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NEW WRITINGS IN SF-14

SF-14

EDITED BY JOHN CARNELL



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NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—14

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. . . of new beings and strange entities . . .

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And of a world just beginning . . .  
Of minds within a universe . . .  
And of a universe within a mind . . .

NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—14

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Also edited by JOHN CARNELL

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EDITED BY  
JOHN CARNELL

NEW WRITINGS IN  
S.F.—14

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## NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—14

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*“The Song Of Infinity” by Domingo Santos © 1966 by Editora y Distribuidora Hispano Americana, S.A. and reprinted by permission of the author.*

DEDICATION

In affectionate memory of

GROFF CONKLIN

Noted Anthologist

. 1904-1968



## FOREWORD

by

JOHN CARNELL

THIS fourteenth volume of *New Writings In S-F* is a particularly pleasing one to myself, mainly because all the stories are ones which I like personally. A singularly rare occasion, because I often select and publish stories which I know are good but do not necessarily appeal to me as a *reader*. If everyone's taste was the same as my own there would be little difficulty in preparing each volume. Many years ago, as a magazine editor, I quickly found out that the most any editor could hope to do was please half the readership half the time. Even that is an optimistic average.

However, judging from reviews and reports, it does look as though the average works out somewhat higher in this series. Much of my own enjoyment usually comes in the circumstances surrounding the selection of stories. For instance, James White's novelette "Blood Brother", which opens this volume, had been in the planning stage for some time, but turned out a great deal different in its final draft and is a worthy follow-up to "Vertigo" in No. 12. Then Arthur Sellings recommended a Spanish-published story, "The Song of Infinity", by Domingo Santos, and as part of our policy is to produce as international a volume as possible, we obtained permission to translate it into English. I then discovered that this young author who lives in Barcelona had had nine novels and over thirty short stories published and was editor of a Spanish science-fiction magazine.

Like Robert A. Heinlein and many other S-F friends, I have long been a cat lover (we have three at present) and when American author Paul Corey submitted "If You're So Smart", it was practically guaranteed a sale—the fact that it turned out to be one of the most powerful telepathy cat stories since Fritz Leiber's classic "Space-Time For Springers" (1958) made it a certainty. I was likewise taken with Sydney J. Bounds' "The Ballad of Luna Lil", but for very different reasons. The more I thought about the distortions that obviously go along with history, the more I liked this futuristic distortion of a ballad and the author's analysis of the probable truth.

Then Ron Mackelworth, who has been slowly forging ahead as a writer for a number of years, came up with "Tilt Angle", a story of a future ice age; the atmosphere and the characterisation he creates are intriguing and almost real—and make a welcome change from spaceships and alien invasions! About this time, as the contents of this volume were beginning to take shape, I was looking for and hoping to find another strong novelette to balance out when Vincent King, who with Keith Roberts and several other writers is turning out to be among our most popular contributors, sent in "The Eternity Game". I had very much wanted to include an experimental piece of writing in No. 14—and Mr. King had excelled himself. So much so that at first I felt the story would be too obscure for most readers—the presentation alone is complex. But the more I thought about it the more I felt the story was like an abstract painting—the longer you look at it the more you see; and certainly the underlying plot motive is strongly there all through the story.

It therefore came as no surprise to learn that Vincent King had been educated at Falmouth School of Art and was at present an assistant lecturer at a northern College of Art and Design. "I'm a painter and etcher, really," he wrote. "I take the view that art and life are both one big thing—on good days it might all be comprehensible." A truly



philosophic attitude from one who admires the works of so wide a field as Conrad, Nabakov, Heller, Golding, Rembrandt, Bob Dylan, T. E. Lawrence, Raymond Chandler and many others!

Everyone's taste and preferment will be as diversified as Vincent King's I am sure, so I do not expect every reader to like and enjoy the contents of this volume just because I do. Only about half, to be exact!

JOHN CARNELL

March 1968



## BLOOD BROTHER

*by*

JAMES WHITE

*This is the third novelette in the new "Sector General" series. The earlier stories, "Invader" and "Vertigo", appeared in New Writings In S-F Nos. 7 and 12. Each story, however, is separate and complete in itself.*



## BLOOD BROTHER

### ONE

LIKE a tremendous cylindrical Christmas tree the lights of Sector Twelve General Hospital blazed against the misty backdrop of the stars. From its thousands of viewports shone light that was yellow or red-orange or a soft, liquid green. But there were patches of darkness as well, and behind these areas of solid metal plating lay wards and corridors wherein the lighting was so viciously incandescent that the eyes of approaching ships' pilots had to be protected from it, or sections which were so dark and cold that not even the feeble glow which filtered in from the stars could be allowed to penetrate to their patients.

In addition to the patients whose numbers and physiological classification varied from day to day it housed a medical and maintenance staff made up from members of the sixty-odd—sometimes very odd—intelligent species known to the Galactic Federation. Together they prided themselves that no case was too big, too small or too hopeless for them, and their professional reputation and facilities were second to none.

But the case currently under discussion in the office of the hospital's Chief Psychologist was a very large one indeed.

"This is not a purely medical assignment, Doctor," said Chief Psychologist O'Mara seriously, "although that side is the most important, naturally. Should your problems develop political complications——"

"I shall be guided by the vast experience of the cultural contact specialists of the Monitor Corps," said Conway.

"Your tone, Doctor Conway," said O'Mara drily, "is an

implied criticism of the splendid body of men and creatures to which I have the honour to belong. . . .”

The third person in the room continued to make gurgling sounds as it rotated ponderously like some large, organic prayer wheel, but otherwise said nothing.

“... But we’re wasting time,” O’Mara went on. “You have two days before your ship leaves for Meatball—time enough, I should think, to tidy up any personal or professional loose ends. You had better study the details of this project as much as possible, while you still have comfortable surroundings in which to work.”

He continued, “I have decided, reluctantly, to exclude Doctor Prilicla from this assignment—Meatball is no place for a being who is so hyper-sensitive to emotional radiation that it practically curls up and dies if anyone thinks a harsh thought at it. Instead you will have Surreshun here, who has volunteered to act as your guide and advisor—although why it is doing so when it was quite literally kidnapped and nearly killed by us is a mystery to me. . . .”

“It is because I am so brave and generous and forgiving,” said Surreshun in its flat, Translated voice. Still rotating, it added, “I am also far-sighted and altruistic and concerned only with the ultimate good of both our species.”

“Yes,” said O’Mara in a carefully neutral voice. “But our purpose is not completely altruistic. We plan to investigate and assess the medical requirements on your home planet with a view to rendering assistance in this area. Since we are also generous, altruistic and . . . and highly ethical this assistance will be given freely in any case, but if you should offer to make available to us a number of those instruments, quasi-living implements, tools or whatever you choose to call them which originate on your planet—’

“But Surreshun has already told us that its race does not use them . . .” began Conway.

“And I believe it,” said Major O’Mara. “But we know that they come from its home planet and it is your problem—one of your problems, Doctor—to find the people who

do use them. And now, if there are no other questions . . .”

A few minutes later they were in the corridor. Conway looked at his watch and said, “Lunch. I don’t know about you, but I always think better with my mouth full. The water-breathers’ section is just two levels above us——”

“It is kind of you to offer but I realise how inconvenient it is for your species to eat in my environment,” replied Sureshun. “My life support equipment contains an interesting selection of food and, although I am completely unselfish and thoughtful where the comfort of my friends is concerned, I shall be returning home in two days and the opportunities of experiencing multi-environment conditions and contacts are therefore limited. I should prefer to use the dining facilities of your warm-blooded oxygen breathers.”

