerous exploit this was in the darkness, and how unfit he was for the task. He stepped down again, and froze with horror as he did so, for the boat containing Martha had slipped from its niche and had gone drifting off alone into the absolute of night.

Perhaps he cried, perhaps he blacked-out with the shock and the reaction, while still maintaining a precarious hold on the girder. He was never afterwards certain of his actions at that moment. He remembered shouting Martha's name until his voice gave out, and somehow restraining himself from plunging into the murderously abrasive drift in an insane attempt to regain the vessel. Somehow, at some time, he must have climbed upwards to the decking and then miraculously fallen down unconscious within half a metre of a new break in the staging, which would certainly have killed him had he continued. But the thing that he did remember was waking and seeing lights hurrying towards him and the sound of running feet. Then the sound of the

voice of Max Colindale at his shoulder, saying: "Hell, Blick, what took you so long?" and "What about Martha?"

"She's in the boat," said Blick painfully, indicating the general direction of the ocean. "Out there somewhere. I brought her with me."

"I'd have staked my life on *that*," said Colindale. He went away and shortly the scream of skimmer engines beat the air, and the night was bewilderingly filled with patterns of searchlights and flares which moved off slowly into a curious firefly ritual dance across the tides of darkness.

They made Blick comfortable on a stretcher and gave him a little warm, thin soup, but made no attempt to move him until morning. When it was light he could see the reason why. He was on the Base side of the break, and even here the decking of the railway was dangerously torn and twisted by the wrench that had torn away thirteen stations and forty-five kilometres of rail in one of the mightiest surges that had ever been observed in the enigmatic ocean which covered the planet. Only by day was it possible to manoeuvre anything like a stretcher the four last kilometres to the sounder part of the railway.

"Did we lose many people?" asked Blick of one of his bearers.

The man was grave. "So far Martha Sorenson and yourself are the only known survivors out of seventy-eight missing. Now the skimmers are here, there's hope for a few more, but if we see another thirty alive, I'll be very much surprised. What beats me is how the hell Colindale knew that you and Martha would come through. You were in the worst position of all, but he's been like a cat on hot bricks for days just waiting for you to come in."

"Did he have any money on it?" asked Blick.

The bearer looked straight ahead. "Some," he said. "Some of nearly everybody's," he added as an afterthought.

"What's the latest news on Martha?" asked Blick.

"She's going to be all right," said Colindale. "She was in a

bad way when they picked her up, and, frankly, it was a near thing, Blick. If you hadn't fetched her in I doubt if we'd have been able to get to her in time."

Blick nodded. "I saw it coming. She didn't have reserves enough to stand that for long. I suspect she'd been dieting pretty heavily. I'd have fetched her in before if I could have seen just how it could be done. That was one hell of a problem. Tell me, Max, why were you so damn certain that Martha and I would come through?"

Colindale pursed his lips. "Experience. Nothing conquers adversity like perversity—and you two are the most perverse individuals I've had the misfortune to encounter. I was unlikely to be lucky enough to lose the two of you simultaneously."

"But seriously, Max . . ."

"Seriously, Blick, you have a reputation for resolving problems from the wrong end. Logically, you didn't stand a chance in Hell, but, with Martha there too, I was certain that, if there was a way out, you'd find it. Petroni on the Rescue Squad is going quietly crazy trying to work out how you made that boat."

"We electroformed it," said Blick. "Out of copper sulphate solution."

"I guessed something like that," said Colindale. "But how? I'll admit I'm an engineer and not a chemist, but I still don't see how you can electroform something without having any available power."

"It's a little complicated," said Blick, "but I'll try to explain. Up at the station, I'd installed a few devices of my own in the plant to allow me more time on the research projects. One device depended on the fact that a metal in a solution of its own ions develops an electrical potential, and this potential is dependent on the concentration of ions with which it is in contact."

"I'm not quite sure that I follow that," said Colindale.

"No, but it's simple electrochemistry. Imagine a tube filled with dilute acid in which a crystal of copper sulphate

is dissolving at the bottom. If copper electrodes are inserted one at the top and one at the bottom of the tube, connected to a circuit, a current will flow in the circuit which will tend to try to equalize the concentration of copper ions in the tube by depositing copper on the lower electrode and dissolving it from the upper. When the concentration of copper ions is the same throughout the tube, the current will cease."

"I'm with you that far," said Colindale.

"Good. Now put the same electrodes at the top and bottom of an ion exchange column and pour in copper sulphate and you have a similar state of affairs. The concentration of copper ions at the top of the column will be very high and, until the resin all the way to the bottom of the column has exhausted its capacity to take up copper ions, the concentration at the bottom of the column will be very low. Thus a current will flow all the time a column is doing useful work. This current I used to control the automatic recycling equipment. As a bonus, when you regenerate the column by adding acid at the top and taking your concentrate from the bottom, a current also flows, but on opposite polarity. This was made to complete the control cycle."

"Ingenious!" said Colindale.

"It has possibilities," said Blick. "By observing the polarity of the current you know on what part of the cycle the column is engaged. When the current ceases, it indicates the column is fully exhausted or regenerated, as the case may be, and variations from the standard current value give the first indication of when the pickup pumps begin to bring up a contaminated stream. And all this for the price of a few pieces of copper and some wire."

"And you managed to use this current to electroform the boat?"

Blick nodded. "Yes, and I had to rewire nearly every damn column in the place to get enough potential. Fortunately, I was able to use the current from both the running and the regeneration parts of the cycle, so we kept up a

fairly continuous process. By a combination of God and guesswork, we made it."

Colindale leaned back in his chair. "We're still looking for someone to head the research team, Blick. I know you've refused before, but I still think you're the man for the job."

"Thanks, Max, but the answer's still the same."

"Very well! Then let's come to the next point of this interview."

Colindale brought out a file and laid it on the table. "These are your letters in which you warned me in some detail that the catastrophe which *has* occurred was likely to occur. In defence, I can only say that it was the balance of the reasoned arguments of a whole army of professional planetary oceanographers, engineers and similar authorities against your unsupported opinion which decided me to do nothing. But hindsight is a lot clearer than foresight. I realize now that my decision was incorrect—but it was a rational judgment in the light of the evidence then available. I must ask you now if you want this file put before the Space Commission when they set up a Court of Enquiry into all this?"

Blick took the file and tore it across. "As you say, Max, it was only my unsupported opinion. I see no point in confusing the Commission with unfounded speculation, even if it was correct. Besides, it'd look bad in the Press."

"Thanks, Blick! I shan't forget that in a hurry."

"And I don't want any favours," said Blick. "Not from you, anyway."

"Hmm! And that's another thing," said Colindale. "Your wife's on her way from Delta Five on the Auxiliary due tomorrow. She asked for special Company dispensation for the trip when you were listed missing. I was so damn sure you'd come through that I granted it. I suggest you go straight back with her and take some leave on Delta."

"Thanks," said Blick. "I'll be sure to remember you in my prayers." He got up to go, but Colindale called him back.

"Blick, it's none of my business, but what the hell is there between Martha and you, anyway?"

"I'll write you a report on it some day," said Blick obtusely. "But it's the one type of relationship which has all the ingredients of permanency. Remember that, Max. It gives us something rather unique."

When the Auxiliary landed, Blick was waiting for his wife in the lounge of the spaceport sheds, thankful that the deep-space transmitter had been able to contact the craft and give her the news of his survival. The re-union was a flood of tears, concern and kindliness, a flood which washed against him, moving him outwardly, but leaving a little hard core of pain untouched. Some fibre of anguish stayed unwetted by compassion and rebelled against the cloying warm joys that familiarity had made a habit. He fought against the insurgent streak and conquered it so that it showed as nothing more than a quiet and lingering misery in the corners of his eyes.

As the welcoming was done and they turned to go, Max Colindale entered and came over to them.

"Ah, Blick, I've just been examining that boat of yours. We're still not quite sure how you made it, but it's damn clever! But what intrigues me is why the Hell call it that name?"

"Name?" Blick looked suddenly fazed and lost. No name had been included in the mould form. Not unless Martha . . .

Colindale chuckled and slapped him on the arm. "You're a great joker, Blick! Fancy calling a boat: *'One day I just might change my mind.'* "

Blick controlled himself rigidly. "Just a private cynicism," he said.

"Sure, Blick, sure! But some time you'll have to explain it to me."

"You're big enough and old enough to work it out for yourself," said Blick.

Colindale swallowed some inner amusement and turned

to Blick's wife. "That's a clever husband you have there, Jean. One of the most original thinkers that Transgalactic Mining's ever had. I'd say he could have gone a long way farther if he'd learned not to waste his opportunities."

"And just what did he mean by that?" asked Jean, as they finally walked the corridor.

"It would take too long to explain," said Blick, "and you'd be none the happier for knowing. Now bring me up to date on what's happening to the kids."

# THE COUNTRY OF THE STRONG

*by*

DENNIS ETCHISON

*Following up our discovery of young American writer, Dennis Etchison* (he appeared in New Writings In S-F 2) *we found that he had had a prize-winning short story published in* Seventeen, *America's foremost teenage magazine, and managed to obtain permission to reprint it here.*

# THE COUNTRY OF THE STRONG

MARBER'S renovated Isetta cut the corner sharply, humming smoothly on its miniature wheels.

Veering right, he bypassed a jagged-lightning crack that split the entire length of what would otherwise have been one of a half-dozen usable streets in town. When *would* the SS Teams begin suburb reconstruction?

Marber again scanned the illogical destruction spreading from the sixth or seventh Spanish–American style home down to the end of the block. Spider houses stood between, stick frames that cast long-shadow fingers over charred earth and heaped concrete at each day's death. *A phantasma,* he thought, *like some desolate surrealist landscape I saw in a painting once——*

A white flash bobbing up and down, up and down in front of the second house from the end caught and held his gaze.

*But you know what? I'm getting used to it. That's the grotesque part.*

He recognized Darla, an SS man's four-year-old, if he remembered correctly. The swelling four o'clock sun cast a halo of backlight on the little girl's hair, spinning her a crown of angel-floss as she faced the car.

She strode into the street, hands curled on hips. Her tiny pale chin thrust out to meet the Isetta.

Marber pulled up.

"Hi-ya, you!" cried Darla as he swung open the front of the squat vehicle and stood, like some metamorphosed creature emerging from a cocoon.

The woman in blouse and faded pedal-pushers waved from the edge of the house before joining her daughter at the curb.

"I'm *so* glad you decided to stop by after all," the woman

beamed. "I thought sure you'd forgotten we were still here."

"Nice to see you again, Mrs. Dayle." He forced a smile for the SS man's wife and nodded at the garage. "Generator holding up?"

She nodded appreciatively. "We're almost as comfortable as—as before. My husband's been meaning to thank you for rigging it up and all, you know, but it seems he's always out with the Team. . . ."

"That's all right." He was aware of the whirring in the garage. "Glad everything's in order."

She laid her hands on her child's shoulders. "Well, what's been keeping *you* so busy?"

He felt the late sun warming the side of his face. "Oh, got to keep my own place from falling apart. And"—he gestured to the Isetta—"keep this baby running."

She clucked. "You're just lucky you found one that wasn't just a pile of nuts and bolts. I can't imagine where——"

"I had to piece her together from several, of course. Like a jigsaw."

She shook her head in a semblance of admiration. The child chinned herself on her mother's hands.

"When ya gonna take me forra ride like ya promised, Jerr-ry?" crooned the little girl coyly.

"Don't bother *Mr.* Marber," corrected her mother.

"I was just heading into San Bernardino to check on some spare parts. See if the supply house has been ransacked there, too."

"Well, won't you—please—do come in and have a beer or something. I think we've even got some——"

"Did you say beer?" He felt Darla press against his leg. "Oh, yes: your husband."

"Yes. You—you know how the Teams confiscated everything right afterwards. And it's still 'clean' in glass, you know." Mrs. Dayle almost flushed. "You won't—*say* anything, will you, Mr. Marber." It was a nearly inaudible affirmation of faith.

He tried a smile. "Of course not, Mrs. Dayle."

"Jerry, berry, merry," sang Darla into his trouser leg.

"Well, now, won't you come in?" smiled Mrs. Dayle. "Why, there might even be—yes, I think there *is* some gin left." She folded and refolded her hands, fumbling at her revelation. "I mean you—we—might as well enjoy whatever's left, don't you think?" she gleamed, as if to a fellow conspirator. "I mean it'll just go to waste. My husband's never home to——"

Marber thought he saw a twitch in her eye.

He recalled the SS vow to redistribute all usable goods among the survivors. And he remembered the teenager shot a week ago for hoarding an armload of magazines from the ruins.

Mrs. Dayle moved towards the house.

Marber cleared his throat. "Ah, thanks, but no thanks. It's past four and I've got to make it back before sundown curfew. But . . . well, perhaps some other time, Mrs.——"

"Winona," she corrected, meeting his eyes. "Why, of course." Her lids lowered almost imperceptibly. "I'll—keep one in the refrigerator for you. Perhaps when you get back, if it's not too——"

"Perhaps." He understood.

"Jerr—rry," protested Darla, offering her upturned face as argument. "Take me forra ride like you *said*."

"We mustn't keep Mr. Marber—Jerry—any longer, dear."

He was aware of the long line of charred rubble darkening the ground where Saturday mowings had once sent showers of ripe grass into the air. Abruptly he realized that the child had been born since there were no lawns. Or trees.

"There is one place," he said.

"What's that?" asked Mrs. Dayle.

"I wanna go witch you," reminded Darla.

Somehow, the idea pleased him. "She . . . she can ride with me. I wouldn't mind at all." He meant it.

"Oh no, just because she's——"

"Really. It isn't such a long way. And coming back, we can stop at the park.

Mrs. Dayle's face was peculiarly expressionless.

"It's the only place within miles that gets water enough."

"Yeahhh, wanna see the *park*!"

"Well . . ." Mrs. Dayle visibly hesitated. "I don't really kno-ow."

"She could see what growing things look like. Indian summer won't be with us much longer. And . . . well, you know I lost mine when it happened. It would be my pleasure."

She said casually, "I suppose you'd be back before—before the Daily?"

"Certainly, if you like. I don't think it's anything she needs to see, myself."

Mrs. Dayle moistened her lips. She searched Marber's face, squinted her eyes shut and decided.

"Here. You—you'd better know." She tossed a wary glance down the empty block.

She led her daughter by the hand to the protective wing of the front-opening Isetta's door. Then she lifted the child's leg until it touched the seat.

"Now. Show Mr. Marber."

The little girl hid her face. "I don't wanna," she whimpered, withdrawing her foot.

"Now just hold still." Again Mrs. Dayle raised the child's leg. In one quick motion the sneaker and stocking were gone. "There."

Darla wept down into herself. "Mommy," she pleaded, helpless.

Her foot was slightly—but unmistakably—clubbed.

"We've always kept it hidden," whispered Mrs. Dayle, leaning close. "Or she would have been——" Marber smelled the mint of her breath and saw the phoney chestnut highlights in her mousy hair. "—You know."

"I've never understood why it had to be us. Is it a punishment of some kind?" She leaned closer. "But we know it's our fault, I guess. It's hereditary, there's no denying that. Certainly not like the others, because of *what happened*.

Not a—what do they call it?—*mutation*." She searched his face for confirmation. "*Is it?*"

Semi-consciously he watched a greasy, three-legged dog rooting in the debris a few yards away. Trying to mount a chunk of concrete, it slipped and fell on its snout in a cloud of ashes.

"I . . . I don't know." He had read of such things, but he couldn't be sure.

Mrs. Dayle tried to relax, standing on one foot. "Certainly the Team would recognize the difference, wouldn't they?"

"I . . . I guess I never noticed her limping." Marber was at a loss. "But she doesn't, does she?"

"Oh, we've been careful." She showed him the padded and blocked interior of the shoe. "It took a long time to teach her to walk properly."

"Are you sure you want me to—I mean, I didn't know or I wouldn't have——" He faltered, brought a hand up to shield his eyes.

Compulsively, Mrs. Dayle hugged her daughter and thrust her into the car. "No, I do want her to see the park while it's still green. There's so little green anywhere, with the water rationed."

"Then I'll make it a point to have her back here before they begin."

"Actually, I don't think it's anything to worry about, after all. You know how mothers are. It's not like Darla is—is like those *others*. It was just the thought of her anywhere near that—that *pool* and those pitiful creatures. But then she wouldn't have anything to worry about, would she?" she added in mock cheerfulness, searching his face. "Would she?"

"Of course not, Mrs.—Winona."

Sniffling, the little girl laced up her shoe.

Lying prone, face nearly at ground level, Marber let his eyes sweep out with the greensward in a wide arc that

terminated in a far away row of sycamores. No, he mused, perhaps the park did not end there, but sloped on down beyond the trees in a gentle golf-course-like hill. He could not be sure. It had been so long since he had lain like this, feeling the motion of the earth beneath him, chlorophyll rich in his nostrils.

A susurrus in the grass behind him.

"Look," breathed Darla, dropping to her knees beside him. "Oh, look!"

He raised to his elbows. In her cupped hands nestled a tiny bluebird, beak throbbing for nourishment.