Conway’s sigh of relief was untranslatable. He merely said, “After you.”

Theoretically his Senior Physician’s armband should have cleared the way so far as nurses and subordinate grades of doctor were concerned, but the corridor was crowded as usual with six-legged, elephantine Tralthans, the giant crab-like natives of Melf IV, silver-furred Kelgian caterpillars and other junior members of the staff who happened to have the advantage of weight. An added hazard was the entity bearing down on them in what was nothing less than a massive refrigerator mounted on balloon tyres. So it was not simple politeness which made him suggest that Sureshun should lead the way—its half-track mounted water tank would effectively clear a way through everything but Tralthans.

Sureshun belonged to a species which did not possess a heart or, indeed, any other form of muscular pump to circulate its blood. Physically it was a large, fleshy doughnut which rolled continually because to stop rolling was to die—its ring-like body circulated while its blood, operating on a form of gravity feed system, remained still. Even the simplest medical examination or treatment necessitated the doctor rotating with his patient, and surgery would have

called for the entire theatre staff, their instruments and lighting to be attached to an elaborate ferris wheel.

It was hard to imagine how such an odd species had evolved in the first place. Life for them must have begun in a wide, shallow tidal pool so constituted that the tide washed continually around it instead of going in and out. Surreshun's ancestors must have been very small, simple creatures which had been rolled continually by the circular tides, picking up food as they went. Gradually they had evolved specialised internal musculature and organs which enabled them to do the rolling instead of trusting to the tides or currents, also manipulatory and locomotor appendages in the shape of a fringe of short tentacles sprouting from the inner edge of their ring-like bodies and with the sensory, respiratory and ingestion apparatus positioned between them. Eventually had come intelligence, an increasing measure of control over their environment, nuclear power and spaceflight—which was where Surreshun had come on the scene, its capsule leaking water vapour at a controlled rate while it whirled and tumbled along a rapidly decaying orbit giving every indication—to Earth-human eyes, that was—of being in a distressed condition.

So far as the crew of the Monitor Corps cruiser which had also been in orbit around the planet was concerned it was a simple rescue operation, but to Surreshun's friends observing the incident from the thick, soupy ocean in which they lived it was plainly the abduction of a perfectly healthy astronaut in a fully functioning space vehicle.

As they entered the dining hall Conway put that highly embarrassing error out of his mind while he tried to decide whether to eat standing up like a Tralthan or risk giving himself a multiple hernia on a Melfan torture rack. All the Earth-human tables were taken.

Conway insinuated himself into a Melfan chair while Surreshun, whose food supply was suspended in the water it breathed, parked its mobile life-support system as close as



possible to the table. He was about to order when there was an interruption. Thornnastor, the Diagnostician-in-Charge of Pathology, lumbered up, directed an eye at each of them while the other two surveyed the room at large and made a noise like a modulated fog-horn.

The sounds were picked up by their Translator packs, relayed to the great computer in the bowels of the hospital and re-transmitted by the packs as a flat, toneless voice saying, "I saw you come in, Doctor and Friend Sureshun, and wondered if we might discuss your assignment for a few minutes—before you begin your meal. . . ."

Like all its fellow Tralthans Thornnastor was a vegetarian. Conway had the choice of eating salad—a food which he considered fit only for rabbits—or waiting, as his superior had suggested, on a steak.

But it quickly became plain that the delay would be longer than a few minutes—Thornnastor, it appeared, would not be itself during the next few days and it had to take this opportunity to talk. There was a Creppelian octopoid, physiological classification AMSL, which had been admitted suffering from some exotic disease which refused to respond to local treatment. Thornnastor would have to take the available Educator Tapes on the species and those of any similar race which might prove helpful in the diagnosis and treatment. Conway would understand, therefore, that it would be in no condition to discuss sensibly any subject not directly relating to sick octopuses.

Conway understood only too well.

The Hospital was equipped to treat every known form of intelligent life, but no single person could hold in his brain even a fraction of the physiological data necessary for this purpose. Surgical dexterity was a matter of ability and training, but the complete physiological knowledge needed for the treatment of an e-t patient had to be furnished by an Educator Tape, which was simply the brain record of some medical genius belonging to the same or a similar species to that of the patient being treated.

If an Earth-human doctor had to treat a Kelgian patient he took one of that species' tapes until treatment was completed, after which the tape was erased. The sole exceptions to this rule were Senior Physicians with teaching duties and Diagnosticians.

Because the tapes did not impart only physiological data—the complete memory and personality of the entity who had originally possessed the knowledge was transferred as well. In effect a Diagnostician spent much of his, her or its professional life as a voluntary schizophrenic. The entities apparently sharing one's mind could be unpleasant, aggressive individuals—geniuses, even medical geniuses, were rarely charming people—with all sorts of alien peeves and phobias. For the next few days Thornnastor would be a very unhappy and confused beastie indeed.

As it discussed the coming assignment, however, Thornnastor's mind was anything but confused. All around them people finished their lunches and walked, undulated, and in one case flew out to be replaced by a similar assortment of extra-terrestrials, and still Thornnastor continued to discuss methods of processing the data and specimens they would be sending him and the efficient organisation of this planet-sized medical examination. As the being responsible for analysing this mass of incoming data it had very definite ideas on how the job should be handled.

But finally the pathologist lumbered off, Conway ordered his steak and for a few minutes he performed major surgery with knife and fork in silence. Then he became aware that Surrehun's Translator was making a low, erratic growling sound which was probably the equivalent of the untranslatable noise an Earth-human would make clearing his throat. He asked, "You have a question?"

"Yes," said Surrehun. It made another untranslatable sound then went on, "Brave and resourceful and emotionally stable as I am . . ."

"Modest, too," said Conway drily.

". . . I cannot help but feel slightly concerned over to-

morrow's visit to the being O'Mara's office. Specifically, will it hurt and are there any mental after-effects?"

"Not a bit and none at all," said Conway reassuringly. He went on to explain the procedure used for taking a brain recording or Educator Tape, adding that the whole affair was entirely voluntary and should the idea cause Surreishun mental or physical distress it could change its mind at any time without loss of respect. It was doing the hospital a great service by allowing O'Mara to prepare this tape, a tape which would enable them to gain a full and valuable understanding of Surreishun's world and society.

Surreishun was still making the equivalent of "Aw, shucks" noises when they finished their meal. Shortly afterwards it left for a roll around the water-filled AUGL ward and Conway headed for his own section.

Before morning he would have to make a start on tidying up loose ends, familiarising himself with Meatball conditions and drawing up some fairly detailed plans for procedure prior to arrival—if for no other reason than to give the Corpsman who would be assisting him the idea that Sector General doctors knew what they were doing.

Currently in his charge were a ward of Kelgians and the hospital's Tralthan maternity section. Despite the fact that one species was covered in thick, silver fur and crawled like a giant caterpillar and the other resembled a six-legged elephant, they were fairly easy to deal with because they had the same atmosphere and gravity requirements as Conway. But he was also responsible for a small ward of Hudlars, beings with hide like flexible armour plate whose artificial gravity system was set at five Gs and whose atmosphere was a dense, high-pressure fog—and the odd-ball TLTU classification entity hailing from he knew not where who breathed superheated steam. It took more than a few hours to tidy up such a collection of loose ends, even though he was fortunate enough to have assistants who were nearly killing themselves in their efforts to prove how well they could handle things without him.