"I bet he fell out of his nest," she sighed, gazing at it sadly. She turned her hands to reveal the other side. Drawn snug against its crumpled new feathers lay a sleeping second head.

"Why?" she whispered.

*My God*, he cried silently, *my dear God*! He had almost forgotten that the "hot" rain had fallen here, too. Almost.

"What's wrong with it?"

A boy's voice. Marber rolled onto his back.

It was a young boy with unkept hair that fell in a sun-bleached swatch across his forehead. Beyond, two tiny girls with straight dishwater hair came running.

"Come with us," the boy invited Darla. "We'll build him a nest!"

For the first time Marber noticed a picnic spread off to his right. A man and a woman lounged on a red-and-white checkered tablecloth, among a kaleidoscope of coloured jars and bottles and plastic plates spilled from an old-fashioned picnic basket.

Marber approached, following the children who cast long, moving shadows around him on the grass. The man, balding slightly, smiled up with rows of too-white teeth past a lengthy aromatic cigar.

Marber automatically extended his hand.

"Hey there! Won't you join us?" offered the man, gesturing to the *mélange* around him. His bushy eyebrows moved like jovial charcoal caterpillars above his eyes.

Awkwardly Marber withdrew his hand. "Thank you," he managed, taken aback.

"Your daughter is sure a charmer," grinned the man. "I've been watching her."

"Oh, she's not mine. A neighbour child——"

"I just love this time of year," sighed the woman to a watercolour sunset beyond the silhouette of the crudely repaired water tower on the horizon. Her teeth, also, seemed too white to Marber, and her blouse and shorts were somehow too bright and new. He wondered how they managed in these times.

He saw the children fashioning a nest of twigs by the nearest tree.

"There's potato salad and sweet pickles, some preserves, homemade bread——"

"Hold on." Marber scratched his forehead. "How did you manage it? The flour, where——"

"We manage," winked the man. "Like most folks nowadays, I suppose. Have to, you know."

"And there's even some meat," added the woman in a gay, nasal voice. "Well, it's only soyameat, but it's the best we can get."

Marber laughed, incredulous at her apology. "Why, I haven't eaten real meat in years! Who has?"

"Well," she said, "some of our friends . . ."

*So it's started all over again,* thought Marber, kneeling and picking a blade of grass. *The new Joneses. Will they ever——*

One of the tiny girls ran up and tumbled onto the grass, laying her head in the man's lap.

For a second Marber wished that he had taught his own daughter to do that, while there had still been time. He found that he was unable to recall her face. The late summer breeze ruffled his eyelashes.

"Better go play now before it gets dark," the man was saying. "Go on, now." He pulled her from his lap.

"Do you come here often?"

"Oh, as often as we can, I guess," said the man.

"It's good for the kids," Marber observed.

"You don't know how great it feels to get away from that damned house," sighed the woman.

"Oh," said Marber.

"Dad," called the boy. "Dad, can we go down to the pool today?" He ran up, breathing heavily, hands hooked in his pockets. Pink-cheeked, he glanced impatiently back towards the row of sycamores.

"My boy, Robby," the man told Marber, holding his cigar like a prize. "Healthy as they come."

"Oh, sweetheart," groaned the woman, "do we have to go down there today?"

"Aw, c'mon now, honey. Can't let the kids miss the Daily. Good for 'em to learn how lucky they are—it's the meat-eaters that run the world! Tell the truth, I wouldn't want to miss it today, myself." He rose. "C'mon son, I'll race ya there!"

"I wanna see too!" shrilled Darla.

"Come on!" urged the boy, lining up with his sisters for the race. "I bet they're starting already!"

Darla was a doe ready to bolt. Marber cleared his throat. The man and his wife, brushing themselves off in the dusk, were looking at him now.

He had to say something. "I'll . . . take her." He stood.

Once, part of a time long gone, it had been a wading pool, a summer place where children splashed crystal water in the sun.

Now a concrete wall rose around the perimeter, adding tank-like depth. Now the wooden lid to the drain controls gaped open against the rusted and sagging chain-link fence like a mouth. Now the sign on the gate no longer listed rules of conduct ("No child under six admitted," recalled Marber, as if from a dream); the Team motto hung in its place: within a circle, the leters *SS* superimposed over *Selectival Survival—Key to Tomorrow*.

The first, a two- or three-month-old baby, struggled for

mere seconds before giving up to float face down like a pale fish in the twilight. This time the white body weights stood unneeded against the pool.

A woman, whimpering, was led away through the vaguely resentful crowd. Marber heard her sob over and over, "It was just a little finger, he couldn't even use it!" He dug his fingers into Darla's shoulders and watched the Team men, spectral in their white robes, conducting the daily ritual with apparent disinterest.

The next was an older child, a scarecrow of a girl. As she was swept to the fore of the crowd, those nearest the pool grew increasingly abusive. They began to give catcalls. They pushed and flung her within the human ring with mounting roughness.

The boy Robby stood with his family, dirty fingers hooked into the link fence. "See?" Marber heard him explain to his sisters. "That's what happens t' the freaks. That way just strong kids can grow up. An' have more kids. Get it?" The smaller girl drew her fingers into her thin, streaked mouth and began to cry.

A Team man near the fence noticed and muttered to his partner, who nodded at the three children. "Hallendorfs—checked in . . ." Marber caught.

Darla squirmed suddenly. "Wanna go *home*!"

The Team men spotted Darla. One shook his head.

The crowd was closing in on its poolside victim. "Ya wretch!" shrieked a woman's voice. "Ya cripple!"

Marber's breath stopped, like summer air at high noon.

"Daughter checked in, mister?"

*I'll run,* he thought, *I'll give the first one three fingers in the gut and then I'll sweep her up under one arm and make it back up the hill, I used to be a pretty good 100-yard man in school——*

The first man in white came through the gate.

*—and if the other one catches up I'll turn and slug him hard in the throat and keep moving——*

He turned. A man in white was opening the gate at the other end.

—or *maybe, no, maybe I'll just stand here relaxed, I'll let go of her and they'll take one look and smile and say* There's nothing wrong here *and we'll all have a good laugh*——

And they were upon him. Darla was a doll lifted screaming from him. They peeled back her doll's clothing.

It happened so fast he didn't have time to—to——

*It was like a time when as a small boy he was playing softball in the street and heard the crack of the bat and looked up to be blinded by the sun and someone yelled* LOOK OUT! *but he was unable to move and just waited there until the ball reached his fated forehead—— For a crazy, timeless moment he had swayed there, suspended, unbelieving, seeing the faces staring at him, waiting for the merciful arms of unconsciousness to enfold him——*

In the bluing twilight, in that protracted moment before night descends in its fullness, Marber, swaying slightly, gagged and was sick.

# PARKING PROBLEM

*by*

DAN MORGAN

*Humour in science fiction is, unfortunately, all too rare—it is a difficult subject-matter to incorporate successfully—but occasionally an author manages to combine near-credibility with a laughable aspect, as Dan Morgan does here with the congested traffic problems of the future.*

# PARKING PROBLEM

At 12.45 hours on 25th May 1970, Professor Elwyn Thomas of Bangor University placed a white rabbit named Kruger in a black-painted box of four cubic feet capacity. The box was open at one end, but Kruger, a tractable rabbit, sat contentedly sniffing as Professor Thomas threw the switch which activated the coils surrounding the box. One and two-fifths of a second elapsed before Kruger disappeared. Six hours later, to the micro-second, Kruger reappeared in the box. He was quite unmarked, but dead.

Professor Elwyn Thomas, who was in search of the principle of anti-gravity, took the loss of Kruger very badly, and would have abandoned his experiments at that point had it not been for the encouragement and support of his assistant, Lemuel Snerd. Snerd proved a tower of strength in the harrowing weeks that followed. One after another, an assortment of fifteen laboratory animals were placed in the black box; and each, with the exception of a rat named Machiavelli, returned exactly six hours later—dead. Machiavelli was never seen again, alive or dead; a fact which can only be attributed to the power failure which affected the entire University building some ten minutes before he was due to reappear.

Sickening of the slaughter, Professor Elwyn Thomas resigned his post at the University and stood as Welsh Home Rule candidate for the constituency. This venture proved more successful than his anti-gravity experiments. He began a long and distinguished Parliamentary career, during which he was the main spokesman of the Anti-Vivisection League and an ardent champion of the rights of dumb animals.

His research laboratory and his work were taken over by Lemuel Snerd, his erstwhile assistant. Snerd placed a further

twenty-five laboratory animals in the black box, with the same results as his predecessor. Then, being of an original turn of mind, Snerd began a series of experiments with inanimate objects. He found that, like the animals, these objects—which ranged from a glass eye to a second-hand army boot—reappeared exactly six hours after the coils had been activated. No change in the nature of the objects was apparent, even on the closest examination. Snerd continued his research enthusiastically.

At the end of his second year Snerd made an unfortunate error of judgment. He applied to the University Grants committee for an increased appropriation in order to build a larger version of the Thomas black-box apparatus. The committee turned down the application by an overwhelming vote of eight to two. (The two in favour were Colonel Bassett-Hoare, a rabid campaigner for the reintroduction of capital punishment, who saw in the black box a potentially foolproof execution chamber; and Sir Charles Dribble, an enthusiastic amateur conjuror.) To make matters worse, the committee recommended the termination of Snerd's contract, on the grounds that too much was being spent on "pure science" research, rather than on technological projects which would pay greater dividends.

Deprived of University patronage, Snerd, a man of infinite resource and courage, worked on alone. Poor, often friendless; persecuted by neighbours who blamed him for the disappearance of any missing pet, Snerd built bigger and bigger black boxes. Finally, in 1979, he patented the Snerd Extra Dimensional Parking Locker. Only slightly larger than the average lockup garage, one of these lockers was capable of storing three hundred and sixty vehicles per six-hour period, thus providing a miraculous clearance of the vehicle-choked streets which were in danger of bringing city life to a grinding halt.

The Extra Dimensional Parking Locker earned Lemuel Snerd a billion credits in royalties during the next twenty years. Far from changing his way of life, this spurred him

on to ever greater efforts in the cause of science. On 15th August 1999, wearing a spacesuit and driving a specially constructed pressurized vehicle which had air and water recovery plants and sufficient food for several months, Lemuel Snerd drove into one of his own Extra Dimensional Parking Lockers and ordered the doors closed behind him. He was never seen again.

HEROES OF SCIENCE: Ernest Gedge. Lld.
(Galatea Press, 2020. Cr.5.)

Arthur Crunch was a short, fat man with hyper-acidity, who kept a used car lot on the outskirts of the city. He looked like a slug in trousers. Inside the fortress of his skull, Crunch was a dashing mastermind of crime, the head of a vast organization beside which Murder Incorporated was a mere tiddler. As some men dream of fair women, Crunch happily contemplated robbery with violence and chuckled with delight over mass murder. He was a past president of the Adolf Hitler Society, and a founder member of the Friends of Ghenghis Khan.

Convinced that he was touched with the stuff of greatness, Crunch chafed continually against the knowledge that the true range of his crimes was limited to nothing more epoch making than the respraying and general faking up of the odd hot car that came his way. There were other ventures, like giving short measure on gasoline and recutting already remoulded tyres, but these were performed more as a matter of principle than for profit. He was unable to rid himself of the gnawing awareness that they gave insufficient scope to his natural meanness.

Crunch was in the crummy little office at the back of his lot, talking to his lieutenant, a beanpole of a man with big ears named Leon Pulver. The office stank of the cheap cigars that formed a staple part of Crunch's diet. Leon Pulver was fifty per cent of the Crunch organization. He spent most of his time in the workshop at the back of the lot, covering the ravages of time with hasty paint jobs and coaxing the

last spurt of life out of ailing engines. Apart from his talents as an automobile gerontologist, Pulver had a certain malleability of character that made him invaluable to Crunch.

"All you do is put this in the key-card slot," Crunch said. He held up a piece of thin white plastic, punched at seemingly random intervals with a pattern of small holes. He had obtained the piece of plastic that morning from a poor, but dishonest student of electronics, one Morris Guzman.

"This I do not understand, Mr. Crunch—you'll pardon me," said Leon, deferentially. "It has always been said that a Snerd Locker is more thiefproof than Fort Knox."

"And with good reason," agreed Crunch. "Because until this moment, no one has been able to forge a satisfactory replica of the standard key card. That is what makes this deal such a cast-iron certainty. The Law does not even bother to guard the Lockers, on the assumption that they *are* thiefproof."

"Can I see that, Mr. Crunch?" Leon Pulver held out one workstained hand.

Crunch gave him the piece of plastic. "All you do is put it in the key-card slot—then drive whatever comes out of the Locker right back here."

"But how do we know *what* is going to come out?" asked Leon, with unusual astuteness.

"We don't—it's like a lucky dip. But whatever it is, we can't lose. Morrie can turn these out by the hundred, now that he's broken the code."

Leon considered for a moment. "So why is it that you want me to go right into the middle of the city? It will make a long drive back here."

"Because a six-hour Locker right in the middle of the business district is sure to carry a bigger percentage of high-priced executive models—why else?" Crunch said. "Now don't waste any more time talking, Leon—go and do just as I've told you."

"Mr. Crunch, sometimes I think that I am working for a

first-class, genuine genius," Leon said. He bowed himself respectfully out of the crummy little office.

"Could you tell me the time?"

Leon Pulver, who had been comfortably sure that he was merging inconspicuously with the landscape, jumped three inches into the air, blinking at the expensively dressed man who had asked the question.

"Ulp! It's five minutes past one, you'll pardon me," Leon said.

"Hell and damnation!" The man, whom Leon guessed to be a company chairman at the very least, scuttled across the pavement to the second in the row of twelve parking lockers. Leon, his natural curiosity aroused, followed.

Fishing in the pocket of his elegant jacket, the man produced a key card, thrust it into the scanner of the locker, and stood back, waiting for the door to open. Nothing happened.

"I think maybe you missed the end of your cycle, you'll pardon me," Leon said, helpfully. "You'll be able to get your car out at the end of another six-hour period."

"Hell and damnation!" reiterated the company chairman. Retrieving his key card, he hurried away.

Leon glanced up and down the street. Nobody seemed to be particularly interested in what was going on around the parking lockers. His moment had come. He placed the white plastic card in the scanner and stood back in eager anticipation. Like Crunch had said—it was a kind of lucky dip.

The door of the locker opened and something that looked like a three-wheeled tricycle rolled off the conveyor belt. It was made of a pink, semi-translucent material, and it floated some four inches above ground level.

Leon, whose speciality was not quick thinking, blinked twice and looked again. The pink tricycle was still there. He guessed that it wasn't really a tricycle; the wheel-like protuberances must, in fact, be propulsion units of some kind.

He had never seen anything quite like it in his life before. In search of a point of reference, he thought back to the morning's conversation with Crunch. There had been, so far as he recalled, no specific instructions with regard to pink tricycles. But Crunch had said quite clearly: "Drive whatever comes out of the Locker right back here"—which must surely be taken to include tricycles, whatever colour?

The locker door rolled shut again. Leon cleared his throat and looked around him in some embarrassment. A couple walked past, wrapped in the preoccupied indifference common to city dwellers. He could have saved his blushes. If the pink tricycle had been a pink elephant they wouldn't have noticed. Still Leon hesitated, wondering if it might not be a good idea to call up Crunch and get some definite ruling about pink tricycles.

"Move over!" A worried-looking citizen elbowed Leon out of the way and placed a key card in the scanner of the locker.

His mind thus made up for him, Leon clambered into the saddle of the pink tricycle and examined the control panel. The only clue to the function of the buttons on the panel was an odd-looking series of arrows and dashes.

"Do you mind?" called the worried-looking citizen, who was waiting to drive his car away.

Startled, Leon jabbed at the first button, which was marked with an upright arrow. The pink tricycle began to move upwards, gathering speed. Panicky, Leon pushed the button which had a dash beside it. The tricycle stopped its upward rush and hung steady, about fifteen feet from the pavement. The worried citizen gave him an odd look, and drove away.

Leon studied the panel. The upright arrow for up, the dash for stop—then it logically followed that the downward pointing arrow was for down. He pressed it. The tricycle swooped downwards. When it was about a foot above the ground, he punched the stop button. The machine slowed to a gentle halt; but not before the "wheels" had buried themselves several inches in the concrete pavement.

Having accepted the pink tricycle, Leon took this in his stride. Giving the UP button a brief push, and following it immediately by the STOP, the tricycle ended up near enough to the surface not to attract too much attention.

Or was it? With a spurt of alarm, Leon saw that a knot of curious people had gathered on the other side of the road during his aerobatics, and were awaiting further developments with interest. Glancing to the right, he saw a blue uniform approaching. It was time to go.

There were only two more buttons on the control panel —each of them had an arrow; one with a dash above and the other with one beneath. He pressed the one with the dash above, and the tricycle surged forward. Turning to the left, he headed for the main street.

Back in the workshop of the used car lot, Arthur Crunch glowered at his lieutenant.

"But, Mr. Crunch, you said the first vehicle that came out of the locker, you'll pardon me," protested Leon unhappily.