The courses of treatment or convalescence were well advanced, but he felt obliged to have a word with them all and say goodbye because they would be discharged and back on their home planets long before he returned from Meatball.

## Two

CONWAY had a hurried and unbalanced meal off an instrument trolley and then decided to call Murchison. Reaction to his lengthy bout of medical dedication was setting in, he thought cynically, and he was beginning to think only of his own selfish pleasure . . .

But in Pathology they told him that Murchison was on duty in the methane section, encased in a small half-track vehicle—heavily insulated, jammed with heaters inside hung with refrigerators outside—which was the only way of entering the Cold Section without both freezing herself to death within seconds and blasting the life out of every patient in the ward with her body heat.

He called her, suggesting a trip to the recreation level when she came off duty, but discovered that would not be for six hours. While she spoke he could hear in the background the ineffably sweet and delicate tinkling—like the chiming of colliding snowflakes, he thought—of a ward full of intelligent crystals talking to each other. Conway promised to collect her in six hours.

His next call was to the office of Colonel Skempton, the senior Monitor Corps officer at the hospital and the man most likely to have the latest information on the Meatball situation. A helpful Major placed the bulky Meatball file in his hands and apologised for the absence of the Colonel—apparently it was the middle of the night so far as Skempton was concerned. Conway yawned suddenly, remembering that his own shift should have ended a long time ago, then began to study the file.

Christened Meatball because Galactic Survey Reference

NT117/136/3 was verbally cumbersome and because Captain Williamson of the cultural contact and survey vessel *Descartes* steadfastly refused the honour of having such an odd and distasteful planet named after him, the place had to be seen to be believed. Its oceans were a thick, living soup and its land masses were almost completely covered by slow-moving carpets of animal life.

In many areas there were mineral outcroppings and soil which supported vegetable life, and other forms of vegetation grew in the water or rooted itself temporarily on the organic "land" surface. But an enormous area of the planet was covered by a thick layer of animal life which in some sections was nearly a mile deep. This vast, organic carpet was subdivided into strata which crawled and slipped and fought their way through each other to gain access to necessary top-surface vegetation or sub-surface minerals or simply to choke off and cannibalise each other.

During the course of this slow, gargantuan struggle these living strata heaved themselves into hills and valleys, altering the shape of lakes and coastlines and changing the topography of the planet from month to month.

The data gathered by *Descartes* before and during its single landing attempt had led to a great deal of theorising by the ship's specialists.

It had been generally agreed that if the planet possessed intelligent life it should take one of two forms, and both were a possibility. The first type would be large—one of the tremendous living carpets which might be capable of anchoring itself to the underlying rock while pushing extensions towards the surface for the purpose of breathing, ingestion and the elimination of wastes. It should also possess a means of defence around its perimeter to keep less intelligent strata from insinuating themselves between it and the ground below or from slipping over it and choking it off from surface air, water and food. They were assuming that intelligence in a massive organism of this kind would require a permanent base from which to grow.



The second possibility would be a fairly small life-form, smooth-skinned and flexible so as to enable it to slip between the carpets on its way to and from the surface. It should also be able to withstand enormous pressure and to move fast enough to escape the ingestive processes of the large types whose metabolism and movements were slow. Their fixed base, if they needed one, would be a cave or tunnel system in the underlying rock.

If either life-form existed it was unlikely to possess an advanced technology—large industrial complexes or cities were impossible on this heaving, ever-changing world. Tools, if they had been developed at all, were almost certainly small, crude and unspecialised. . . .

But even the most beautiful of theories has to be proved. Captain Williamson had chosen an area containing a large clearing composed of some thick, dry, leathery material on which to set down his ship. The stuff looked dead and insensitive so that the tail flare should not cause pain to life in the area, intelligent or otherwise. But the clearing had slowly opened an enormous mouth and tried to swallow them while their stern was pelted with small rocks or pieces of metal. *Descartes* had taken off hurriedly with one of the pieces of metal still inside the ship's hull.

Shortly afterwards the lump of metal had entered Sector General with a casualty caused by the too-hurried takeoff and, when it was realised what exactly it was and what it could do, the normally highminded medical types at the hospital began to think covetous thoughts.

Basically it was a small, unspecialised, thought-controlled tool. Any desired shape, degree of hardness or cutting edge could be had—immediately—just by thinking at it. Nobody knew how or for what purpose it was used on Meatball, but it was obviously the product of very high intelligence which was philosophically rather than technologically oriented. In Sector General, however, there was not a surgeon of any species who had not already offered the equivalent of a right arm to possess one of them.

But there was only one available and in all probability it was immensely valuable and should by rights be returned to its owner. At the same time the hospital needed it and as many others as it was possible to lay their hands on, and all they had to offer by way of trade were their medical facilities—if and when they made contact with the users of these wonderful tools.

When Surreshun's vehicle had gone tumbling into orbit they had thought that problem at least was solved. But the big, water-breathing, constantly rotating doughnut knew nothing at all about the tools or their users. Obviously there was an intelligent species on Meatball which even Surreshun knew nothing about.

Conway returned the file to the Major and left to collect Murchison. He found himself yawning so hard that he was in danger of dislocating his jaw.

Half an hour later they were in the recreation level, where trick lighting and some really inspired landscaping gave an illusion of spaciousness, lying on a small, tropical beach enclosed on two sides by cliffs and open to a sea which seemed to stretch for miles. Only the alien vegetation growing from the clifftops kept it from looking like a tropical bay anywhere on Earth, but then space was at a premium in Sector General and the people who worked together were expected to play together as well.

Conway was feeling very tired and he realised suddenly that he would have been due to start tomorrow morning's rounds in two hours' time if he still had had rounds to make. He would probably spend the rest of his date yawning in Murchison's face. But tomorrow—today, that was—would be even busier and, if he knew his O'Mara, Conway would not be completely himself. . . .

When he awakened, Murchison was leaning over him with an expression which was a mixture of amusement, irritation and concern. Punching him not too gently in the stomach she said, "You went to sleep on me, in the middle of a sentence, over an hour ago! I don't like that—it makes

me feel insecure, unwanted, unattractive to men." She went on punishing his diaphragm. "I expected to hear some inside information, at least. Some idea of the problems or dangers of your new job and how long you will be gone. At very least I expected a warm and tender farewell. . . ."

"If you want to fight," said Conway laughing, "let's wrestle. . . ."

But she slipped free and took off for the water. With Conway close behind she dived into the area of turbulence surrounding a Tralthan who was being taught how to swim. He thought he had lost her until a slim, tanned arm came around his neck from behind and he swallowed half of the artificial ocean.

Later as he was taking her back to her quarters Conway told her all he knew about his new assignment. Their farewell promised to be tender and very warm indeed, but it lasted only until the servo responsible for the section trundled up and said, "I perceive that you are beings of classification DBDG and are of differing genders, and note further that you have been in close juxtaposition for a period of two minutes fifty-three seconds. In the circumstances I must respectfully remind you of Regulation Twenty-one regarding the entertaining of visitors in DBDG Nurses Quarters. . . ."

"I forgot to tell you," said Murchison, "they fixed it again. . . ."