"Maybe I did—but who expects a thing like that?" The roll of fat at the back of Crunch's collar was a deep purple as he gazed at the tricycle. "What in Hell is it, anyway?"

"This I don't know—but it is a first-class machine," Leon said.

"With three wheels . . ." Crunch grunted cynically.

"Not wheels, Mr. Crunch, you'll pardon me. There are no wheels."

"No wheels?" Crunch bent to look closer at the tricycle, straining his expansive waistline. A moment later he straightened up and eyed Leon suspiciously. 'What is this—some kind of gag?"

"No gag, Mr. Crunch . . . honest."

"Then how does it move along?"

"This I can't tell you—but maybe I should show?" During his ride through the city Leon had become familiar with the controls of the pink tricycle, and he was eager for an opportunity of displaying his aptitude. He hopped into the

saddle and began to put the machine through its paces; demonstrating its capability of moving in any direction at the touch of a button.

Crunch watched as the pink tricycle hovered one minute near the ceiling, then swooped down to and partly through the oil-soaked concrete of the floor. Careful not to show too much surprise in front of Leon, he prodded gingerly with his foot around the base of the machine. It was apparently welded into the solid concrete.

Noticing his error, Leon touched the control lightly and the machine rose, to hang some three inches above the floor, humming faintly. "Who needs wheels, you'll pardon me?" he said, getting off the tricycle. "Maybe you'd like to try it, Mr. Crunch?"

"Yeah . . . some other time," said Crunch, who was a devout coward. He considered the situation at length. Leon had apparently stumbled onto the prototype of some revolutionary type of vehicle. But who would be careless enough to leave such a machine in a public parking locker? It didn't make sense—any more than the method of propulsion of the vehicle itself made sense. More important, at the present moment Crunch could not see any clear way of making a profit on the deal. An ordinary hot car could be resprayed, fitted with new registration plates and sold—but what did you do with something as outlandish as this? If it was the only one of its kind and the cops were out searching already. . . .

"Bonehead!" snarled Crunch.

Leon who had been expecting at least a kind word, was deflated. "But Mr. Crunch . . ."

"What am I going to do with the thing? But that wouldn't occur to you, would it?"

"Like you always say, Mr. Crunch—you are the brains of this outfit. I just do as I'm told. Only thing, you'll pardon me, is that there can't be another machine like this in the whole world, maybe . . . so it must be worth something."

*In the whole world*. . . . Crunch's rubbery nose tilted upwards with the reflex of a hungry jackal who smells carrion.

"Get Morrie Guzman—get him right away," Crunch ordered.

Jack Daly, Area Maintenance Engineer for the Snerd Locker Corporation, arrived at the Marron Street lockers at 14.15 hours on a routine check. Maintenance, as everyone knows, is one of those jobs that goes on day after day, week after week, being boring as Hell—then suddenly the sky falls in and there you are with your thumb in the dyke. Daly was in the middle of a boring period, but he cheered himself with thoughts of his new girl, Sophie, as he worked away steadily checking the generator circuits of the line of lockers.

As he plugged his test meter into the control panel of Locker YH786, Daly was on the point of inventing the foolproof phrase that would lure Sophie up to his apartment. The grand seduction scene did a quick dissolve as a red light on the panel began to flash intermittently, indicating that a vehicle was in process through the locker. The *green* light, which should have gone on at the insertion of a key card, remained dead. Daly cursed. It looked as though he had arrived just at the right time to catch the sky. Lockers just *didn't* disgorge their contents without the use of a key card.

Leaving his test kit plugged in, Daly rushed round to the front of the locker. The door was still shut, whereas if the locker was making a delivery it should already be rolling upwards. The door was still shut, but . . . Daly gulped and rubbed his eyes as a pink, semi-translucent tricycle emerged, flowing apparently through the solid metal of the door. The rider of the machine was a vaguely reptilian humanoid, clothed from top to toe in a suit of the same pinkish colour. Ignoring Daly, the reptilian humanoid consulted his instrument panel briefly, then at the height of some six inches above the pavement headed swiftly for the building opposite . . . and disappeared through the blank wall.

Daly, a phlegmatic type, not given to self doubt in any form, stood for a moment looking at the wall, then hurried

to the nearest phone and called his supervisor, Fred Ebworth.

"I don't want to bother you, Fred," Daly said. "But a pink lizard man just came out of Locker YH786 . . ."

Fred Ebworth, a balding man in his mid-fifties who anticipated his forthcoming retirement with some satisfaction, looked Daly straight in the eye and pointedly said nothing.

"No fooling, Fred. The thing came through the closed door of the locker, and . . ."

"Look, Daly—we all got our troubles, right?" said Ebworth. "Now why don't you go somewhere and sleep it off and we'll forget the whole thing?"

"I'm telling you, Fred. This is serious. That creature is loose in the city—and it came out of one of our lockers. I never saw anything like it in my life before—we ought to do something, Fred."

Fred Ebworth sucked his gums for a moment. A man didn't reach supervisor grade in the Snerd Locker Corporation if he was the type to be stampeded into rash decisions. "So how do you figure the situation, Daly?" he asked, at length.

"There's only one possible explanation," Daly said. "Some intelligent life-form from another dimension must have found its way through the locker."

"Daly, we've been using these lockers for thirty years, and nothing like that ever happened," said Ebworth soberly.

"Maybe so, but I'll tell you something, Fred—this character was here for a purpose, *and he knew where he was going!*"

Ebworth sighed mightily. "And it had to happen in my section. All right, Daly—I'll pass your report on to headquarters. In the meantime, stay right where you are and post Locker YH786 Out Of Order."

Morris Guzman scratched his coal-black beard and blinked enigmatically at Arthur Crunch through pebble-thick glasses.

"Well?" said Crunch, who had been chewing impatiently on a cigar butt all through a lengthy examination of the pink tricycle.

"Interesting . . . very interesting," murmured Guzman. "Where did you steal it?"

"Leon got it out of a downtown parking locker, using that plastic key card of yours."

"Hmm. . . . Now the question is whether I made a slight error in the design of the key card, or is this just a lucky accident?"

*Lucky!* Crunch stamped his cigar butt into the workshop floor. The question as far as he was concerned was the usual one: "What's in this deal for Arthur Crunch?" But he knew better than to expect any interest in such worldly matters from Guzman.

"I think we can safely say that the machine doesn't originate on this planet," Guzman continued. "This being so, it must have somehow slipped through from another dimension into the parking locker—probably due to a distortion of the locker's field through the use of the plastic card. The drive units appear to be some kind of force-field generator with a built-in nuclear power device. Certainly nothing of the kind exists on Earth, to my knowledge."

"So what's it worth?" Crunch was able to contain himself no longer.

Guzman chewed his beard pensively. "Let me put it to you this way, Mr. Crunch. The principle involved in these units could be as big a leap forward in human technology as the invention of the wheel."

"Like how?" asked Crunch.

"A larger model of this power unit would undoubtedly be superior to any spaceship drive yet invented," suggested Guzman.

"And you could make such a unit?" Crunch asked eagerly.

Guzman shrugged. "Given time and the proper facilities. The drive units are sealed—I would first have to find a way of dismantling them without damaging their components.

Then, a certain amount of research and experimentation would be necessary before attempting to build a larger unit."

"And this would be worth while?"

"How many billions do the government spend on such projects each year? Here we have the principle for which they are searching without success."

"We'll turn this whole darned place into a laboratory for you," Crunch said eagerly. "I'll get you all the apparatus you need."

"The side effects are very interesting also," Guzman said thoughtfully.

"Side effects?"

Guzman nodded. "You must have noticed the way the machine appears to sink into the solid ground if the downward movement isn't checked in time. This would suggest to me that a further effect of the force-field generators is a realignment of the atoms in the molecular structure."

"Uh-huh . . ." said Crunch.

"It seems to me more than probable that this machine would be capable of passing through so-called solid objects, without damage to itself or the object penetrated," said Guzman. "Such an interpenetration was suggested as a theoretical possibility as far back as the nineteenth century. I can show you the equations, if you wish. . . ."

"I'll take your word for it." Crunch, in his own way, was just as much of a specialist as Guzman, and somewhere in the back of his mind an idea was stirring. "You mean to tell me that this machine could go through a solid wall . . . ?"

Crunch stopped talking as Leon Pulver, who had been standing near by, respectfully listening to the conversation of his betters. emitted a gulping yell of considerable weirdness. He stood, one hand raised defensively, eyes bulging, as he stared at the wall behind Crunch and Guzman.

Crunch turned abruptly, in time to see a humanoid lizard on a pink tricycle flow through the wall and come to a halt about ten feet away.

"In just such a manner," Guzman said, backing away

cautiously. "Have a care. We may well be dealing with a very advanced civilization here. . . ."

The humanoid lizard dismounted from his machine and walked with an oddly rolling gait towards the original pink tricycle, completely ignoring the presence of the three human beings.

It didn't take a great deal of imagination on Crunch's part to realize that, as of the arrival of the humanoid lizard, his possession of the pink tricycle was in some jeopardy—and as a consequence, the attainment of his dreams of wealth and power. Not normally a man of violence, save by proxy, he was moved to extreme action. Picking up a heavy wrench from a nearby workbench, he hurriedly approached the humanoid lizard from the rear and bopped him firmly. The alien slumped to the ground and lay there, out cold.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Morris Guzman.

"Shouldn't have done it—Hell!" said Crunch. "Do you think I was going to stand by and let him take that machine away? Anyway—now we've got two of them."

"Maybe. . . ." Guzman was dubious, and more than a little nervous. "But have you stopped to think that a race with their kind of technology would have some rather special weapons?"

"Look, Colonel—we've been through this a dozen times already. It was man-shaped, with a lizard-like head and it came out of that locker. I didn't notice whether or not it was carrying any weapons, and I have no idea of its intentions." Daly had been in the Colonel's office of the Mobile Command post for the past two and a half hours. He was impatient and tired of all the fuss.

Marron Street had been a quiet city backwater. Now it was transformed into something like an invasion beachhead. All buildings within a mile radius had been evacuated of civilians and the whole area was now a seething mass of military activity. Tanks and atomic cannon were stationed

at every street corner and formed a solid ring round the parking lockers; squads of heavily armoured ground troops searched every building, weapons at the ready. Overhead, fighters and bombers, hastily assembled from the mothball squadrons, roared armed to the teeth with destruction.

In a world at peace for the last thirty years the role of a soldier had lacked both glory and action, but a career of parades and simulated battles had done nothing to dim the martial enthusiasm of Colonel Stephen Miller. A spare whippet of a man, with bony features and close-cropped grey hair, he fixed Daly with the stare that had made strong men quail on parade grounds all over the planet.

"You fail to realize the seriousness of the situation, Mr. Daly. For the first time in history Earth has been invaded by an alien life-form."

"One odd-looking, but probably harmless creature hardly constitutes an invasion, Colonel," said Jack Daly.

"Reconnaissance!" snapped Miller. "The enemy would hardly risk a landing in force without sending a scout in advance."

"And on that basis you're assuming that this creature is hostile?"

Colonel Miller rattled his bony fingers on the desk top. Civilians! No wonder the defence estimates dwindled year by year, pared down by complacent politicians. "We are dealing with the unknown, Mr. Daly. At any moment Parking Lockers all over the planet may start to disgorge hordes of these creatures, armed with what weapons we can only guess. As far as we know at the moment this is the one beachhead, but . . ."

"I think you're making too much of an isolated incident," Daly said. "There's no sense in going off half cocked."

"*Half cocked!*" Colonel Miller's bony features were very pale. "Let me tell you . . ." He broke off as there was a rap on the door and a worried-looking staff captain entered. "Yes, Hynam?" barked the Colonel.

"We've just had a message that the civilian police have traced the alien to a used car lot on the north-west side of

the city," said the captain. He moved over and indicated a position on a wall map. "Somewhere in this area."

"Good! Tell them to hold everything and send two squadrons of tanks immediately. I want that scout alive, but if he puts up any resistance, blast him!"

"The civilian police say they're closing in now," said the captain unhappily.

"They *what?*" Colonel Miller rose to his feet roaring. "What do they think this is, a blasted traffic ticket? Tell communications I want to talk to the officer in charge of the civilian police operation immediately." He stormed out of the room, shepherding the apologetic captain ahead of him.

"Maybe, but if this one's any sample, I don't think they're so smart," said Arthur Crunch, indicating the prostrate form of the humanoid lizard. His successful use of violence had brought the Ghenghis Khan side of his personality to the fore.

Guzman tugged at his beard nervously. "I don't like it, Crunch. If you want me to work on that drive . . ."

"Nuts to the drive!" Crunch said. "I never did like that idea. Too close to the legitimate and too slow. I don't care *how* the thing works, just so long as it does."

"What do you mean?" Guzman asked.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Crunch said, easing his ample bulk onto the alien's pink machine. "One of these vehicles can go right through anything solid and take its rider with it, right? So who wants to waste time and money experimenting and trying to build more? We've got two machines now, so Leon and I can ride into any bank vault in the world and help ourselves. We don't need you, Guzman."

"Mr. Crunch, you are a genius, you'll pardon me," Leon said admiringly.

"Just practical thinking, Leon," Crunch said modestly. "We're in business like never before. But first we have to

get rid of the evidence." He touched the prostrate lizard man with his foot. There was no response.

"You can't do that!" protested Guzman, as Crunch produced a blaster from the inside pocket of his jacket and levelled it at the prone figure.

"Can't I?" Crunch eyed Guzman craftily. "Leon, take care of this witness, will you? We don't want him lousing things up."

"Yes, Mr. Crunch." Leon pulled his own blaster and moved in on Guzman.

A massively amplified voice boomed through the workshop. "THIS IS A POLICE WARNING. COME OUTSIDE WITH YOUR HANDS UP. WE SHALL BE USING TEAR GAS IN SIXTY SECONDS FROM NOW."

"The police!" Leon rushed to the window. "They've got the whole place surrounded."

"All right. Time to go, Leon," Crunch said confidently. "They won't touch us. Hop on the other machine. Like I said, we're in business." He lowered his blaster and turned his attention to the control panel of his tricycle.

"Wait a minute!" shouted Guzman. "You're making a mistake, Crunch. That alien is wearing . . ."

Arthur Crunch, master criminal, crouched over the handlebars of the pink tricycle and pressed the forward button down to its fullest extent. The machine headed for the back wall of the workshop with the speed of a bullet.

The *machine* went through the wall.

Leon Pulver, saved by his blessedly slow reflexes, looked at Guzman. "What happened, you'll pardon me?"

Morris Guzman turned sickly from his contemplation of the revolting smear on the back wall of the workshop. "I tried to tell him. Look at the alien's suit. Just as I thought—enclosure in that pink plastic is essential to the proper functioning of the realignment field."

The alien stirred, then struggled shakily to his feet.

Leon, thoroughly demoralized by the loss of his leader, backed away from the pink tricycle trembling. The alien ignored him. Getting on the machine he headed it quickly

through the back wall of the workshop—delicately avoiding the remains of the past president of the Adolf Hitler Society.

Back at the beachhead, Jack Daly was in the busy communications centre of the Command Post.

"What do you mean, you've lost him?" bellowed Colonel Miller, glaring at the image of a crestfallen police captain. "I told you to wait until my tanks got there, you drivelling idiot!"

"Message from one of our spotter planes, sir," said an earphoned communications sergeant. "The alien has been seen heading in this direction."

Miller turned his back on the image of the policeman. "Right! Now we'll have a chance to do the job properly. Obviously the enemy will try and get back through the locker he used to enter our dimension, so all we have to do now is wait. As soon as he appears, all guns will be trained on him, but there's to be no firing until I give the order. I want him alive, if possible."

Daly stood with the officers at the blastproof observation window as a loudspeaker on the wall behind gave second by second reports on the approach of the alien.

"C Company stand by!" commanded the colonel.

"Stand by, sir."

"Be ready to fire one round, in the path of the enemy, but not close enough to harm him."

"Very good, sir."

The tension in the Command Post was like a physical pressure. The only sound was the hiss of the live loudspeaker on the wall. Daly had a sinking feeling that he was going to be present at one of mankind's more historic pieces of stupidity.

"There he is!" gasped a sweating captain.

The alien flowed through the wall of the building opposite the lockers. He was riding one machine and towing the other behind him.

"Company C—*fire!*" barked Colonel Miller.

An explosion reverberated along the street and when the debris and smoke had cleared away a crater some six feet across had appeared in the pavement, some fifteen yards in front of the alien.

The humanoid lizard stopped his machine and surveyed the assembled might of Earth's military power.

Jack Daly felt as though a stream of ice water was being poured very slowly down his spine.

Colonel Miller picked up a microphone. "STAY WHERE YOU ARE. YOU ARE MY PRISONER!" his voice boomed down the street.

The alien glanced in the direction of the Command Post, then back towards the line of tanks that barred his way back into Locker No. YH786. Slowly, almost casually, like a man brushing away a fly, he raised his hand.

Three massive tanks disappeared in a soundless explosion.

Before the shocked gasps in the Command Post had died away, the alien punched the control panel of his machine. A micro-second later, he and both machines had disappeared through the closed door of Locker YH786.

"What now, Colonel?" Jack Daly said shakily. "He'll be back . . . him and a few million others. . . ."

*Earth's population was shocked when, in the year 2009, the world government ordered the immediate destruction of all Snerd Extra Dimensional Parking Lockers. No explanation for this sudden decision, made under Emergency Security Regulations, was given; neither has one been forthcoming since. And no compensation has ever been paid to the owners of the millions of vehicles thus abandoned in another dimension. There was in consequence of this action, a five-year boom in the world automobile industry, and today we face a traffic situation beside which the problems of the late twentieth century pale into insignificance. ...*

(Ibid.)

# SUB-LIM

*by*

KEITH ROBERTS

*There have been a number of interesting s-f stories concerning subliminal advertising during the past few years but none quite so intriguing as the almost-possible conception envisaged here by Keith Roberts. Are you quite sure those TV commercials are all they seem to be?*

## SUB-LIM

Look, Doc, don't bother with intros there isn't time. I'm Johnny Harper, I'm a guy who makes films, that'll do. Doc, I'm in bad trouble. I got something stuck down inside my head and I got to get it out. Can you fix that for me, Doc? Have you got a machine can reach into a guy's brain and find a thing that shouldn't be there and snap it out by the roots, have you got a machine can do that. . . .

I'm not crazy, Doc, honest to God I know what I'm saying, you've got to help. Look, I'll give you the whole story from when it started then you'll know I'm not crazy, you'll know what to do. . . .

Have you got a girl can take shorthand? Well, get this down yourself then. Don't argue, man, get a pad or something and get this down, it's the most important thing you ever heard. Get a name first. Freddy Keeler. Take that down right now, he's the guy that matters. It all started with Freddy, blast his Goddam soul. . . .

He's studio projectionist, shows all the rushes. Well, that's part of his job, the rest's secret. I'm telling you about it so you'll know what to do with Freddy——

What? What studio? Oh God—— No, Doc, I'm sorry, I guess I didn't say. Hill Studio, the people who make the Little Andy films. You know Little Andy, everybody knows Little Andy . . . you don't see television? Then I'll tell you, you're the luckiest guy alive.

Doc, Hill Studio's the biggest thing in the business. Six months ago we were broke. Bust, flat, finished. We'd fired off all our staff, and all we had left were the two partners, J. B. March and Jeff Holroyd, and little Freddy and Connie the secretary, Connie the lion I called her. And me, stooging round with a director's ticket and nothing to direct. Just five of us and the red light was burning for everybody and I

was plenty worried, the state the trade was in ex-directors were going to be a drug on the market.

We'd started up along with ten hundred other little units about the time commercial television got going and we'd outlasted most of the rest. J.B. was smart, he saw to it right from the start we'd got more than one string to our bow, we did animated cartoon, we did stop-frame and special effects and we'd got a good name for live action. When the big slump happened we carried on making films for the Far East and Germany, then we began to feel the pinch and we had to start laying people off. A year ago we'd got fifty staff, then it came down to twenty, then ten, then like I said it was just a handful of us hanging on the best way we could. I knew the axe was going to swing again soon and Connie wasn't taking enough out the firm to make it worth firing her, and, anyway, you got to keep a smart-looking popsy in the front office because the rest of the boys expect it, so I knew it was Freddy or me that had to go.

I went along to see J.B. I didn't get on too good with Jeff, he was a sort of emotional type, always getting worked up, but I got on fine with J.B., you knew where you were with him. Arguing with him was like playing Russian Roulette with half the chambers loaded, but if you knew how to sort of smooth him along you were O.K. I went into his office, I said, "J.B. I'm worried about old Freddy. You know he's a great guy, but I'm sort of worried about him."

He looked at me like he'd heard it before, he said, "So you want him out, Johnny."

I lit a cigarette. I said, "Projectionist's not much good with no films to show."

J.B. got nasty. "Director's no better off with none to direct." I could see this was one of his bad mornings, he'd been married a few years and there weren't any kids, and some days his wife gave him Hell, you know how it goes, Doc. I said "I'll put it to him nice, J.B. He won't hardly feel a thing."

He shrugged. "O.K., Johnny, but do it nice, you know? He's a nice little guy, I like Freddy a lot."

I said, "I promise you my face will be wet with tears." I made for the door and J.B. called me back. He said, "Funny thing, Johnny, he draws pictures. You ever see one of his pictures?"

I didn't get it. "So what, what's that, J.B.?"

He said, "Get him to draw you one. Did one for me, they're pretty good. I was thinking we could use them but . . . that's the way it goes."

The idea struck me funny. "What does he draw, Snow White and the Dwarfs, or is it grown-up stuff for the lavatory wall?"

He glared at me. "Just get him to draw. And don't push too hard, Johnny, could be he's more use than you."

I got out.

After that I had to play it safe, so I ran Freddy down in the pub where he got his lunch. He was standing up at the bar when I went in, he was scoffing a sandwich and a pint of beer. He's a little guy, Doc, sort of thin on top, fiftyish, wears hornrim glasses. He's nothing to look at. I went up and clapped him on the back, I said, "Hello, Freddy, what's new?"

He looked at me like he was going to choke. I reckon he knew why I was there. He said, "You want to see me, Mr. Harper?"

I whistled up a beer for myself and paid for another for him. I said, "I do, Freddy, I do. I want to sort of have a quick talk. Things aren't too good, Freddy, but believe me they could be worse, they could be a lot worse." I got hold of his arm and steered him to a table. God, I get tired of soft-talking punks like Freddy, when a guy's through he's through, that's all he needs to know. But I did it slow, the J.B. way. I said, "The boss tells me you're a bit of an artist, Freddy boy, I didn't know." I figured from that I could get round to the fact that he was soon going to need a spare profession.

He shook his head. He said no he wasn't an artist, he couldn't draw worth a damn. He just made images.

Doc, cinema operators are a funny lot. They stand all

their lives watching films through a little square of glass, after a time it gets them so they're no good for nothing else. They're queer, Doc, they get things on the brain. All sorts of things. Freddy had spent years watching Images flicker about and jump up and down, he'd got to think Images all day and all night long. . . .

No don't get me wrong, Doc, not pictures, *Images*. That was how he explained it to me, he said a film director, say Hitchcock, anybody you want to name, is always worrying consciously or subconsciously about Images, trying to get some shape on the screen that'll help the actors along, make you *feel* what's going on. He said that was what a good film was, not a lot of shots of actors and such, but a set of Images that made you feel what you were supposed to. He said it was done with the picture composition and the lighting and everything. And he said, for instance, if you saw every thriller ever made and studied them all over and over you could work out a shape from all the Images all the directors had ever used, and the shape would sort of represent fear, all on its own. He said if you drew it and showed it to a guy he'd get scared to death and he wouldn't know why. He said if the Image was right it would sort of lock onto his mind and make him feel whatever it meant. He said it was possible to make an Image for every emotion, every one in the book, once you'd got the hang of drawing them.

You know I thought that was pretty smart. Coming from a guy like Freddy it was a pretty smart idea. It was crazy, but it got me interested. It even took my mind off why I was there. I said, "Freddy, I can see you've been doing some solid thinking." I grinned. I said, "Just for kicks, can you draw these Images yourself, or is it still in the theory stage?"

He sort of stared at me. He said, "Oh no, Mr. Harper, I can draw them all right. It took me years to find them all out, but I can draw them now. Any sort of Image you want."

That wasn't what I'd expected. I stopped laughing and

wondered just how nutty he was, anyway. I said, "Er . . . yeah. Look these Images, Freddy, they take long to do?"

He shook his head. "It's dead quick. Easy when you know how."

I said, "O.K., Freddy, I'll try you out. You make me one of them. Let's have that fear thing to start with, you scare me to death."

He got a pen out of his pocket and smoothed a paper napkin. He started to draw. The ink ran in blots, when he'd finished it just looked a mess. I said, "Sorry, Freddy, I must be thick-skinned. Doesn't do a thing for me."

He was very eager. "Give it a chance, Mr. Harper, sometimes they have to sort of grow on you. You keep looking at it, you'll feel what it means. Honest, Mr. Harper."

Well, what the Hell, I was humouring the guy, wasn't I? I picked the thing up and leaned back in my chair and held it up in front of my face. I stared at it for maybe five seconds and then——

I was on my feet and the napkin was screwed up and thrown in an ashtray, and I couldn't remember doing it. I was trembling. I said, "Christ in Heaven . . ." Then things came back into focus a bit and I saw a couple of guys staring at me and I sat down again, but I was still feeling pretty bad. I said, "O.K., Freddy, what's the gag?"

He looked worried. He said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Harper, I really am . . . it gets you, don't it? I can't see 'em myself, they won't work for me, but I know what they do, I should have told you."

I lit a cigarette. I felt I needed it. I said, "I asked you, what's the gag?"

"No gag, sir, honest. It's the drawing. It's a sort of trick."

I shook my head. "You're a liar. That's crazy."

He reached for the napkin. "Honest, Mr. Harper, it's in the d——"

I knocked his hand away. I didn't want that napkin unrolled again. I said, "All right, Freddy, so I buy it. Can you do it every time?"

He sort of smirked. Like a guy who's spent twenty years

on some damn fool model boat, showing it off and getting praised. He said, "Every time, Mr. Harper. You say what you want, I'll make you an Image."

I said, "Happiness, Freddy. Can you make an Image can make me laugh?"

He picked the pen up again and started to draw, and the result of that was on the way back to the studio I had to stop every twenty yards or so and wipe my eyes. People must have thought I was crazy.

In the end, of course, I didn't fire him, I wish to God I had. . . .

I sat in my office all the rest of that day smoking and thinking about what I'd seen. I knew I was on to the biggest thing in showbiz, but I couldn't see a way to use it. You couldn't make a film just of Images, nobody would watch it. And even if they did, if they got what I'd got they wouldn't be back for any more. Freddy's gimmick was the smartest thing I'd seen, but it didn't help Hill Studios out of the mire one little bit.

You know how it is when you've got something in the back of your mind but it just won't form out? I kept thinking there was some way we could use this crazy talent. I got high that night because I knew unless I came up with a dilly of an idea we wouldn't last the month, and it didn't seem I'd got an idea in my head. I got back to my flat about midnight, I lay on the divan and kicked my shoes off and put the light out, and in time the room stopped revolving and I dozed. Next thing I knew it was dawn and I was sitting up shouting Hallelujah. I'd solved it and there wasn't much standing between me and my first million.

I got up and hunted out a drawing-board and some instruments. I was trained as a draughtsman once, Doc, I can set an idea down on paper so it'll work. I made myself some coffee to clear my head, then I started to draw and by mid-morning I'd got all I wanted, I fetched the car and drove down to the studio like Hell.

I walked in on J.B., he was dictating to Connie. Jeff

wasn't around. I banged my stuff on the desk. I said, "J.B., this will not wait."

He started to get wound up. "I've been waiting since nine this bloody morning, where the Hell you been—and get that crap off my desk and get out, I'm busy——"

I held the door open. I said, "Connie, suddenly you remembered you just had to powder your nose." She looked at me like she'd get a kick out of putting arsenic in my soup, but she scrammed. J.B. got up. He was real mad. He said "By Christ, Johnny, but this has to be so very good."

"It is good. Now look at these, J.B., and knock it off, I've just made us a million apiece. . . ."

"What in Hell are they?"

I said, "Drawings for God's sake, mods to a projector. Sub-lim——"

I guess he'd got a right to blow his top because up to that time sub-lim was a dirty joke. He yelled at me, "What we going to say then, you got it scripted? How about 'buy our films' or 'best British studio', that's a good slogan, Johnny, that's great. Now this is just about the craziest way you ever lost a job——"

I just yelled louder. Beat him down. "We don't *say* anything for Chrissake, we use *Freddy's Images*. . . ."

He stopped dead with his mouth open and his finger still waving round at me. He said, "What? Johnny, what did you say?"

I said, "I looked at his stuff like you told me. It took an hour to get it out of my system. If I'm not careful I can still remember it."

He said, "Yeah. Yeah, I know." He sat down and pulled one of the drawings across the desk. He said, "What's this, Johnny?"

Do you know about sub-lim, Doc? There was a big row about it four, five years back. Somebody said it was unethical. That was a joke because it never worked, anyway, they didn't use it right.

Look, I'd better tell you about this, you've got to get the picture. The ad boys worked it out that if you took a word,

say a product name, and flashed it on a screen too fast for the eye to pick it up, the guy on the receiving end wouldn't know he was being pressurized, but he'd get the message, anyway, sub-liminally. The idea was great, trouble was getting a thing on the screen and off again quick enough. They tried it, tried it on television. I know because I damn well saw it. Doc, film speed through a projector gate is twenty-four frames a second, twenty-five for television to help the scanning. And that isn't fast enough. They'd overprinted single frames and you could read them as they went through, it wasn't sub-lim at all.

My idea got round all that. What I'd designed was a second optical system with a film gate and all that we could strap alongside the projector mute head. I hadn't sorted all the details, but I knew what I wanted and I knew it would work. There was a second intermittent movement geared to a stop-frame assembly, cans to hold a spare film roll . . . and behind the gate, try to see this, Doc, behind the gate a lamp housing with an electronic flash. You know you can get those things to fire down to thousandths of a second? Using the rig we could pump in rogue pictures whenever we wanted and nobody would be any the wiser. And we didn't have any junky product-names to play with, we had Freddy's Images. I wish I could draw one for you, Doc, but Freddy's the only guy can do that. I can't even remember what they look like, all I know is if they say laugh you laugh, and if they say cry, by God you cry. . . .

When I'd done, J.B. just sat and looked at the drawings. Then he said, "It's great, Johnny. The greatest thing ever. For cinema. But television?"

I was prancing round the office, I couldn't keep still. I said, "Why not the little screens, J.B., don't electrons move fast enough no more? Strap a unit on the telecine gear, rig a prism behind the lens, slam the Images straight through the camera. . . ."

He licked his lips. "They wouldn't touch it. They wouldn't dare."

I walked back to him and put the palms of my hands on

the desk and stared him in the eyes. I said, "We make up a pilot. We get some of the boys down to see it. We run it with sub-lim. The Images tell 'em they love it. They tell them how much to pay. How much do we want to make apiece, J.B., got any ideas?"

And that's how Little Andy was born. . . .

You don't know who Little Andy is do you, Doc? Oh yeah, I forgot, you don't see the Lantern. But, Doc, if you did, it wouldn't make no difference. *Nobody* knows who Little Andy is, Doc. They just know they love him, that's all. Is he a puppet? They don't know. Is he a real live actor? They don't know. Is he a cartoon? They don't know, Doc, but they laugh when Little Andy laughs, they cry when Little Andy cries. He's all that matters, they *know* he's real. The Images tell them, that's sub-lim. . . .

I started on my prototype that same day. I got in a couple of guys I needed, I had to promise them plenty. I didn't know where the money was coming from and I didn't care. That was J.B.'s worry, I had troubles of my own.

We only had one projector in the place then, the Kalee Twelve in the viewing theatre. I planned to use that for the experimental hookup. I scrounged a lens and we fitted a bracket to carry it just above the mute gate. The stop-frame unit wasn't so easy, we had to rob a linetest camera and adapt the parts to fit. I'd intended to run it from the mech, but when we got down to it breaking into the geartrain was a major job, so we settled for a spare motor strapped up behind the top spoolbox and rigged a flexible link to the camera drive. The flash was no problem, one of the boys built up a unit and we made a housing out of tinplate and hitched it on behind our auxiliary head. Then we made up the cans to hold the filmstrip and it all looked a crazy mess, but mechanically it was O.K.

Freddy hung round all the time, fussing like an old hen. I told him we wanted to try out his Images just for kicks, he was pleased as Hell. I set him onto producing a range of stuff to cover every emotion I could think of, all the subtle

things like worry and hope. And I got him to grade them down a bit. The thing he'd shown me, that had upset me plenty. I didn't want to frighten people to death, just glue 'em to the screens. He brought the work in the morning after I asked him, I looked through it and it was great. I took time out to set up one of the rostrum cameras and get the whole lot on film. I did my own processing. I didn't want any little prying eyes seeing what we were doing till we were ready to hit the market.

When we'd got the sub-lim head built we started on the control system for it. I'd had a Hell of an idea for that. Problem was to inject the Images just where they were needed to back up the action. For a time I thought we were going to have to do it manually, then I realized I was crazy, all we needed was a split roller somewhere on the film track and metallic flashes on the master print to trigger our relays. We fixed the roller, then we rigged a solenoid on the stop-frame trigger, keyed it to a microswitch and we were home and dry. Bridge the roller with a wet finger and the spare cross turned, the flash went off behind it; each cue on the master roll would bring a new frame into the sub-lim gate, each frame would register on the screen as a split-second rogue image. All we needed now was a pilot film to cook.