Surreshun had already gone when Conway arrived in Major O'Mara's office. "You know it all already, Doctor," said the psychologist as he and Lieutenant Craythorne, his assistant, hooked him up to the Educator. "But I am nevertheless required to warn you that the first few minutes following memory transfer are the worst—it is then that the human mind feels sure that it is being taken over by the alien *alter ego*. This is a purely subjective phenomenon caused by the sudden influx of alien memories and experience. You must try to maintain flexibility of mind and adapt to these alien, sometimes very alien, impressions as



quickly as possible. How you do this is up to you. Since this is a completely new tape I shall monitor your reactions in case of trouble. How do you feel?"

"Fine," said Conway, and yawned.

"Don't show off," said O'Mara, and threw the switch.

Conway came to a few seconds later in a small, square, alien room whose planes and outlines, like its furnishings, were too straight and sharp-edged. Two grotesque entities—a small part of his mind insisted they were his friends—towered over him, studying him with flat, wet eyes set in two faces made of shapeless pink dough. The room, its occupants and himself were motionless and . . .

*He was dying!*

Conway was aware suddenly that he had pushed O'Mara on to the floor and that he was sitting on the edge of the treatment couch, fists clenched, arms crossed tightly over his chest, swaying rapidly back and forth. But the movement did not help at all—the room was still too horrifying, dizzily *steady*! He was sick with vertigo, his vision was fading, he was choking, losing all sense of touch . . .

"Take it easy, lad," said O'Mara gently. "Don't fight it. Adapt."

Conway tried to swear at him but the sound which came out was like the bleat of a terrified small animal. He rocked forward and back, faster and faster, wagging his head from side to side. The room jerked and rolled about but it was still too steady. The steadiness was terrifying and lethal. *How*, Conway asked himself in utter desperation, *does one adapt to dying?*

"Pull up his sleeve, Lieutenant," said O'Mara urgently, "and hold him steady."

Conway lost control then. The alien entity who apparently had control would not allow anyone to immobilise its body—that was unthinkable! He jumped to his feet and staggered into O'Mara's desk. Still trying to find a movement which would pacify the alien inside his mind Con-

way crawled on hands and knees through the organised clutter on top of the desk, rolling and shaking his head.

But the alien in his mind was dizzy from standing still and the Earth-human portion was dizzy from too much movement. Conway was no psychologist but he knew that if he did not think of something quickly he would end up as a patient—of O'Mara's—instead of a doctor, because his alien was firmly convinced that it was dying, right now.

Even by proxy, dying was going to be a severe traumatic experience.

He had had an idea when he climbed on to the desk, but it was hard to recall it when most of his mind was in the grip of panic reaction. Someone tried to pull him off and he kicked until they let go, but the effort made him lose his balance and he tumbled head first on to O'Mara's swivel chair. He felt himself rolling towards the floor and instinctively shot out his leg to check the fall. The chair swivelled more than 180 degrees so he kicked out again, and again. The chair continued to rotate, erratically at first, but then more smoothly as he got the hang of it.

His body was jack-knifed on its side around the back of the chair, the left thigh and knee resting flat on the seat while the right foot kicked steadily against the floor. It was not too difficult to imagine that the filing cabinets, bookshelves, office door and the figures of O'Mara and Craythorne were all lying on their sides and that he, Conway, was rotating in the vertical plane. His panic began to subside a little.

"If you stop me," said Conway, meaning every word, "I'll kick you in the face. . . ."

Craythorne's expression was ludicrous as his face wobbled into sight. O'Mara's was hidden by the open door of the drug cabinet.

Defensively Conway went on, "This is not simply revulsion to a suddenly introduced alien viewpoint—believe me, Surreishun as a person is more human than most of the taped entities I've had recently. But I can't take this one!

I'm not the psychologist around here, but I don't think any sane person can adapt to a continually recurring death agony.

"On Meatball," he continued grimly, "there is no such thing as pretending to be dead, sleeping or unconsciousness. You are either moving and alive or still and dead. Even the young of Surreshun's race rotate during gestation until——"

"You've made your point, Doctor," said O'Mara, approaching once again. His right hand, palm upwards, held three tablets. "I won't give you a shot because stopping you to do so will cause distress, obviously. Instead I'll give you three of these sleep-bombs. The effects will be sudden and you will be out for at least forty-eight hours. I shall erase the tape while you're unconscious. There will be a few residual memories and impressions when you awaken, but no panic.

"Now open your mouth, Doctor. Your eyes will close by themselves . . ."

### THREE

CONWAY awoke in a tiny cabin whose austere colour scheme told him that he was aboard a Federation cruiser and whose wall plaque narrowed it down to Cultural Contact and Survey vessel *Descartes*. An officer wearing Major's insignia was sitting in the single, fold-down chair, overcrowding the cabin while studying one of the thick Meatball files. He looked up.

"Edwards, ship's medical officer," he said pleasantly. "Nice to have you with us, Doctor. Are you awake?"

Conway yawned furiously and said, "Half."

"In that case," said Edwards, moving into the corridor so that Conway could have room to dress, "the Captain wants to see us."

*Descartes* was a large ship and its control room was spacious enough to contain Surreshun's life-support system

without too much inconvenience to the officers manning it. Captain Williamson had invited the roller to spend most of its time there—a compliment which could be appreciated by any astronaut regardless of species—and for a being who did not know the meaning of sleep it had the advantage of always being manned. Surrehun could talk to them, after a fashion.

The vessel's computer was tiny compared with the monster which handled Translation at Sector General, and even then only a fraction of its capacity could be spared for translation purposes since it still had to serve the ship. As a result the Captain's attempts at communicating complex psycho-political ideas to Surrehun were not meeting with much success.

The officer standing behind the Captain turned and he recognised Harrison, the lieutenant who had been the only casualty of the first Meatball landing. Conway nodded and said, "How's the leg, Lieutenant?"

"Fine, thank you," said Harrison. He added seriously, "It troubles me a little when it rains, but that isn't often in a spaceship . . ."

"If you must make conversation, Harrison," said the Captain with controlled irritation, "please make intelligent conversation." To Conway he said briskly, "Doctor, its governmental system is completely beyond me—if anything it appears to be a form of para-military anarchy. But we must contact its superiors or, failing this, its mate or close relatives. Trouble is, Surrehun doesn't even understand the concept of parental affection and its sex relationships seem to be unusually complex. . . ."

"That they are," said Conway with feeling.

"Obviously you know more than we do on this subject," said the Captain, looking relieved. "I had hoped for this. As well as sharing minds for a few minutes it was also your patient, I'm told?"

Conway nodded. "It was not really a patient, sir, since it wasn't sick, but it co-operated during the many physio-

logical and psychological tests. It is still anxious to return home and almost as anxious for us to make friendly contact with its people. What is the problem, sir?’

Basically the Captain’s problem was that he had a suspicious mind and he was giving the Meatball natives credit for having similar minds. So far as they were concerned Surrehun, the first being of their race to go into space, had been swallowed up by *Descartes’* cargo lock and taken away.

“They expected to lose me,” Surrehun put in at that point, “but they did not expect to have me stolen.”

Their subsequent reaction on *Descartes’* return was predictable—every form of nastiness of which they were capable had been hurled at the ship. The nuclear missiles were easily evaded or knocked out, but Williamson had withdrawn because their warheads had been of a particularly dirty type and surface life would have been seriously affected by fallout if the attack had been allowed to continue. Now he was returning again, this time with Meatball’s first astronaut, and he must prove to the planetary authorities and/or Surrehun’s friends that nothing unpleasant had happened to it.

The easiest way of doing this would be to go into orbit beyond the range of their missiles and let Surrehun itself spend as much time as necessary convincing its people that it had not been tortured or had its mind taken over by some form of monstrous alien life like the Captain. Its vehicle’s communications equipment had been duplicated so there was no technical problem. Nevertheless, Williamson felt that the proper procedure would be for him to communicate with the Meatball authorities and apologise for the mistake before Surrehun spoke.

“The original purpose of this exercise was to make friendly contact with these people,” Williamson concluded, “even before you people at the hospital got so excited about these thought-controlled tools and decided that you wanted more of them.”

"My reason for being here is not altogether commercial," said Conway, in the tone of one whose conscience is not altogether clear. He went on, "So far as the present problem is concerned, I can help you. The difficulty stems from your not understanding their complete lack of parental and filial affection or any other emotional ties other than the brief but very intense bond which exists prior to and during the mating process. You see, they really do hate their fathers and everyone else who . . ."

"Help us, he said," muttered Edwards.

"... Everyone else who is not directly related to them," Conway went on. "As well, some of Sureshun's more unusual memories have remained in my mind. This sometimes occurs after exposure to an unusually alien personality, and these people are unusual. . . ."

The structure of Meatball's society until the fairly recent past had been a complete reversal of what most intelligent species considered normal. Outwardly it was an anarchy in which the most respected people were the rugged individualists, the far travellers, the beings who lived dangerously and continually sought for new experiences. Co-operation and self-imposed discipline was necessary for mutual protection, of course, since the species had many natural enemies, but this was completely foreign to their natures and only the cowards and weaklings who put safety and comfort above all else were able to overcome the shame of close physical co-operation.

In the early days this stratum of society was considered to be the lowest of the low, but it had been one of them who had devised a method of allowing a person to rotate and live without having to travel along the sea bed. This, the ability to live while remaining stationary, was analogous to the discovery of fire or the wheel on Earth and had been the beginning of technological development on Meatball.

As the desire for comfort, safety and co-operation grew the number of rugged individualists dwindled—they tended to be killed off rather frequently in any case. Real power

came to lie in the stubby tentacles of the beings who worried about the future or who were so curious about the world around them that they were willing to do shameful things and give up practically all of their physical freedom to satisfy it. They made a token admission of guilt and lack of authority, but they were, in fact, the real rulers. The individualists who were nominally the rulers had become figureheads with one rather important exception.

The reason for this topsy turvy arrangement was a deep, sex-based revulsion towards all blood relations. Since the rollers of Meatball had evolved in a fairly small and confined area and had been forced to move continually within this area, physical contact for mating purposes—a wholly instinctive affair in pre-sapient times—was much more likely to occur between relatives than complete strangers, they had evolved an effective safeguard against inbreeding.

Surreshun's species reproduced hermaphroditically. Each parent after mating grew their twin offspring, one on each side of their bodies like continuous blisters encircling the side walls of a tyre. Injury, disease or the mental confusion immediately following birth could cause the parent to lose balance, roll on to its side, stop and die. But this type of fatality occurred less frequently now that there were machines to maintain the parent's rotation until it was out of danger. But the points where the children eventually detached themselves from their parents remained very sensitive areas to everyone concerned and their positions were governed by hereditary factors. The result was that any close blood relation trying to make mating contact caused itself and the other being considerable pain. The rollers really did hate their fathers and every other relative. They had no choice.

"... And the very brief period of courtship," Conway added in conclusion, "explains the apparent boastfulness we have observed in Surreshun. During a chance convergence on the sea bottom there is never much time to impress an intended mate with the strength and beauty of one's

personality, so that modesty is definitely a non-survival characteristic."

The Captain gave Surreishun a long, thoughtful look, then turned back to Conway. "I take it, Doctor, that our friend, because of the long training and discipline necessary to its becoming Meatball's first astronaut, belongs to the lowest social stratum even though unofficially it may be quite well thought of?"

Conway shook his head. "You're forgetting, sir, the importance—again this is tied in with the avoidance of inbreeding—which these people place on the far travellers who bring back new blood and knowledge. In this respect Surreishun is unique. As the planet's first astronaut it is top dog no matter which way to view it—it is the most respected being on its world and its influence is, well, considerable."

The Captain did not speak, but his features were stretching themselves into the unusual, for them, configuration of a smile.

"Speaking as one who has been inside looking out," said Conway, "you can be sure that it doesn't hold a grudge over being kidnapped—it feels obligated to us, in fact—and that it will co-operate during contact procedure. Just remember, sir, to stress our *differences* to these people. They are the strangest species we have encountered—which is literally true. Be especially careful not to talk about us all being brothers under the epidermis, or that we belong to the great, galaxy-wide family of intelligent life. 'Family' and 'Brother' are dirty words!"

Shortly afterwards Williamson called a meeting of the cultural contact and communications specialists to discuss Conway's new information. Despite the poor translation facilities available on *Descartes*, by the time the watch-keeping officers in the control room had been relieved for the second time they had completed plans for making contact with the natives of Meatball.

But the senior cultural contact specialist was still not



satisfied—he wanted to study the culture in depth. Normal civilisations, he insisted, were based upon the extension of family ties to tribe, village and country until eventually the world was united. He could not see how a civilisation could rise without such co-operation at family and tribal level, but he thought that a closer study of personal relationships might clarify things. Perhaps Doctor Conway would like to take the Surrehun tape again?

Conway was tired, irritable and hungry. His reply was forestalled by Major Edwards who said, "No! Definitely not! O'Mara has given me strict instructions about this. With respect, Doctor, he forbids it even if you are stupid enough to volunteer. This is one species whose tapes are unusable. Dammit, I'm hungry and I don't want more sandwiches!"

"Me, too," said Conway.

"Why are doctors always *hungry*?" asked the CC officer.

"Gentlemen," said the Captain tiredly.

"Speaking personally," Conway said, "it is because my entire adult life has been devoted to the unselfish service of others and my wide powers of healing and surgical skill instantly available at any time of the day or night. The tenets of my great and altruistic profession demand no less. These sacrifices, the long hours, inadequate sleep and irregular meals I suffer willingly and without complaint. If I should think of food more often than seems normal for lesser beings it is because some medical emergency may arise to make the next meal uncertain and eating now will enable me to bring a greater degree of skill—even laymen like yourselves must appreciate the effect of malnutrition on mind and muscle—to the aid of my patient."

He added drily, "There is no need to stare, gentlemen. I am merely preparing my mind for contact with Surrehun's people by pretending that modesty does not exist."

For the remainder of the voyage Conway divided his time between Communications and Control talking to the Captain, Edwards and Surrehun. But by the time *Descartes*

materialised inside the Meatball solar system he had gained very little useful information on the practice of medicine on the planet and even less about its medical practitioners.

Contact with his opposite numbers on Meatball was essential for the success of the assignment.

But curative surgery and medicine were very recent developments which had become possible only when the species learned how to rotate while remaining in one position. There were vague references to another species, however, who acted as physicians of sorts. From Surrehun's description they seemed to be part physician, part parasite and part predator. Carrying one of them was a very risky business which very often caused imbalance, stoppage and death in the patient's continually rotating body. The doctor, Surrehun insisted, was more to be feared than the disease.

With the limited translation facilities it was unable to explain how the beings communicated with their patients. Surrehun had never met one personally nor was it on rolling-together terms with anyone who had. The nearest it could express it was that they made direct contact with the patient's soul.