J.B. had been working on that while I was playing with the mech. Don't ask me how he talked Jeff into trebling the overdraft, but he did it somehow; when J.B. starts operating stones have haemorrhages. Hill Studios was back on its feet and we'd got a staff of nearly twenty again. He'd dreamed up Little Andy himself and written the pilot script. We got a combined print a week after the projector was fixed and I got busy on it, making a sort of trackreading of the action and marking the frames where I wanted a sub-lim pulse to help the audience get the message. The emotion sequence was pretty simple; J.B. had scripted to keep it that way. The opening of the reel was happy, there was a middle section that needed a sad treatment, then there were a series of gags, then things went happy again for the fadeout. I cued

for fifty or sixty frames of each Image, trying to grade the timing so the effect would come on the audience gradually, then build up. While I was working on the print J.B. started eating carpet, the bank balance was getting redder and redder and he was scared the labs were going to clamp down on processing: if that happened, we were through. I told him there wasn't a thing to worry about: if we wanted a bigger loan all we had to do was get the bank boys round, show them a film and load the cans to make 'em love us, but there wasn't time for playing games like that. J.B. wanted results on the pilot and he wanted them fast.

The cutting took a while because the system was still crude. Like I said, it was only rigged to give one flash per frame, so if I wanted fifty images to register that meant fifty frames on the sub-lim roll and fifty cues on the master. I finished in the end, and took the crazy-looking reel through to Freddy and watched him lace the cans and run a final check to see the roller was bridging O.K., then I went and told J.B. we were set to blast. We ran the first test just two months after I walked into his office with those drawings.

We jammed a couple of dozen people into the viewing theatre, cameramen, secretaries, everybody we could lay hold of. Jeff was there, he hated the whole idea, but J.B. had soft-talked him into coming along. And Connie, she was still giving me the freeze treatment every chance she got. That was a pity, because she was a great girl. Connie the cat, Connie the little lion . . . that was what she reminded me of, Doc, a lion. Tawny hair and tawny eyes, and she walked like she knew what she was worth.

J.B. had decided we'd show the pilot twice. The first time it would go through straight, with no sub-lim, so we could get the normal reaction. Then we'd run it again with hot cans. That meant the test rig would be circuited, pumping Freddy's Images at the audience. We'd developed a new slang, that was what we meant when we talked about hot cans. . . . J.B. gave a talkdown, saying we were going to see

the same thing twice, then he buzzed Freddy and the mech started and the lights went out. The main title came on the screen.

I tell you, Doc, that picture stank. It didn't raise a grin. When the lights came on at the end even the secretaries were yawning, and J.B. was looking like thunder. Nobody ever got round to telling him when a story stank, he always had to find out for himself. Freddy rewound and laced, I gave him the thumbs-up through the port and we started over.

For a minute nothing happened. The film was just like it was before. I felt the bottom was dropping out of my stomach, I stood at the back, wondering if the flash was triggering or if I'd got a break in the roller circuit. Then slowly I realized something. I was feeling good.

Doc, I tell you, it was crazy. I just felt great. Little Andy was great, the world was great, J.B. was a great boss, Connie was a great guy, everything was fine. I wondered was I going scatty, then I got it.

*This was the happy section. . . .*

I couldn't help myself. I was in that rotten little film, following it like it was the best thing that ever hit the screen. When Little Andy was scared, I couldn't breathe. When he came out on top of a gag, I wanted to cheer. We got to the sad sequence and one of the girls started in crying like she'd never leave off. It curled 'em up, Doc, it laid 'em in the aisles. There never was a film like that, not ever before.

Came the funnies, I started to giggle. Wasn't a thing I could do. It was just . . . well, the world was so crazy, you know, there was nothing to do but laugh . . . I'd got my arm round Connie, and she was rolling her head on my shoulder and howling, and we couldn't have hated each other if we'd tried. She kept pointing at the screen and trying to say something, then she'd sort of choke and start laughing all over again. Up in front, J.B. was banging the chair arms and throwing his head back and having hysterics at his own junk. There was no fighting it, you had to go. I'd never

seen anything like it. Then there was the happy section at the end and the lights came up and we felt great, just great. . . .

That was the only time I watched a Little Andy show with hot cans. Doc, it *is* great. It's great for the jaybirds, but if you can sort of think, you know what I mean, Doc . . . afterwards, it's like you went down on your knees and bayed the moon. . . .

I guess Connie was the first to come round. I was still hanging on to her, she looked up at me, she said, "Johnny, did you . . ." She giggled and crammed a hand over her mouth. Controlled herself. She said, "Did you . . . do whatever that was?"

"I did."

She said, "It's . . . great. Just great." She wiped her eyes. Poor old Connie, she was in a Hell of a mess with the tears and all. . . . She said, "You're worth a million pounds." I fixed a date with her that night, told her we'd paint the town. The way she was feeling she couldn't have said no to a thing, and I don't miss a chance like that, Doc.

I told Freddy the show had gone over fine. It was queer, the look he gave me. Like the whole world was a party and he hadn't got an invite. You see he was the only one couldn't get a lift from the Images, they wouldn't work for him. I said he was a great guy, to keep right on at the job, I'd see J.B. about getting him a raise. He said, "Thanks, Mr. Harper, sir, thanks very much indeed. . . ." You know, Doc, he sounded like he *meant* it. . . .

I took Connie round the swank bars. I threw the money about. Money didn't matter, the more I thought about sublim the more loot I could see rolling in. I got stinking drunk, Doc, I'll tell you. . . .

She got the whole story out of me. Oh, it was a question here, a touch there, I gabbled it all out because I thought it didn't matter, she couldn't understand what the cans were or how we hotted them. She understood enough though. She understood Hill Studios had got something nobody on God's sweet earth could refuse to buy, that we could write

our own cheques from here on in and that I was the key man in the whole shebang. The way she played up to me I felt a mile high.

I tried to be sort of modest, you know? I told her about Freddy, I said, "Honest to God, the little guy's the one that matters. He's the only one can make the Images. I can use 'em, but Freddy has to draw them. . . ."

We were alone in a quiet bar, the lights were low. She said, "What are you doing about him, Johnny?"

I hooted. "Do? Raise him. Raise him fifty a week, a hundred. Yeah, give him a hundred a week. Worth every penny."

She banged her cigarette in the tray and glared at me, she said, "What are you doing, Johnny, you gone crazy?"

"What? Now, honey . . ."

She said, "Did you tell him? Did you talk crazy money like that?"

I kind of touched her hair. I said, "What in Hell's that scent?"

She got mad. She said, "Listen, Johnny, tell me what you said. You say a thing like that to him?"

"Course not, but what the Hell, we got to keep him. . . ."

She said, "So you play to lose. A hundred a week, Johnny, what'll he do? What would you do, go down the road and get two? You put a price on him, he knows what he's worth. . . ."

"Well, what the Hell——"

She crossed her long legs and there was a sort of frothing of lace. She said, "Raise him a quid. And pat his head every Friday. That way he *knows* he's nothing but an op."

It took a time to sink in because I was plenty stewed, then I started to giggle. I said, "Connie, my pet, who has the brains. . . ." She said primly, "Me, Johnny. Tell you what. Pay me the hundred a week, I'll use them all the time."

I looked her up and down a long, long while, and those tawny eyes, it was like they were saying things. You know, all sorts of things. I said, "Connie, I might just do that. . . ."

We got out to the car and she sort of slid down in

the seat and she didn't care about her skirt. She said, "Johnny . . ."

"What?"

She found my hand in the half-dark. She said sleepily, "Going to be a big man. Going to the top."

I said, "Could be."

She was sort of close. She said, "Johnny, take me along. You can do it if you want. . . ."

We stayed in the car a good while, and as far as it went it was great.

It's a long way to the top, Doc, a damn long way. I got Connie moved out of the main office, made her my personal secretary. I got a girl to work under her, so she'd have nothing to do but polish her nails. Then I had to fix up to manufacture the sub-lim adaptations. We wouldn't just need units for our own gear, we'd need them to supply to anybody that bought our films. Before production could start there had to be a prototype, so we tore the test rig apart and rebuilt it in a single housing so it looked like something that might work. We had trouble ironing out all the bugs, because the end-product would have to fit half a dozen different types of mech and telecine gear. Right in the middle of things, as though we didn't have trouble enough, we had trouble with Jeff. Like I said, he wouldn't stand for sub-lim. J.B. tried to get me to fix a reel just for Jeff to see but he was too smart, one time with hot cans had been enough, he wouldn't watch any more. There was a big row. I was in on it. Jeff shot his mouth off for maybe an hour, not even J.B. could get a word in. He sort of raved about morality and warping people's minds and a lot of crap like that. J.B. tried to tell him we were in too deep, we couldn't pull back, but that didn't make no difference to Jeff. He was like that when he got an idea in his head. I told Connie afterwards. I was telling Connie nearly everything.

I was too mad to keep still, I sort of paced up and down the office while I was talking. I said, "It's like he's got a complex, you know, like the captain going down with the

boat. Wants us all to pack up and go home, says he's not putting his name on anything that's got sub-lim mixed up in it. And you know Jeff, once he gets a thing in his head he won't shift."

Connie laughed at that, she thought it was pretty funny. She said, "Jeff's a nice guy, it's just he's got a bit old. Sort of set in his ways. I'll be sorry to see him out to grass, but maybe it's time." I asked her who was going to put Jeff out and when, she just purred and used those cat-eyes on me, and the eyes said you wait and see. . . .

I had a call from J.B. that night. You could tell he was mad on the phone. He'd had Jeff round to his place, tried to gin him into saying yes. Sub-lim hadn't worked neither did the gin, I could have told him he was wasting his time. He asked me what I thought, I said I didn't know. He said he wanted to see me, said to get round there fast. I asked could I bring Connie and make it a party, he said the Hell with that, to come on my own and make it fast. I put the phone down. I'd never heard him so set, and when J.B. gets set on something, better get out of his way, brother. I got the Jag out and went over to his house, a week later I was a partner in Hill Studios.

Jeff took it bad. He resigned on the spot, and we found him his coat and told him we hoped he'd keep in touch, then I shook hands with J.B. and we were all set to go. I moved into Jeff's office. It was about ten times bigger than mine and it had a carpet. I'd never had an office with a carpet, it was a pity I didn't have time to admire it.

Connie spent about ten minutes showing me how pleased she was, and that bucked me up a lot, because what with the work and the trouble with Jeff I hadn't seen much of her for weeks. Well, she'd asked for the top, and that was where we were headed. I told her to get lost for a few hours, I'd got work to do. I sent for Freddy. Next problem was to get the television boys to see things our way. I needed some more Images.

We got the circus down from Town and showed them the pilot with hot cans. There wasn't any argument, they

signed us up for a series of fifty, and that was the end of our money worries. The studio was in an old house that stood in its own grounds and we bought what extra land we needed, shoved bulldozers through everything on it and started putting up a couple of sound stages. J.B. bought a dozen writers, he knows when he's licked, and we started vetting the first scripts and fixing production schedules. And I raised Freddy another pound; that made him the best-paid op in the business.

I passed out most of the routine work. I'd got a team building a new control system; instead of the pulses, we planned to use low frequency signals on the track itself, that way we could programme the gear to insert patterns of any number of flashes off one frame. It made life easier, and it also meant our control was better, we could play an emotion up or down, hold it at a pitch, peak it just at the right time. It all depends on the Image strength, Doc, the number of flashes a second, the duration of the pulses. We can trim it just how we like. I tell you, Little Andy is nothing. We don't need the film, Doc, we could make you writhe just looking at an empty screen. The Video's only the excuse for what happens to you. . . .

Biggest headache was getting the sub-lim units installed at the transmitter end. We licked the problem eventually. We made up a film about sub-lim, what it was, how it worked, and the Images that went with it told you it was great, you had to buy it. You know how we used that film, Doc, you can work it out for yourself . . . anybody didn't like the idea, we just got them down to the studios, showed them our movie. Every independent telecine is wearing cans now, Doc, every machine. And they can do anything you want. They're still showing Little Andy, all they've done is make us a nation of saps; that's nothing, they haven't even started. What say we wanted a change of government, Doc, or to kick all the foreigners out of the country or set up pelota as the national game. Do you see what this thing is, Doc? We could do it, all it needs is the film and the Images that make you *know* it's true. . . . That's why I came to

you, Doc, that's why I want out, but now I don't think there's time. . . .

After the first show was telecast J.B. went wild. The papers were full of Little Andy; the cheap dailies got it straight away, but inside the month the great nationals were giving the junk spread after spread. I guess people all over the world started wondering what the Hell had bitten us. By the time the second film was ready I'd named Connie as dialogue director and she'd had her physique splashed across every paper in the country. I guess I should have worried more, but there wasn't time; the place was like a madhouse most of the day, with workmen tearing down walls, installing gear, units shooting scenes in every damn corner they could find. I got to my office one morning, couldn't get in the door for cables. And somebody had got a pneumatic drill going just outside, you couldn't think. I grabbed Connie and got out, went and found a quiet bar where we could talk. She said J.B. had got an idea for a new series, he wanted to start work on it right away.

That got me. I was the guy who should be told a thing like that, not Connie. I said, "The Hell with it, he can't start anything else. We haven't got the space or the time, we haven't got the staff. We shall need the new stages for Little Andy, we can't start something fresh."

She sort of looked at her nails. She said, "Fact is, Johnny, we've got more space. We bought Orbit Films a week ago. The whole lot, stages, everything."

I couldn't wait to get back to Hill. We managed to stop the building boys long enough to talk. J.B. tried to calm me down. Sure we'd expanded, sure I hadn't been told, hadn't I got enough worries on the technical side, anyhow? Each man to his job, that was what J.B. said. He said not to worry, there was enough profit for everybody. He said within twelve months we'd have sub-lim cans on every telecine in the country, in two years we'd have the whole world. The Hell with that. I said, "Look, J.B., let's take this slow. They find us out, they find out what we're doing, they'll hang us off the trees right there in the road. . . . Let's

make films," I said to him. "Let's stick at that. I'm a film man, I don't want to own a planet. . . ." But I couldn't get through to him. He just slapped me on the back and said not to worry, he'd look after everything. I tried Connie afterwards, she blew cold. "O.K. Johnny," she said, "play it your way. I don't care."

That hurt because you know, Doc, she was a great girl, she'd got way under my skin. Wasn't supposed to happen but it had. Somehow I'd done the lot for Connie, she didn't care it made the whole thing sort of empty. I said to her we'd get out, go someplace and enjoy ourselves, we didn't have to work no more. She wouldn't answer me direct, just shrugged and said she'd see. I hadn't had a drink for months, but I went on the beer that night. I couldn't see my way round anything, somehow it had all got too big.

I had a call next morning from a guy I know, a newsman. It was late, about ten-thirty, but I was still shaving. I got to the phone. I said, "Hello, Eddie, what's the trouble?"

He didn't waste time being civil. "You bastards got something over there that's sending the country crazy, Johnny, what the Hell you doing?"

I said, "What's the matter, Eddie, don't you like Little Andy?"

The phone made a noise. It said, "I don't see Little Andy. I been wearing dark glasses for a month . . . what're you doing, Johnny, what in Hell goes on?"

"Well, you know, pal, just making fi——"

He said, "J.B. was in here yesterday. Got a newsflash for us. If you don't know, you better had . . . he said he'd sold a new series, reckons it'll make Little Andy look like feed for the chickens. And I know he hasn't sold a thing, Johnny, he wants us to run the story, but Hell we can't do a thing like that. . . ."

I finished shaving fast as I could and bolted for the studio. All that soft talk, he'd been working over my head all the time. I parked the Jag and half ran to his office. I kept thinking, supposing for kicks he wanted to start World War Three. Supposing he gave out in the Press, the Russians

didn't like Little Andy. Just you think about that, Doc, just you try that for size. . . .

I went in. I said, "What the Hell, J.B., you gone off your rocker? This crap you gave out about the new series, you can't do that. . . ."

He was sitting at his desk. He looked me up and down. He said, "Johnny, it's done."

I started to swear. I was the guy that mattered in that firm, I was the one had done all the donkeywork. I said, "You can't do this, J.B. It's just you and me, and I'm not having you do this. . . ."

I hadn't seen Connie. She was sort of behind me. She came forward purring. She said, "We can, Johnny. Sorry."

I got it. Oh, but I got it all. And I knew I couldn't fight the both of them. I couldn't fight Connie. I thought of all the time she'd been playing about with me, she'd been hating my guts. I said, "Great. Just great. The new Mrs. March, I presume? Or won't you bother. . . ."

She said, "You've got to understand, Johnny, it's just one of those things."

I said, "Yeah, one of those things." I put my face about six inches from hers. I said, "It's true love at last, it always finds it's little old way. What's the matter, Connie, can't you resist the smell of his breath——"

I saw the swipe on the way and ducked. I didn't miss with my backhand. I'm like that, Doc, somebody takes a swing at me I swing right back. . . . I felt good for about half a second, then it was like the ceiling fell on me. I didn't know J.B. was that tough. . . . He hit me again right where it hurts, and I was on my knees on the carpet and it was like I'd swallowed a ball of something red-hot, it was stuck right in my throat. . . . When I could see again, he was standing in front of me dialling the police.

She took the handset off him and threw it on the cradle. She said, "Forget it, J.B., he's through."

He hauled me up. He was still plenty mad. He said, "Throw the bastard through the door."