"Oh Lord," said Edwards, "what next?"

"Are you praying or just relieving your feelings?" asked Conway.

The Major grinned, then went on seriously, "If our friend uses the word 'soul' it is because your hospital translator carries the word with an equivalent Meatball meaning. You'll just have to signal the hospital to find out what that overgrown electronic brain thinks a soul is."

"O'Mara," said Conway, "will begin wondering about my mental health again. . . ."

By the time the answer arrived Captain Williamson had successfully made his apologies to the Meatball non-authorities and Surrehun had painted such a glowing picture of the utter strangeness of the Earth-humans that their welcome was assured. *Descartes* had been requested to

remain in orbit, however, until a suitable landing area had been marked out and cleared.

"According to this," said Edwards as he passed the signal flimsy to Conway, "the computer's definition of 'soul' is simply 'the life principle'. O'Mara says the programmers did not want to confuse it with religious and philosophical factors by including material on immortal souls. So far as the translation computer is concerned if a thing is alive then it has a soul. Apparently Meatball physicians make direct contact with their patients' life-principle."

"Faith healing, do you think?"

"I don't know, Doctor," said Edwards. "It seems to me that your Chief Psychologist isn't being much help on this one. And if you think I'm going to help by giving you Sureshun's tape again, save your breath."

Conway was surprised at the normal appearance of Meatball as seen from orbit. It was not until the ship was within ten miles of the surface that the slow wrinklins and twitchings of the vast carpets of animal tissue which crawled over the land surface became obvious, and the unnatural stillness of the thick, soupy sea. Only along the shorelines was there activity. Here the sea was stirred into a yellow-green froth by water-dwelling predators large and small tearing furiously at the living coastline while the "land" fought just as viciously back.

*Descartes* came down about two miles off a peaceful stretch of coast in the centre of an area marked with brightly coloured floats, completely hidden in the cloud of steam produced by its tail-flare. As the stern slipped below the surface, thrust was reduced and it came to rest gently on the sandy sea bottom. The great mass of boiled water produced by the flare drifted slowly away on the tide and the people began to roll up.

Literally, thought Conway.

Like great soggy doughnuts they rolled out of the green liquid fog and up to the base of the ship, then around and around it. When outcroppings of rock or a spikey sea

growth got in the way they wobbled ponderously around it, sometimes laying themselves almost flat for an instant if forced to reverse direction, but always maintaining their constant rate of rotation and the maximum possible distance from each other.

Conway waited for a decent interval to allow Surrehun to descend the ramp and be properly welcomed by its non-friends. He was wearing a lightweight suit identical to the type used in the water-breather's section of the hospital, both for comfort and to show as much as possible of his oddly-shaped body to the natives. He stepped off the side of the ramp and fell slowly towards the sea bottom, listening to the translated voices of Surrehun, the VIPs and the louder members of the circling crowd.

When he touched bottom he thought he was being attacked at first. Every being in the vicinity of the ship tried to score the nearest possible miss on him and each one said something as it passed. The suit mike picked up the sound as a burbling grunt but the translator, because it was a simple message within the capabilities of the ship's computer, relayed it as "Welcome stranger".

There could be no doubt about their sincerity—on this cockeyed world the warmth of a welcome was directly proportional to the degree of strangeness. And they did not mind answering questions one little bit. From here on in, Conway was sure his job would be easy.

Almost the first thing he discovered was that they had no real need of his professional services.

It was a society whose members never stopped moving through and around "towns" which were simply facilities for manufacture, learning or research rather than large groupings of living quarters—on Meatball there were no living quarters. After a period of work on a mechanically rotated frame the doughnut slipped out of its retaining harness and rolled away to seek food, exercise, excitement or strange company somewhere across the sea bed.

There was no sleep, no physical contact other than for reproduction, no tall buildings, no burial places.

When one of the rollers stopped due to age, accident or a run-in with one of the predators or a poison-spined plant it was ignored. The generation of internal gases which took place shortly after death caused the body to float to the surface where the birds and fish disposed of it.

Conway spoke to several beings who were too old to roll and who were being kept alive by artificial feeding while they were rotated in their individual ferris wheels. He was never quite sure whether they were kept alive because of their value to the community or simply the subjects of experimentation. He knew that he was seeing geriatrics being practised, but other than a similar form of assistance with difficult births this was the only form of medicine he encountered.

#### FOUR

MEANWHILE the survey teams were mapping the planet and bringing in specimens by the boat load. Most of this material was sent to Sector General for processing and very soon detailed analysis suggestions for treatment began coming from Thornnastor. According to the Diagnostician-Pathologist Meatball had a medical problem of the utmost urgency. Conway and Edwards, who had had a preliminary look at the data and a number of low-level flights over the planetary surface, could not have agreed more.

"We can begin a preliminary diagnosis of the planet's troubles," said Conway angrily, "which are caused by the rollers being too damned free with the use of nuclear weapons! But we still badly need a local appreciation of the medical situation and that we are not getting. The big question is——"

"Is there a doctor in the house?" said Edwards, grinning. "And if so, where?"

"Exactly," said Conway. He did not laugh.

Outside the direct vision port the slow, turgid waves reflected the moonlight through a curtain of surface mist. The moon, which was approaching Roche's Limit and disintegration, would pose the inhabitants of Meatball yet another major problem—but not for another million years or so. At the moment it was a great jagged crescent illuminating the sea, the two hundred feet of *Descartes* which projected above the surface and the strangely peaceful shoreline.

Peaceful because it was dead and the predators refused to eat carrion.

"If I built a rotating framework for myself would O'Mara . . . ?" began Conway.

Edwards shook his head. "Surrehun's tape is more dangerous than you think—you were very lucky not to have lost all of your marbles, permanently. Besides, O'Mara has already thought of that idea and discarded it. Rotating yourself while under the influence of the tape, either in a swivel chair or in a gadget built by our machine shop, will fool your mind for only a few minutes, he says. But I'll ask him again if you like?"

"I'll take your word for it," said Conway. Thoughtfully, he went on, "The question I keep asking myself is where on this planet is a doctor most likely to be found. Suppose the answer is where the greatest number of casualties occur, that is, along the coastlines——"

"Not necessarily," Edwards objected. "One doesn't normally find a doctor in a slaughter-house. And don't forget that there is another intelligent race on this planet, the makers of those thought-controlled tools. Isn't it possible that your doctors belong to this race and your answer lies outside the roller culture entirely?"

"True," said Conway. "But here we have the willing co-operation of the natives and we should make all possible use of it. I shall ask permission, I think, to follow one of our far-travelling doughnuts next time it sets off on a trip. It may be like having a third party along on a honeymoon

and I may be told politely where to go with my request, but it is obvious that there are no doctors in the towns or settled areas and it is only the travellers who have a chance of meeting one. Meanwhile," he ended, "let's try to find that other intelligent species."

Two days later Conway made contact with a non-relative of Surrehun's who worked in the nearby power station, a nuclear reactor in which he felt almost at home because it had four solid walls and a roof. The roller was planning a trip along an unsettled stretch of coast at the end of its current work period which, Conway estimated, would last two or three days. The being's name was Camsaug and it did not mind Conway coming along provided he did not stay too close if certain circumstances arose. It described the circumstances in detail and without apparent shame.

Camsaug had heard about the "protectors", but only at second or third hand. They did not cut people and sew them up again as Conway's doctors did—it did not know what they did exactly, only that they often killed the people they were supposed to protect. They were stupid, slow-moving beings who for some odd reason stayed close to the most active and dangerous stretches of shore.

"Not a slaughter-house, Major, a battlefield," said Conway smugly. "You expect to find doctors on a battlefield . . ."

But they could not wait for Camsaug to start its vacation—Thornnastor's reports, the samples brought in by the scoutships and their own unaided eyes left no doubt about the urgency of the situation.

Meatball was a very sick planet. Surrehun's people had been much too free in the use of their newly discovered atomic energy. Their reason for this was that they were an expanding culture which could not afford to be hampered by the constant threat of the massive land beasts. By detonating a series of nuclear devices a few miles inland, taking good care that the wind would not blow the fallout

on to their own living area, of course, they had killed large areas of the land-beast. They were now able to establish bases on the dead land to further their scientific investigation in many fields.

They did not care that they spread blight and cancer over vast areas far inland—the great carpets were their natural enemy. Hundreds of their people were stopped and eaten by the land-beasts every year and now they were simply getting their own back.

“Are these carpets alive and intelligent?” asked Conway angrily as their scoutship made a low-level run over an area which seemed to be afflicted with advanced gangrene. “Or are there small, intelligent organisms living in or under it? No matter which, Sureshun’s people will have to stop chucking their filthy bombs about!”

“I agree,” said Edwards. “But we’ll have to tell them tactfully. We *are* their guests, you know.”

“You shouldn’t have to tell a man *tactfully* to stop killing himself!”

“You must have had unusually intelligent patients, Doctor,” said Edwards drily. He went on, “If the carpets are intelligent and not just stomachs with the attachments for keeping them filled they should have eyes, ears and some kind of nervous system capable of reacting to outside stimuli——”

“When *Descartes* landed first there was quite a reaction,” said Harrison from the pilot’s position. “The beastie tried to swallow us! We’ll be passing close to the original landing site in a few minutes. Do you want to look at it?”

“Yes, please,” said Conway. Thoughtfully, he added, “Opening a mouth could be an instinctive reaction from a hungry and unintelligent beast. But intelligence of some kind was present because those thought-controlled tools came aboard.”

They cleared the diseased area and began to chase their shadow across large patches of vivid green vegetation. Unlike the types which recycled air and wastes these were



tiny plants which served no apparent purpose. The specimens which Conway had examined in *Descartes'* lab had had very long, thin roots and four wide leaves which rolled up tight to display their yellow undersides when they were shaded from the light. Their scoutship trailed a line of rolled-up leaves in the wake of its shadow as if the surface was a bright green oscilloscope screen and the ship's shadow a high persistency spot.

Somewhere in the back of Conway's mind an idea began to take shape, but it dissolved again as they reached the original landing site and began to circle.

It was just a shallow crater with a lumpy bottom, Conway thought, and not at all like a mouth. Harrison asked if they wanted to land, in a tone which left no doubt that he expected the answer to be "No".

"Yes," said Conway.

They landed in the centre of the crater. The doctors put on heavy duty suits as protection against the plants which, both on land and under the sea, defended themselves by lashing out with poison-thorn branches or shooting lethal quills at anything that came too close. The ground gave no indication of opening up and swallowing them so they went outside leaving Harrison ready to take off in a hurry should it decide to change its mind.

Nothing happened while they explored the crater and immediate surroundings so they set up the portable drilling rig to take back some local samples of skin and underlying tissue. All scoutships carried these rigs and specimens had been taken from hundreds of areas all over the planet. But here the specimen was far from typical—they had to drill through nearly fifty feet of dry, fibrous skin before they came to the pink, spongy, underlying tissue. They transferred the rig to a position outside the crater and tried again. Here the skin was only twenty feet thick, the planetary average.

"This bothers me," said Conway suddenly. "There was

no oral cavity, no evidence of operating musculature, no sign of any kind of opening. It *can't* be a mouth!"

"It wasn't an eye it opened," said Harrison on the suit frequency. "I was there . . . here, I mean."

"It looks just like scar tissue," said Conway. "But it's too deep to have been formed only as a result of burning by *Descartes'* tail flare. And why did it just happen to have a mouth here anyway, just where the ship decided to land? The chances against that happening are millions to one. And why haven't other mouths been discovered inland? We've surveyed every square mile of the land mass, but the only surface mouth to appear was a few minutes after *Descartes* landed. Why?"

"It saw us coming and . . ." began Harrison.

"What with?" said Edwards.

"... Or *felt* us land, then, and decided to form a mouth . . ."

"A mouth," said Conway, "with muscles to open and close it, with teeth, pre-digestive juices and an alimentary canal joining it to a stomach which, unless it decided to form that as well, could be many miles away—all within a few minutes of the ship landing? From what we know of carpet metabolism I can't see all that happening so quickly, can you?"

Edwards and Harrison were silent.

"From our study of the carpet inhabiting that small island to the north," said Conway, "we have a fair idea of how they function."

Since the day after their arrival the island had been kept under constant observation. Its inhabitant had an incredibly slow, almost vegetable, metabolism. The carpet's upper surface appeared not to move, but it did in fact alter its contours so as to provide a supply of rain water wherever needed for the plant-life which recycled its air and wastes or served as an additional food supply. The only real activity occurred around the fringes of the carpet where the great being had its mouths. But here again it was not the

carpet itself which moved quickly but the hordes of predators who tried to eat it while it slowly and ponderously ate them by sucking them in with the thick, food-rich sea water. The other big carpets unlucky enough not to have a fringe adjoining the sea ate vegetation and each other.

The carpets did not possess hands or tentacles or manipulatory appendages of any kind—just mouths and eyes capable of tracking an arriving spaceship.

"Eyes?" said Edwards. "Why didn't they see our scoutship?"

"There have been dozens of scoutships and copters flitting about recently," said Conway, "and the beast may be confused. But what I'd like you to do now, Lieutenant, is take your ship up to, say, one thousand feet and do a series of figure-of-eight turns. Do them as tightly and quickly as possible, cover the same area of ground each time and make the cross-over point directly above our heads. Got it?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"This will let the beastie know that we aren't just any scoutship but a very special one," Conway explained, then added, "be ready to pick us up in a hurry if something goes wrong."

A few minutes later Harrison took off leaving the two doctors standing beside their drilling rig. Edwards said, "I see what you mean, Doctor. You want to attract attention to us. 'X' marks the spot and an 'X' with closed ends is a figure-of-eight. Persistency of vision will do the rest."

The scoutship was criss-crossing above them in the tightest turns Conway had ever seen. Even with the ship's gravity compensators working at full capacity Harrison must have been taking at least four Gs. On the ground the ship's shadow whipped past and around them, trailing a long, bright yellow line of rolled up leaves. The ground shook to the thunder of the tiny vessel's jets and then, very slightly, it began shaking by itself.

*"Harrison!"*

The scoutship broke off the manoeuvre and roared in

to a landing behind them. By then the ground was already beginning to sag.

Suddenly they appeared.

Two large, flat metal discs embedded vertically in the ground, one about twenty feet in front of them and the other the same distance behind. As they watched each disc contracted suddenly into a shapeless blob of metal which crawled a few feet to the side and then suddenly became a large, razor-edged disc again, cutting a deep incision in the ground. The discs had each cut more than a quarter circle around them and the ground was sagging rapidly inside the incisions before Conway realised what was happening.

"Think cubes at them!" he yelled. "Think something *blunt*! Harrison!"