She said, "No, leave him. Let him go. He don't matter, let

him stick around. You want to stick around, Johnny, see the fun?"

I got hold of the edge of the desk, that meant I could stay on my feet. I didn't answer. She said, "Come on, Johnny, I want you to stay, you're a useful guy. Just one thing, you may have to move your office, but stay around, we'd miss you if you went."

I tried to talk. I was so mad the words wouldn't come, it was like talking through felt. I said, "Anything more, Miss Connie?"

She grinned at me. She only used one side of her mouth. Her hair had half come out the clips and the bruise was already showing on her cheek. She picked her bag off the desk, opened it, threw down a couple of coins. She said, "Get me some cigarettes, Johnny. It seems I run right out. . . ."

So I got out of my office. I had to because J.B. was building a new place for her, and there was going to be a projection room so she could watch rushes without getting up from her desk. The box-suite cut my room in half. I moved downstairs. For what it mattered I was still a partner, I wasn't leaving. I knew that was what they wanted, that was the way we ditched Jeff. I wasn't going out like that.

Nobody came near me, because the whole place knew how things stood. I brought in a couple of crates of Scotch and had a sort of lost ten days. I could look out the windows, see the stages going up, all the activity, I could hear Movieolas running all over the building, the whole damn place was jumping, but I didn't belong any more. Everybody was riding the same wagon except me, I'd been kicked over the tailboard. I heard them installing the mechs for Connie. J.B. put in a pair of new Kalees because she'd said she liked the colour of the finish. . . . They were right over my head, when they were running they shook the walls. Freddy would come in about ten and warm them over, and they'd show rushes three, four, maybe half a dozen times a day. And I sat and soaked whisky and list-

ened to the projectors and thought about Connie and what she'd done. . . .

I felt pretty bad for a time, then I got over that and started getting wild. I didn't care no more about Little Andy sending the world crazy, I could only think about Connie. Nobody tears me down like that and gets away with it, Doc, but nobody . . .

It took me days to think of it. If I hadn't pickled my brains I'd have worked it out straight away.

I laid in enough money to cover the deal I was going to make. Then I waited. Five-thirty that night I heard the studio packing up and going home. I left it a few minutes, then I went and got the Jag, gunned it down the drive to the road. There was a bus stop a couple of hundred yards away from the gates, Freddy was waiting. It was raining and he looked like a little rat standing there with his collar turned up and the water running out of his hair. I did a skid stop and opened the car door. "Come on, Freddy," I said, "you've got a lift."

For a minute I thought he was going to turn me down, he sort of looked round like he might make a run for it, but there was no place to run. He got in the car. He said, "Very nice of you, Mr. Harper. Very much obliged."

I got to his place ten minutes later. He lived in a scrappy little terrace over on the other side of town. I got out of the car. There was one streetlamp alight, the housefronts were shining with wet. Freddy tried to nip past and I got hold of his coat. I said, "Just a minute, Freddy, want a talk with you."

He stood there looking at me. He said, "Yes, Mr. Harper, I thought you did." I waited. The rain beat on the pavement. He said, "You better come in."

He opened the door with a latchkey. The hall was dark, there was a sort of sour smell. Somebody called from upstairs, "Freddy, is that you? Who you got with you, Freddy?"

He put a light on. He said, "She's bedridden, Mr. Harper. Can't get about no more." He shouted back. "All right,

mother, only Mr. Harper from the studio. Shan't be long." He opened a door. "In here, Mr. Harper. Isn't very warm, I'll get the old fire on in a jiff."

I said, "The Hell with it, doesn't matter." I followed him into the room. There was an old table, high-backed chairs set round it. Faded floral paper. A big print on the chimney breast that showed all Wren's buildings in one engraved heap. Freddy turned back to face me. He said, "Mustn't be too long, Mr. Harper, she gets worried."

I lit a cigarette. "This won't take long, Freddy. This won't take no time at all. You remember I helped you out once?"

He sort of stood and pulled his lip.

I said, "You were for the chop, Freddy, I kept you on. Remember?"

"Yes, Mr. Harper, yes, I do. . . ."

I said, "Right then, you know what they say. One good turn . . . you're going to make me an Image."

He said, "Eh?"

I said, "Special sort of Image, Freddy. A love charm. A simple. An Image for love, can you do that, Freddy?"

He swallowed. "I don't know, I haven't ever tried."

I said, "You're going to try now. And you're going to succeed. There's an Image for everything, Freddy, you said so yourself."

He said, "Mr. Harper, Mr. Harper, sir . . . who's it for?"

I started to laugh. I said, "The mechs in the new suite, Freddy, the new Kalees. They got cans on?"

He jumped like I'd stung him. He said, "I couldn't do it, Mr. Harper. Not for a thousand quid I couldn't. . . ."

I got hold of him. Like I told you, Doc, he's a little guy. . . . I backed him against the wall, I said, "Don't play games, little man, I don't have the time. . . ." I got my free hand in my pocket, took out a wad of notes. I rammed them under his nose. I said, "A straight thousand, Freddy, no questions, no tax. You can get out, go any place you want. You'll do it, little man." I banged him against the wall, made his teeth rattle. I said, "A love charm. For the

one and only Connie, for the little lion. Come on, Freddy, I'll break your back. . . ."

Some expression went across his face, like a fool I thought it was fear. He said, "All right, Mr. Harper, let go, I can't get my breath. . . ."

I stepped back. I said, "Attaboy, Fred." You can buy anybody any time, Doc, you just gotta be sure you're paying the highest . . . I slung the wad down on the table. I said, "Get the stuff to me tomorrow, Freddy, I'll love you like a son. Don't let me down." I went out and left him staring at the notes.

He brought me the drawing next day and I looked at it just long enough to make sure it was the real thing. I couldn't do anything about it till the evening. When the studio had emptied I set up one of the rostrums and filmed the Image. I developed the neg and printed enough frames for both mechs. Then I went up to the new suite and laced the Kalees. I set the heads for independent running, maximum saturation. From then on, Doc, everything she saw she'd see with hot cans. . . .

I sat in my office next day and laughed every time the mechs started up. I knew each time the crosses turned Images were stabbing into Connie's brain like hypo shots.

It didn't take hardly any time. I met her in the corridor and her eyes were wild and she glared at me, and I stared right back and I knew. . . .

I took her home that night. We walked into my flat just the time the Little Andy show was starting up, all the suckers in the country crowding round their sets. She took her coat off and she was shaking. Her eyes were crazy like an animal and the tears were running down her throat, but her hands couldn't stop unfastening her skirt. "You bastard," she said. Over and over. "You bastard." Doc, it was great. The little lion had an itch, and Johnny Harper was the only guy in the whole sweet world could do anything about it. I sat on the bed, then I lay on it, and laughed myself sick.

And then I made her crawl. . . .

God, that little bastard, Freddy, he'd got it worked out right from the start. He was twenty moves in front of me all the way. . . .

Doc, what's the matter, I thought you were smart. Freddy, he'd got nothing. He'd go home nights, look at the picture of all Wren's buildings, sit and watch the fire. See to his old mum, wipe her mouth, feed her meat broth. . . . He was through, Doc, he was a little old guy nobody could use. No front-office girls for Freddy. No Connie, not ever. Until I made my move. The Images wouldn't work for him, there was no way he could get her, I put her right in his lap. She had to get free of me, he was the only guy could fix it. He knew she'd go to him, he knew she'd pay plenty. *But she wouldn't pay in cash. . . .*

What? How could she get free? Wake up, Doc, do I have to spell it out for you. . . . She couldn't get the Image out of her head once the cans had driven it in, she was tied to me till I passed my check. That's what she got Freddy to fix, he made me an Image as well. *My Image was death. . . .*

I . . . I only got it once. Up in the main theatre, I saw a print this morning, the cans were hot. Somehow I knew as soon as the mech started, I tried to look away from the screen but I wasn't quick enough. It only needed the once, it must have been a masterpiece. I expect it was, Doc, it was a labour of love. . . .

Doc, I've got an itch now, I know what it's like. . . . I didn't know how I was going to do it till I bought the razor. I'm trying to keep my hands off it, Doc, I'm scared, I don't want to go this way. Yeah, you'd better get on that phone, get the boys in with the jacket. . . . But, Doc, don't put me out, if you do I won't wake up, my body's programmed . . . get moving, man, for the sake of God. . . .

The razor. Can't . . . put it down. Don't try to take it off me, Doc, I could kill you, don't try and come too near. . . . Doc, don't watch Little Andy. Find Freddy Keeler, break his back for me. . . .

It's . . . like there was a magnet in my wrist, pulling. That's where the itch is, Doc, it's in my wrist right down

near the bone. I can scratch it with this, I've got to do it, got to scratch, and scratch. . . .

Doc, don't, don't be crazy, I told you——

*Don't*——

God. . . .

God, Doc, I'm . . . sorry, didn't mean to . . . clout you like that, couldn't help. . . . Doc, look I . . . done it, I had to. It was easy, going through the tendons was like cutting straw . . . it's better now, Doc, the itching's gone away. . . .

Messing the carpet a bit, Doc, sorry. . . . God, Doc, listen, you can hear the blood sort of whistling. . . . I . . . thought about it, what it'd be like, didn't . . . think of that. . . .

Doc, I'm scared, I want Connie. . . . Try and listen, you gotta find her, look after her. . . . She didn't know what she was starting, he'll . . . do it again, sell her to somebody else, and she'll buy off and then he'll sell her, again and again, he'll break her, Doc, she won't walk proud no more. . . . He's the most dangerous guy in the world, we made him that way. . . . Doc, this is sub-lim, you see what it can do. . . .

Funny. Like I can feel all the blood I got go rushing down my arm. Is that for real, Doc, is that what happens——

Don't feel too good. Can't see . . . shoulder's hurting, guess I better . . . sit down . . .

Sort of want to cry, but maybe better make a . . . gag instead. . . . *Roll credits and fade to black. . . . Doc, this is it I don't want to go*——

Connie, darling, please, I never . . .

never . . .

meant . . .

# BERNIE THE FAUST

*by*

WILLIAM TENN

*This story has the rather unique distinction of having been chosen by three editors as worthy of publication. Since its original debut in* Playboy *magazine, it was chosen for this collection and almost at the same time selected as one of the best s-f stories of 1963 for inclusion in Judith Merril's* Year's Best S-F *in the USA. If you like satire, you will see the reason why.*

# BERNIE THE FAUST

BERNIE THE FAUST, that's what Ricardo calls me. I don't know what I am.

Here I am, I'm sitting in my little nine-by-six office. I'm reading notices of Government-surplus sales. I'm trying to decide where lies a possible buck and where lies nothing but more headaches.

So the office door opens. This little guy with a dirty face, wearing a dirty, very wrinkled Palm Beach suit, walks into my office, and he coughs a bit and he says:

"Would you be interested in buying a twenty for a five?"

That was it. I mean, that's all I had to go on.

I looked him over and I said, "*Wha-at?*"

He shuffled his feet and coughed some more. "A twenty," he mumbled. "A twenty for a five."

I made him drop his eyes and stare at his shoes. They were lousy, cracked shoes, lousy and dirty like the rest of him. Every once in a while, his left shoulder hitched up in a kind of tic. "I give you twenty," he explained to his shoes, "and I buy a five from you with it. I wind up with a five, you wind up with a twenty."

"How did you get into the building?"

"I just came in," he said, a little mixed up.

"You just *came in*." I put a nasty mimicking note in my voice. "Now you just go right back downstairs and come the Hell out. There's a sign in the lobby—NO BEGGARS ALLOWED."

"I'm not begging." He tugged at the bottom of his jacket. It was like a guy trying to straighten out his slept-in pyjamas. "I want to sell you something. A twenty for a five. I give you——"

"You want me to call a cop?"

He looked very scared. "No. Why should you call a cop? I haven't done anything to make you call a cop!"

"I'll call a cop in just a second. I'm giving you fair warning. I just phone down to the lobby and they'll have a cop up here fast. They don't want beggars in this building. This is a building for business."

He rubbed his hand against his face, taking a little dirt off, then he rubbed the hand against the lapel of his jacket and left the dirt there. "No deal?" he asked. "A twenty for a five? You buy and sell things. What's the matter with my deal?"

I picked up the phone.

"All right," he said, holding up the streaky palm of his hand. "I'll go."

"You better. And shut the door behind you."

"Just in case you change your mind." He reached into his dirty, wrinkled pants pocket and pulled out a card. "You can get in touch with me here. Almost any time during the day."

"Blow," I told him.

He reached over, dropped the card on my desk, on top of all the surplus notices, coughed once or twice, looked at me to see if maybe I was biting. No? No. He trudged out.

I picked the card up between the nails of my thumb and forefinger and started to drop it into the wastebasket.

Then I stopped. A card. It was just so damned out of the ordinary—a slob like that with a card. A card, yet.

For that matter, the whole play was out of the ordinary. I began to be a little sorry I hadn't let him run through the whole thing. After all, what was he trying to do but give me an offbeat sales pitch? I can always use an offbeat sales pitch. I work out of a small office, I buy and sell, but half my stock is good ideas. I'll use ideas, even from a bum.

The card was clean and white, except where the smudge from his fingers made a brown blot. Written across it in a kind of ornate handwriting were the words *Mr. Ogo Eksar.* Under that was the name and the telephone number of a hotel in the Times Square area, not far from my office. I

knew that hotel: not expensive, but not a fleabag either—somewhere just under the middle line.

There was a room number in one corner of the card. I stared at it and I felt kind of funny. I really didn't know.

Although, come to think of it, why couldn't a panhandler be registered at a hotel? "Don't be a snob, Bernie," I told myself.

Twenty for five. What kind of panhandling pitch would follow it? I couldn't get it out of my mind!

There was only one thing to do. Ask somebody about it. Ricardo? A big college professor, after all. One of my best contacts.

He'd thrown a lot my way—a tip on the college-building programme that was worth a painless fifteen hundred, an office-equipment disposal from the United Nations, stuff like that. And any time I had any questions that needed a college education, he was on tap. All for the couple, three hundred, he got out of me in commissions.

I looked at my watch. Ricardo would be in his office now, marking papers or whatever it is he does there. I dialled his number.

"Ogo Eksar?" he repeated after me. "Sounds like a Finnish name. Or maybe Estonian. From the eastern Baltic, I'd say."

"Forget that part," I said. "This is all I care about." And I told him about the twenty-for-five offer.

He laughed. "That thing again!"

"Some old hustle that the Greeks pulled on the Egyptians?"

"No. Something the Americans pulled. And not a con game. During the Depression, a New York newspaper sent a reporter around the city with a twenty-dollar bill which he offered to sell for exactly one dollar. There were no takers. The point being that even with people out of work and on the verge of starvation, they were so intent on not being suckers that they turned down an easy profit of nineteen-hundred per cent."

"Twenty for one? This was twenty for five."

"Oh, well, you know, Bernie, inflation," he said, laughing again. "And these days it's more likely to be a television show."

"Television? You should have seen the way the guy was dressed!"

"Just an extra, logical touch to make people refuse to take the offer seriously. University research people operate much the same way. A few years back, a group of sociologists began an investigation of the public's reaction to sidewalk solicitors in charity drives. You know, those people who jingle little boxes on street corners: HELP THE TWO-HEADED CHILDREN, RELIEF FOR FLOOD-RAVAGED ATLANTIS? Well, they dressed up some of their students——"

"You think he was on the level, then, this guy?"

"I think there is a good chance that he was. I don't see why he would have left his card with you, though."

"That I can figure—now. If it's a TV stunt, there must be a lot of other angles wrapped up in it. A giveaway show with cars, refrigerators, a castle in Scotland, all kinds of loot."

"A giveaway show? Well, yes—it could be."

I hung up, took a deep breath and called Eksar's hotel. He was registered there all right. And he'd just come in.

I went downstairs fast and took a cab. Who knew what other connections he'd made by now?

Going up in the elevator, I kept wondering. How did I go from the twenty-dollar bill to the real big stuff, the TV giveaway stuff, without letting Eksar know that I was on to what it was all about? Well, maybe I'd be lucky. Maybe he'd give me an opening.

I knocked on the door. When he said, "Come in," I went in. But for a second or two I couldn't see a thing.

It was a little room, like all the rooms in that hotel, little and smelly and stuffy. But he didn't have the lights on, any electric lights. The window shade was pulled all the way down.

When my eyes got used to the dark, I was able to pick out this Ogo Eksar character. He was sitting on the bed on

the side nearest me. He was still wearing that crazy, rumpled Palm Beach suit.

And you know what? He was watching a programme on a funny little portable TV set that he had on the bureau. Colour TV. Only it wasn't working right. There were no faces, no pictures, nothing but colours chasing around. A big blob of red, a big blob of orange and a wiggly border of blue and green and black. A voice was talking from it, but all the words were fouled up: "*Wah-wah, de-wah, de-wah.*"

Just as I went in, he turned it off. "Times Square is a bad neighbourhood for TV," I told him. "Too much interference."

"Yes," he said. "Too much interference." He closed up the set and put it away. I wished I'd seen it when it was working right.

Funny thing, you know? I would have expected a smell of liquor in the room, I would have expected to see a couple of empties in the tin-trash basket near the bureau. Not a sign.

The only smell in the room was a smell I couldn't recognize. I guess it was the smell of Eksar himself, concentrated.

"Hi," I said, feeling a little uncomfortable because of the way I'd been with him back in the office. So rough I'd been.

He stayed on the bed. "I've got the twenty," he said. "You've got the five?"

"Oh, I guess I've got the five, all right," I said, looking in my wallet hard and trying to be funny. He didn't say a word, didn't even invite me to sit down. I pulled out a bill. "O.K.?"

He leaned forward and stared, as if he could see—in all that dimness—what kind of a bill it was. "O.K.," he said. "But I'll want a receipt. A notarized receipt."

Well, what the hell, I thought a notarized receipt. "Then we'll have to go down. There's a druggist on 45th."

"Let's go," he said, getting to his feet with several small coughs that came one, two, three, four, right after one another.

On the way to the druggist, I stopped in a stationery store and bought a book of blank receipts. I filled out most of one right there. New York, N.Y., and date. *Received from Mr. Ogo Eksar the sum of twenty dollars for a five-dollar bill bearing the serial number. . . .*

"That O.K.?" I asked him. "I'm putting in the serial number to make it look as if you want that particular bill, you know, what the lawyers call the value-received angle."

He screwed his head around and read the receipt. Then he checked the serial number of the bill I was holding. He nodded.

We had to wait for the druggist to get through with a couple of customers. When I signed the receipt, he read it to himself, shrugged and went ahead and stamped it with his seal.

I paid him the two bits; I was the one making the profit.

Eksar slid a crisp new twenty to me along the counter. He watched while I held it up to the light, first one side, then the other.

"Good bill?" he asked.

"Yes. You understand: I don't know you, I don't know your money."

"Sure. I'd do it myself with a stranger."

He put the receipt and my five-dollar bill in his pocket and started to walk away.

"Hey," I said. "You in a hurry?"

"No." He stopped, looking puzzled. "No hurry. But you've got the twenty for a five. We made the deal. It's all over."

"All right, so we made the deal. How about a cup of coffee?"

He hesitated.

"It's on me," I told him. "I'll be a big shot for a dime. Come on, let's have a cup of coffee."

Now he looked worried. "You don't want to back out? I've got the receipt. It's all notarized. I gave you a twenty, you gave me a five. We made a deal."

"It's a deal, it's a deal," I said, shoving him into an empty booth. "It's a deal, it's all signed, sealed and delivered. Nobody's backing out. I just want to buy you a cup of coffee."

His face cleared up, all the way through that dirt. "No coffee. Soup. I'll have some mushroom soup."

"Fine, fine. Soup, coffee, I don't care. I'll have coffee."

I sat there and studied him. He hunched over the soup and dragged it into his mouth, spoonful after spoonful, the living picture of a bum who hadn't eaten all day. But pure essence of bum, triple-distilled, the label of a fine old firm.

A guy like this should be lying in a doorway trying to say no to a cop's night stick, he should be coughing his alcoholic guts out. He shouldn't be living in a real honest-to-God hotel, or giving me a twenty for a five, or eating anything as respectable as mushroom soup.

But it made sense. A TV giveaway show, they want to do this, they hire a damn good actor, the best money can buy, to toss their dough away. A guy who'll be so good a bum that people'll just laugh in his face when he tries to give them a deal with a profit.

"You don't want to buy anything else?" I asked him.

He held the spoon halfway to his mouth and stared at me suspiciously. "Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Like maybe you want to buy a ten for a fifty. Or a twenty for a hundred dollars?"

He thought about it, Eksar did. Then he went back to his soup, shovelling away. "That's no deal," he said contemptuously. "What kind of deal is that?"

"Excuse me for living. I just thought I'd ask. I wasn't trying to take advantage of you." I lit a cigarette and waited.

My friend with the dirty face finished the soup and reached for a paper napkin. He wiped his lips. I watched him: he didn't smudge a spot of the grime around his mouth. He just blotted up the drops of soup. He was dainty in his own special way.

'Nothing else you want to buy? I'm here. I've got time

right now. Anything else on your mind, we might as well look into it."

He balled up the paper napkin and dropped it into the soup plate. It got wet. He'd eaten all the mushrooms and left the soup.

"The Golden Gate Bridge," he said all of a sudden.

I dropped the cigarette. "What?"

"The Golden Gate Bridge. The one in San Francisco. I'll buy it for . . ." he lifted his eyes to the fluorescent fixtures in the ceiling and thought for a couple of seconds "say a hundred and a quarter. A hundred and twenty-five dollars. Cash on the barrel."

"Why the Golden Gate Bridge?" I asked him like an idiot.

"That's the one I want. You asked me what else I wanted to buy—well, that's what else. The Golden Gate Bridge."

"What's the matter with the George Washington Bridge? It's right here in New York, it's across the Hudson River. Why buy something all the way out on the Coast?"

He grinned at me as if he admired my cleverness. "Oh, no," he said, twitching his left shoulder hard. Up, down, up, down. "I know what I want. The Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. A hundred and a quarter. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it. If that's what you want, you're the doctor. But look—all I can sell you is my share of the Golden Gate Bridge, whatever equity in it I may happen to own."

He nodded. "I want a receipt. Put that down on the receipt."

I put it down on the receipt. And back we went. The druggist notarized the receipt, shoved the stamping outfit into a drawer under the counter and turned his back on us. Eksar counted out six twenties and one five from a big roll of bills, all of them starchy new. He put the roll back into his pants pocket and started away again.

"More coffee?" I asked, catching up. "A refill on the soup?"

He turned a very puzzled look at me and kind of twitched all over. "Why? What do you want to sell now?"

I shrugged. "What do you want to buy? You name it. Let's see what other deals we can work out."

This was all taking one hell of a lot of time, but I had no complaints. I'd made a hundred and forty dollars in fifteen minutes. Say a hundred and thirty-eight, if you deducted expenses such as notary fees, coffee, soup—all legitimate expenses, all low. I had no complaints.

But I was waiting for the big one. There had to be a big one.

Of course, it could maybe wait until the TV programme itself. They'd be asking me what was on my mind when I was selling Eksar all that crap, and I'd be explaining, and they'd start handing out refrigerators and gift certificates for Tiffany's and . . .

Eksar had said something while I was away in cloudland. Something damn unfamiliar. I asked him to say it again.

"The Sea of Azov," he told me. "In Russia. I'll give you three hundred and eighty dollars for it."

I'd never heard of the place. I pursed my lips and thought for a second. A funny amount—three hundred and eighty. And for a whole damn sea. I tried an angle.

"Make it four hundred and you've got a deal."

He began coughing his head off, and he looked mad. "What's the matter," he asked between coughs, "three hundred and eighty is a bad price? It's a small sea, one of the smallest. It's only fourteen thousand square miles. And do you know what the maximum depth is?"

I looked wise. "It's deep enough."

"Forty-nine feet," Eksar shouted. "That's all, forty-nine feet! Where are you going to do better than three hundred and eighty for a sea like that?"

"Take it easy," I said, patting his dirty shoulder. "Let's split the difference. You say three eighty, I want four hundred. How about leaving it at three ninety?" I didn't really care: ten bucks more, ten bucks less. But I wanted to see what would happen.

He calmed down. "Three hundred and ninety dollars for the Sea of Azov," he muttered to himself, a little sore at

being a sucker, at being taken. "All I want is the sea itself; it's not as if I'm asking you to throw in the Kerch Strait, or maybe a port like Taganrog or Osipenko . . ."

"Tell you what." I held up my hands. "I don't want to be hard. Give me my three ninety and I'll throw in the Kerch Strait as a bonus. Now how about that?"

He studied the idea. He sniffled. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "All right," he said finally. "It's a deal. Azov *and* the Kerch Strait for three hundred ninety."

Bang! went the druggist's stamp. The bangs were getting louder.

Eksar paid me with six fifties, four twenties and a ten, all new-looking bills from that thick roll in his pants pocket.

I thought about the fifties still on the roll, and I felt the spit start to ball up in my mouth.

"O.K.," I said. "Now what?"

"You still selling?"

"For the right price, sure. You name it."

"There's lots of stuff I could use," he sighed. "But do I need it right now? That's what I have to ask myself."

"Right now is when you've got a chance to buy it. Later —who knows? I may not be around, there may be other guys bidding against you, all kinds of things can happen." I waited awhile, but he just kept scowling and coughing. "How about Australia?" I suggested. "Could you use Australia for, say, five hundred bucks? Or Antarctica? I could give you a real nice deal on Antarctica."

He looked interested. "Antarctica? What would you want for it? No—I'm not getting anywhere. A little piece here, a little piece there. It all costs so much."

"You're getting damn favourable prices, buddy, and you know it. You couldn't do better buying at wholesale."

"Then how about wholesale? How much for the whole thing?"

I shook my head. "I don't know what you're talking about. What whole thing?"

He looked impatient. "The whole thing. The world. Earth."

"Hey," I said. "That's a lot."

"Well, I'm tired of buying a piece at a time. Will you give me a wholesale price if I buy it all?"

I shook my head, kind of in and out, not yes, not no. Money was coming up, the big money. This was where I was supposed to laugh in his face and walk away. I didn't even crack a smile. "For the whole planet—sure, you're entitled to a wholesale price. But what is it, I mean, exactly *what* do you want to buy?"

"Earth," he said, moving close to me so that I could smell his stinking breath. "I want to buy Earth. Lock, stock and barrel."

"It's got to be a good price. I'll be selling out completely."

"I'll make it a good price. But this is the deal. I pay two thousand dollars, cash. I get Earth, the whole planet, and you have to throw in some stuff on the Moon. Fishing rights, mineral rights and rights to buried treasure. How about it?"

"It's a hell of a lot."

"I know it's a lot," he agreed. "But I'm paying a lot."

"Not for what you're asking. Let me think about it."

This was the big deal, the big giveaway. I didn't know how much money the TV people had given him to fool around with, but I was pretty sure two thousand was just a starting point. Only what was a sensible, business-like price for the whole world?

I mustn't be made to look like a penny-ante chiseller on TV. There was a top figure Eksar had been given by the programme director.

"You really want the whole thing," I said, turning back to him, "the Earth and the Moon?"

He held up a dirty hand. "Not all the Moon. Just the rights on it. The rest of the Moon you can keep."

"It's still a lot. You've got to go a Hell of a lot higher than two thousand dollars for any hunk of real estate that big."

Eksar began wrinkling and twitching. "How—how much higher?"

"Well, let's not kid each other. This is the big time now!

We're not talking about bridges or rivers or seas. This is a whole world and part of another that you're buying. It takes dough. You've got to be prepared to spend dough.

"How much?" He looked as if he were jumping up and down inside his dirty Palm Beach suit. People going in and out of the store kept staring at us. "How *much?*" he whispered.

"Fifty thousand. It's a damn low price. And you know it."

Eksar went limp all over. Even his weird eyes seemed to sag. "You're crazy," he said in a low, hopeless voice. "You're out of your head."

He turned and started for the revolving door, walking in a kind of used-up way that told me I'd really gone over the line. He didn't look back once. He just wanted to get far, far away.

I grabbed the bottom of his filthy jacket and held on tight.

"Look, Eksar," I said, fast, as he pulled. "I went over your budget, way over, I can see that. But you know you can do better than two thousand. I want as much as I can get. What the Hell, I'm taking time out to bother with you. How many other guys would?"

That got him. He cocked his head, then began nodding. I let go of his jacket as he came around. We were connecting again!

"Good. You level with me, and I'll level with you. Go up a little higher. What's your best price? What's the best you can do?"

He stared down the street, thinking, and his tongue came out and licked at the side of his dirty mouth. His tongue was dirty, too. I mean that! Some kind of black stuff, grease or grime, was all over his tongue.

"How about," he said, after a while, "how about twenty-five hundred? That's as high as I can go. I don't have another cent."

He was like me: he was a natural bargainer.

"You can go to three thousand," I urged. "How much is three thousand? Only another five hundred. Look what you

get for it. Earth, the whole planet, and fishing and mineral rights and buried treasure, all that stuff on the Moon. How's about it?"

"I can't. I just can't. I wish I could." He shook his head as if to shake loose all those tics and twitches. "Maybe this way. I'll go as high as twenty-six hundred. For that, will you give me Earth and just fishing rights and buried-treasure rights on the Moon? You keep the mineral rights. I'll do without them."

"Make it twenty-eight hundred and you can have the mineral rights, too. You want them, I can tell you do. Treat yourself. Just two hundred bucks more, and you can have them."

"I can't have everything. Some things cost too much. How about twenty-six fifty, without the mineral rights and without the buried-treasure rights?"

We were both really swinging now. I could feel it.

"This is my absolutely last offer," I told him. "I can't spend all day on this. I'll go down to twenty-seven hundred and fifty, and not a penny less. For that, I'll give you Earth and just fishing rights on the Moon. Or just buried-treasure rights. You pick whichever one you want."

"All right," he said. "You're a hard man; we'll do it your way."

"Twenty-seven fifty for Earth and either fishing or buried-treasure rights on the Moon?"

"No, twenty-seven even, and no rights on the Moon. I'll forget about that. Twenty-seven even, and all I get is the Earth."

"Deal!" I sang out, and we struck hands. We shook on it.

Then, with my arm around his shoulders—what did I care about the dirt on his clothes when the guy was worth twenty-seven hundred dollars to me?—we marched back to the drugstore.

"I want a receipt," he reminded me.

"Right," I said. "But I put the same stuff on it: that I'm selling you whatever equity I own or have a right to sell. You're getting a lot for your money."

"You're getting a lot of money for what you're selling," he came right back. I liked him. Twitches and dirt or not, he was my kind of guy.

We got back to the druggist for notarization, and, honest, I've never seen a man look more disgusted in my life. "Business is good, huh?" he said. "You two are sure hotting it up."

"Listen, you," I told him. "You just notarize." I showed the receipt to Eksar. "This the way you want it?"

He studied it, coughing. "Whatever equity you own or have the right to sell. All right. And put in, you know, in your capacity as sales agent, your professional capacity."

I changed the receipt and signed it. The druggist notarized.

Eksar brought that lump of money out of his pants pocket. He counted out fifty-four crisp new 50s and laid them on the glass counter. Then he picked up the receipt, folded it and put it away. He started for the door.

I grabbed up the money and went with him. "Anything else?"

"Nothing else," he said. "It's all over. We made our deal."

"I know, but we might find something else, another item."

"There's nothing else to find. We made our deal." And his voice told me he really meant it. It didn't have a trace of the tell-me-more whine that you've got to hear before there's business.

I came to a stop and watched him push out through the revolving door. He went right out into the street and turned left and kept moving, all fast, as if he was in a Hell of a hurry.

There was no more business. O.K. I had thirty-two hundred and thirty dollars in my wallet that I'd made in one morning.

But how good had I really been? I mean, what was the top figure in the show's budget? How close had I come to it?

I had a contact who maybe could find out—Morris Burlap.

Morris Burlap is in business like me, only he's a theatrical agent, sharp, real sharp. Instead of selling a load of used copper wire, say, or an option on a corner lot in Brooklyn, he sells talent. He sells a bunch of dancers to a hotel in the mountains, a piano player to a bar, a disc jockey or a comic to late-night radio. The reason he's called Morris Burlap is because of these heavy Harris-tweed suits he wears winter and summer, every day in the year. They reinforce the image, he says.

I called him from a telephone booth near the entrance and filled him in on the giveaway show. "Now, what I want to find out——"

"Nothing to find out," he cut in. "There's no such show, Bernie."

"There sure as Hell is, Morris. One you haven't heard of."

"There's no such show. Not in the works, not being rehearsed, not anywhere. Look: before a show gets to where it's handing out this kind of dough, it's got to have a slot, it's got to have air time all bought. And before it even buys air time, a packager has prepared a pilot. By then I'd have got a casting call—I'd have heard about it a dozen different ways. Don't try to tell me my business, Bernie; when I say there's no such show, there's no such show."

So damn positive he was. I had a crazy idea all of a sudden and turned it off. No. Not that. No.

"Then it's a newspaper or college research thing, like Ricardo said."

He thought it over. I was willing to sit in that stuffy telephone booth and wait; Morris Burlap has a good head. "Those damn documents, those receipts, newspapers and colleges doing research don't operate that way. And nuts don't either. I think you're being taken, Bernie. How you're being taken, I don't know, but you're being taken."

That was enough for me. Morris Burlap can smell a hustle through sixteen feet of rock-wool insulation. He's never wrong. Never.

I hung up, sat, thought. The crazy idea came back and exploded.

A bunch of characters from outer space say they want Earth. They want it for a colony, for a vacation resort, who the Hell knows what they want it for? They got their reasons. They're strong enough and advanced enough to come right down and take over. But they don't want to do it cold. They need a legal leg.

All right. These characters from outer space, maybe all they had to have was a piece of paper from just one genuine accredited human being, signing the Earth over to them. No, that couldn't be right. *Any* piece of paper? Signed by *any* Joe Jerk?

I jammed a dime into the telephone and called Ricardo's college. He wasn't in. I told the switchboard girl it was very important: she said, all right, she'd ring around and try to spot him.

All that stuff, I kept thinking, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Sea of Azov—they were as much a part of the hooks as the twenty-for-a-five routine. There's one sure test of what an operator is really after: when he stops talking, closes up shop and goes away.

With Eksar, it had been the Earth. All that baloney about extra rights on the Moon! They were put in to cover up the real thing he was after, for extra bargaining power.

That's how Eksar had worked on me. It was like he'd made a special study of how I operate. From me alone, he had to buy.

But why me?

All that stuff on the receipt, about my equity, about my professional capacity, what the Hell did it mean? I don't own Earth; I'm not in the planet-selling business. You have to own a planet before you can sell it. That's law.

So what could I have sold Eksar? I don't own any real estate. Are they going to take over my office, claim the piece of sidewalk I walk on, attach the stool in the diner where I have my coffee?

That brought me back to my first question. Who was this "they"? Who the holy Hell were "they"?

The switchboard girl finally dug up Ricardo. He was irri-

tated. "I'm in the middle of a faculty meeting, Bernie. Call you back?"

"Just listen a second," I begged. "I'm in something, I don't know whether I'm coming or going. I've got to have some advice."

Talking fast—I could hear a lot of big-shot voices in the background—I ran through the story from the time I'd called him in the morning. What Eksar looked like and smelled like, the funny portable colour-TV he had, the way he'd dropped all those Moon rights and gone charging off once he'd been sure of the Earth. What Morris Burlap had said, the suspicions I'd been building up, everything. "Only thing is," I laughed a little to show that maybe I wasn't really serious about it, "who am I to make such a deal, huh?"

He seemed to be thinking hard for a while. "I don't know, Bernie, it's possible. It does fit together. There's the U.N. aspect."

"U.N. aspect? Which U.N. aspect?"

"The U.N. aspect of the situation. The—study of the U.N. on which we collaborated two years ago." He was using double talk because of the college people around him. But I got it. I got it.

Eksar must have known all along about the deal that Ricardo had thrown my way, getting rid of old, used-up office equipment for the United Nations here in New York. They'd given me what they called an authorizing document. In a file somewhere there was a piece of paper, United Nations stationery, saying that I was their authorized sales agent for surplus, second-hand equipment and installations.

Talk about a legal leg!

"You think it'll stand up?" I asked Ricardo. "I can see how the Earth is second-hand equipment and installations. But surplus?"

"International law is a tangled field, Bernie. And this might be even more complex. You'd be wise to do something about it."

"But what? What should I do, Ricardo?"

"Bernie," he said, sounding sore as Hell, "I told you I'm in a faculty meeting, damn it! A *faculty* meeting!" And he hung up.

I ran out of the drugstore like a wild man and grabbed a cab back to Eksar's hotel.

What was I most afraid of? I didn't know: I was so hysterical. This thing was too big-time for a little guy like me, too damn dangerously big-time. It would put my name up in lights as the biggest sellout sucker in history. Who could ever trust me again to make a deal? I had the feeling like somebody had asked me to sell him a snapshot, and I'd said sure, and it turned out to be a picture of the Nike Zeus, you know, one of those top-secret atomic missiles. Like I'd sold out my country by mistake. Only this was worse: I'd sold out my whole goddamn world. I had to buy it back—I had to!

When I got to Eksar's room, I knew he was about ready to check out. He was shoving his funny portable TV in one of those cheap leather grips they sell in chain stores. I left the door open, for the light.

"We made our deal," he said. "It's over. No more deals."

I stood there, blocking his way. "Eksar," I told him, "listen to what I figured out. First, you're not human. Like me, I mean."

"I'm a Hell of a lot more human than you, buddy boy."

"Maybe. But you're not from Earth—that's my point. Why you need Earth——"

"I *don't* need it. I'm an agent. I represent someone."

And there it was, straight out, you are right, Morris Burlap! I stared into his fish eyes, now practically pushing into my face. I wouldn't get out of the way. "You're an agent for someone," I repeated slowly. "Who? What do they want Earth for?"

"That's their business. I'm an agent. I just buy for them."

"You work on a commission?"

"I'm not in business for my health."

*You sure as Hell aren't in it for your health,* I thought.

*That cough, those tics and twitches*—Then I realized what they meant. This wasn't the kind of air he was used to. Like if I go up to Canada, right away I'm down with diarrhoea. It's the water or something.

The dirt on his face was a kind of sun-tan oil! A protection against our sunlight. Blinds pulled down, face smeared over—and dirt all over his clothes so they'd fit in with his face.

Eksar was no bum. He was anything but. I was the bum. Think fast, Bernie, I said to myself. This guy took you, and big!

"How much you work on—ten per cent?" No answer: he leaned against me, and he breathed and he twitched. "I'll top any deal you have, Eksar. You know what I'll give you? Fifteen per cent! I hate to see a guy running back and forth for a lousy ten per cent."

"What about ethics?" he said hoarsely. "I got a client."

"Look who's bringing up ethics! A guy goes out to buy the whole damn Earth for twenty-seven hundred! You call that ethics?"

Now he got sore. He set down the grip and punched his fist into his hand. "No, I call that business. A deal. I offer, you take. You go away happy, you feel you made out. All of a sudden, here you are back, crying you didn't mean it, you sold too much for the price. Too bad! I got ethics: I don't screw my client for a crybaby."

"I'm not a crybaby. I'm just a poor schnook trying to scratch out a living. Here, I'm up against a big-time operator from another world with all kinds of angles and gimmicks going for him."

"You had these angles, these gimmicks, you wouldn't use them?"

"Certain things I wouldn't do. Don't laugh, Eksar, I mean it. I wouldn't hustle a guy in an iron lung. I wouldn't hustle a poor schnook with a hole-in-the-wall office to sell out his entire planet."

"You really sold," he said. "That receipt will stand up anywhere. And we got the machinery to make it stand up.

Once my client takes possession, the human race is finished, it's kaput, forget about it. And you're Mr. Patsy."

It was hot in that hotel-room doorway, and I was sweating like crazy. But I was feeling better. All of a sudden Eksar wanted to do business with me. I grinned at him.

He changed colour a little under all that dirt. "What's your offer, anyway?" he asked, coughing. "Name a figure."

"You name one. You got the property, I got the dough."

"Aah!" he grunted impatiently, and pushed me out of the way. He was *strong*! I ran after him to the elevator.

"How much you want, Eksar?" I asked him as we were going down.

A shrug. "I got a planet, and I got a buyer for it. You, you're in a jam. The one in a pickle is the one who's got to tickle."

The louse! For every one of my moves, he knew the counter-move.

He checked out and I followed him into the street. Down Broadway we went, me offering him the thirty-two hundred and thirty he'd paid me, him saying he couldn't make a living out of shoving the same amount of money back and forth all day. "Thirty-four?" I offered. "I mean, you know, thirty-four fifty?" He just kept walking.

If I didn't get him to name a figure, any figure, I'd be dead.

I ran in front of him. "Eksar, let's stop hustling each other. If you didn't want to sell, you wouldn't be talking to me in the first place. You name a figure. Whatever it is, I'll pay it."

That got a reaction. "You mean it? You won't try to chisel?"

"How can I chisel? I'm over a barrel."

"O.K., then. I'll give you a break and save myself a long trip back to my client. What's fair for you and fair for me and fair all around? Let's say eight thousand even?"

Eight thousand—it was almost exactly what I had in the bank. He knew my bank account cold, up to the last statement.

He knew my thoughts cold, too. "You're going to do

business with a guy," he said, between coughs, "you check into him a little. You got eight thousand and change. It's not much for saving a guy's neck."

I was boiling. "Not much? Then let me set you straight, you Florence goddamn Nightingale! You're not getting it! A little skin I know maybe I have to give up. But not every cent I own, not for you, not for Earth, not for anybody!"

A cop came up close to see why I was yelling, and I had to calm down until he went away again. "Help! Police! Aliens invading us!" I almost screamed out. What would the street we were standing on look like in ten years if I didn't talk Eksar out of that receipt?

"Eksar, your client takes over Earth waving my receipt—I'll be hung high. But I've got only one life, and my life is buying and selling. I can't buy and sell without capital. Take my capital away, and it makes no difference to me who owns Earth and who doesn't."

"Who the Hell do you think you're kidding?" he said.

"I'm not kidding anybody. Honest, it's the truth. Take my capital away, and it makes no difference if I'm alive or if I'm dead."

That last bit of hustle seemed to have reached him. Listen, there were practically tears in my eyes the way I was singing it. How much capital did I need, he wanted to know—five hundred? I told him I couldn't operate one single day with less than seven times that. He asked me if I was really seriously trying to buy my lousy planet back—or was today my birthday and I was expecting a present from him? "Don't give your presents to me," I told him. "Give them to fat people. They're better than going on a diet."

And so we went. Both of us talking ourselves blue in the face, swearing by everything, arguing and bargaining, wheeling and dealing. It was touch and go who was going to give up first.

But neither of us did. We both held out until we reached what I'd figured pretty early we were going to wind up with, maybe a little bit more.

Six thousand, one hundred and fifty dollars.

That was the price over and above what Eksar had given me. The final deal. Listen, it could have been worse.

Even so, we almost broke up when we began talking payment.

"Your bank's not far. We could get there before closing."

"Why walk myself into a heart attack? My cheque's good as gold."

"Who wants a piece of paper? I want cash. Cash is definite."

Finally, I managed to talk him into a cheque. I wrote it out; he took it and gave me the receipts, all of them. Every last receipt I'd signed. Then he picked up his little satchel and marched away.

Straight down Broadway, without even a goodbye. All business, Eksar was, nothing but business. He didn't look back once.

*All* business. I found out next morning he'd gone right to the bank and had my cheque certified before closing time. What do you think of that? I couldn't do a damn thing: I was out six thousand, one hundred and fifty dollars. Just for talking to someone.

Ricardo said I was a Faust: I walked out of the bank, beating my head with my fist, and I called up him and Morris Burlap and asked them to have lunch with me. I went over the whole story with them in an expensive place that Ricardo picked out. "You're a Faust," he said.

"What Faust?" I asked him. "Who Faust? How Faust?"

So naturally he had to tell us all about Faust. Only I was a new kind of Faust, a Twentieth Century-American one. The other Fausts, they wanted to know everything. I wanted to own everything.

"But I didn't wind up owning," I pointed out. "I got taken. Six thousand, one hundred and fifty dollars' worth I got taken."

Ricardo chuckled and leaned back in his chair. "O my sweet gold," he said under his breath. "O my sweet gold."

"What?"

"A quotation, Bernie. From Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus.* I forget the context, but it seems apt. 'O my sweet gold.' "

I looked from him to Morris Burlap, but nobody can ever tell when Morris Burlap is puzzled. As a matter of fact, he looks more like a professor than Ricardo, him with those thick Harris tweeds and that heavy, thinking look. Ricardo is, you know, a bit too natty.

The two of them added up to all the brains and sharpness a guy could ask for. That's why I was paying out an arm and a leg for this lunch, on top of all my losses with Eksar.

"Morris, tell the truth. You understand him?"

"What's there to understand, Bernie? A quote about the sweet gold? It might be the answer, right there."

Now I looked at Ricardo. He was eating away at a creamy Italian pudding. Two bucks even, those puddings cost in that place.

"Let's say he was an alien," Morris Burlap said. "Let's say he came from somewhere in the outer space. O.K. Now what would an alien want with U.S. dollars? What's the rate of exchange out there?"

"You mean he needed it to buy some merchandise here on Earth?"

"That's exactly what I mean. But what *kind* of merchandise, that's the question. What could Earth have that he'd want?"

Ricardo finished the pudding and wiped his lips with a napkin. "I think you're on the right track, Morris," he said, and I swung my attention back to him. "We can postulate a civilization far in advance of our own. One that would feel we're not quite ready to know about them. One that has placed primitive little Earth strictly off limits—a restriction only desperate criminals dare ignore."

"From where come criminals, Ricardo, if they're so advanced?"

"Laws produce lawbreakers, Bernie, like hens produce eggs. Civilization has nothing to do with it. I'm beginning to see that Eksar now. An unprincipled adventurer, a star-

man version of those cut-throats who sailed the South Pacific a hundred years or more ago. Once in a while, a ship would smash the coral reefs, and a bloody opportunist out of Boston would be stranded for life among primitive, backward tribesmen. I'm sure you can fill in the rest."

"No, I can't. And if you don't mind, Ricardo——"

Morris Burlap said he'd like another brandy. I ordered it. He came as close to smiling as Morris Burlap ever does and leaned towards me confidentially. "Ricardo's got it, Bernie. Put yourself in this guy Eksar's position. He wraps up his spaceship on a dirty little planet which it's against the law to be near in the first place. He can make some half-assed repairs with merchandise that's available here—but he has to buy the stuff. Any noise, any uproar, and he'll be grabbed for a Federal rap in outer space. Say you're Eksar, what do you do?"

I could see it now. "I'd peddle and I'd parley. Copper bracelets, strings of beads, dollars—whatever I had to lay my hands on to buy the native merchandise. I'd peddle and I'd parley in deal after deal. Maybe I'd start with a piece of equipment from the ship, then I'd find some novelty item that the natives would go for. But all this is *Earth* business know-how, *human* business know-how."

"Bernie," Ricardo told me, "Indians once traded pretty little shells for beaver pelts at the exact spot where the stock exchange now stands. Some kind of business goes on in Eksar's world, I assure you, but its simplest form would make one of our corporate mergers look like a game of potsy on the sidewalk."

Well, I'd wanted to figure it out. "So I was marked as his fish all the way. I was screwed and blued and tattooed," I mumbled, "by a hustler superman."

Ricardo nodded. "By a businessman's Mephistopheles fleeing the thunderbolts of heaven. He needed to double his money one more time and he'd have enough to repair his ship. He had at his disposal a fantastic sophistication in all the ways of commerce."

"What Ricardo's saying," came an almost soft voice

from Morris Burlap, "is the guy who beat you up was a whole lot bigger than you."

My shoulders felt loose, like they were sliding down off my arms. "What the Hell," I said. "You get stepped on by a horse or you get stepped on by an elephant. You're still stepped on."

I paid the check, got myself together and went away.

Then I began to wonder if maybe this was really the story after all. They both enjoyed seeing me up there as an interplanetary jerk. Ricardo's a brilliant guy, Morris Burlap's sharp as Hell, but so what? Ideas, yes. Facts, no.

So here's a fact.

My bank statement came at the end of the month with that cancelled cheque I'd given Eksar. It had been endorsed by a big store in the Cortlandt Street area. I know that store. I've dealt with them. I went down and asked them about it.

They handle mostly marked-down, surplus electronic equipment. That's what they said Eksar had bought. A walloping big order of transistors and transformers, resistors and printed circuits, electronic tubes, wiring, tools, gimmicks like that. All mixed up, they said, a lot of components that just didn't go together. He'd given the clerk the impression that he had an emergency job to do—and he'd take as close as he could get to the things he actually needed. He'd paid a lot of money for freight charges: delivery was to some backwoods town in northern Canada.

That's a fact, now. I have to admit it. But here's another one.

I've dealt with that store, like I said. Their prices are the lowest in the neighbourhood. And why is it, do you think, they can sell so cheap? There's only one answer: because they buy so cheap. They buy at the lowest prices; they don't give a damn about quality: all they want to know is, how much markup? I've personally sold them job lots of electronic junk that I couldn't unload anywhere else, condemned stuff, badly wired stuff, stuff that was almost dangerous—it's a place to sell to when you've given up on

making a profit because you yourself have been stuck with inferior merchandise in the first place.

You get the picture? It makes me feel rosy all over.

There is Eksar out in space, the way I see it. He's fixed up his ship, good enough to travel, and he's on his way to his next big deal. The motors are humming, the ship is running, and he's sitting there with a big smile on his dirty face: he's thinking how he took me, how easy it was.

He's laughing his head off.

All of a sudden, there's a screech and a smell of burning. That circuit that's running the front motor, a wire just got touched through the thin insulation, the circuit's tearing the Hell out of itself. He gets scared. He turns on the auxiliaries. The auxiliaries don't go on—you know why? The vacuum tubes he's using have come to the end of their rope, they didn't have much juice to start with. *Blooie!* That's the rear motor developing a short circuit. *Ka-pow!* That's a defective transformer melting away in the middle of the ship.

And there he is, millions of miles from nowhere, empty space all around him, no more spare parts, tools that practically break in his hands—and not a single, living soul he can hustle.

And here am I, in my office, thinking about it, and *I'm* laughing my head off. Because it's just possible, it just could happen, that what goes wrong with his ship is one of the half-dozen or so job lots of really bad electronic equipment that I personally, me, Bernie the Faust, that I sold to that surplus store at one time or another.

That's all I'd ask. Just to have it happen that way.

Faust. He'd have Faust from me then. Right in the face. Faust. On the head, splitting it open, Faust. Faust I'd give him!

The only trouble is I'll never know. All I know for sure is that I'm the only guy in history who sold the whole goddamn planet.

*And* bought it back!

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