"Lock's open. Come running."

But they could not run without taking their eyes and minds off the discs, and if they did that they could not run fast enough to clear the circular incision which was being made around them. Instead they sidled towards the scoutship, willing every inch of the way that the discs become cubes or spheres or horseshoes—anything but the great, circular scalpels which something had made them become.

## FIVE

AT Sector General Conway had watched his colleague Mannen perform incredible feats of surgery, using one of these thought-controlled tools, an all-purpose surgical instrument which became anything he wanted it to be, instantly. Now two of the things were crawling and twisting like metallic nightmares as they tried to shape them one way and something else—which was their owner and as such had more expertise—tried to shape them another. It was a very one-sided struggle but they did, just barely, manage to hamper their opponent's thinking enough to allow them to get clear before the circular plug of "skin" containing the drilling rig and other odds and ends of equipment dropped from sight.

"They're welcome to do," said Major Edwards as the lock slammed shut and Harrison lifted off. "After all, we've been taking specimens for weeks and it may give them something to think about before we broaden contact with shadow diagrams." He grew suddenly excited as he went on, "With high-acceleration radio controlled missiles we can build up quite complex figures!"

Conway said, "I was thinking more in terms of a tight beam of light projected on to the surface at night. The leaves should react by opening and the beam could be moved very quickly in a rectangular sweep pattern like old-fashioned TV. It might even be possible to project moving pictures."

"That's *it*," said Edwards enthusiastically. "But how a dirty great beast the size of a county, who doesn't have arms, legs or anything else will be able to answer our signals is another matter. Probably it will think of something."

Conway shook his head. "It is possible that despite their slow movements the carpets are capable of quick thinking, that they are in fact the tool users we are looking for and that their enormous bodies undergo voluntary surgery whenever they want to draw in and examine a specimen which is not within reach of a mouth. But I prefer the theory of a smaller, intelligent life-form inside or under the big one, an intelligent parasite perhaps which helps maintain the host in good health by the use of the tools and other abilities, and which makes use of the host being's 'eyes' as well as everything else. You can take your pick."

There was silence while the scoutship levelled off on a course which would take it back to the mother ship, then Harrison said, "We haven't made *direct* contact, then—we've just put squiggles on a vegetable radar screen? But it is still a big step forward."

"As I see it," said Conway, "if tools were being used to bring us to them, they must be a fair distance from the surface—perhaps they can't exist on the surface. And don't

forget they would use the carpet exactly as we use vegetable and mineral resources. How would they analyse life samples? Would they be able to see them at all down there? They use plants for eyes but I can't imagine a vegetable microscope. Perhaps they would use the big beastie's digestive juices in certain stages of the analysis. . . ."

Harrison was beginning to look a little green around the gills. He said, "Let's send down a robot sensor first, to see what they do, eh?"

Conway began, "This is all theory . . ."

He broke off as the ship's radio hummed, cleared its throat and said briskly, "Scoutship Nine. Mother here. I have an urgent signal for Doctor Conway. The being Cam-saug has gone on vacation wearing the tracer the Doctor gave it. It is heading for the active stretch of shore in area H-Twelve. Harrison, have you anything to report?"

"Yes, indeed," replied the Lieutenant, glancing at Conway. "But first I think the Doctor wants to speak to you."

Conway spoke briefly and a few minutes later the scoutship leapt ahead under emergency thrust, ripping through the sky too fast for even the leaves to react to its shadow and trailing an unending shock-wave which would have deafened anything on the surface with ears to hear. But the great carpet slipping past them might well number deafness among its many other infirmities which now, Conway thought angrily, included a number of well-developed and extensive skin cancers and God alone knew what else.

He wondered if a great, slow-moving creature like this could feel pain, and if so, how much? Was the condition he could see confined to hundreds of acres of "skin" or did it go much deeper? What would happen to the beings living in or under it if too many of the carpets died, decomposed? Even the rollers with their off-shore culture would be affected—the ecology of the whole planet would be wrecked! Somebody was going to have to talk to the rollers, politely but very, very firmly if it wasn't already too late.

All at once the horse-trading aspect of his assignment, the swapping of tools for medical assistance, was no longer important. Conway was beginning to think like a doctor again, a doctor with a desperately ill patient.

At *Descartes* the copter he had requested was waiting. Conway changed into a lightweight suit with a propulsion motor strapped on to his back and extra air tanks on his chest. Camsaug had too great a lead for him to follow on foot, so Conway would fly out to the being's present position by helicopter. Harrison was at the controls.

"You again," said Edwards.

The Lieutenant smiled. "This is where the action is. Hold tight."

After the mad dash to the mother ship the helicopter trip seemed incredibly slow. Conway felt that he would fall flat on his face if it did not speed up and Edwards assured him that the feeling was mutual and that they would have made better time swimming. They watched Camsaug's trace grow larger in the search screen while Harrison cursed the birds and flying lizards diving for fish and suiciding on his rotor blades.

They flew low over the settled stretch of coast where the shallows were protected from the large predators of the sea by a string of off-shore islands and reefs. To this natural protection the rollers had added a landward barrier of dead land-beast by detonating a series of low power nuclear devices inside the vast creature's body. The area was now so settled that doughnuts could roll with very little danger far inside the beast's cavernous mouths and pre-stomachs and out again.

But Camsaug was ignoring the safe area. It was rolling steadily towards the gap in the reef leading to the active stretch of coast where predators large, medium and small ate and eroded the living shore.

"Put me down on the other side of the gap," said Conway. "I'll wait until Camsaug comes through, then follow it."

Harrison brought the copter down to a gentle landing on the spot indicated and Conway lowered himself on to a float. With his visor open and his head and shoulders projecting through the floor hatch he could see both the search screen and the half mile distant shore. Something which looked like a flatfish grown to the dimensions of a whale hurled itself out of the water and flopped back again with a sound like an explosion. The wave reached them a few seconds later and tossed the copter about like a cork.

"Frankly, Doctor," said Edwards, "I don't understand why you're doing this. Is it scientific curiosity regarding roller mating habits? A yen to look into the gaping gullet of a land-beast? We have remote-controlled instruments which will let you do both without danger once we get a chance to set them up. . . ."

Conway said, "I'm not a peeping Tom, scientific or otherwise, and your gadgetry might not tell me what I want to know. You see, I don't know what exactly I'm looking for, but I'm pretty sure that this is where I can contact them——"

"The tool users? But we can contact them visually, through the plants."

"That may be more difficult than we expect," Conway said. "I hate to attack my own lovely theory, but let's say that because of their vegetable vision they have difficulty in grasping concepts like astronomy and space-travel or, as beings who live in or under their enormous host, of visualising it from an outside viewpoint. . . ."

This was just another theory, Conway went on to explain, but the way he saw it the tool users had gained a large measure of control over their environment. On a normal world environmental control included such items as reforestation, protection against soil erosion, efficient utilisation of natural resources and so on. Perhaps on this world these things were not the concern of geologists and farmers but of people who, because their environment was a living organism, were specialists in keeping it healthy.



He was fairly sure that these beings would be found in peripheral areas where the giant organism was under constant attack and in need of their assistance. He was also sure that they would do the work themselves rather than use their tools because these thought-controlled devices had the disadvantage of obeying and shaping themselves to the nearest thought source—this had been proved many times at the Hospital as well as earlier today. Probably the tools were valuable, too much so to risk them being swallowed and/or rendered useless by the savage and disorganised thinking of predators.

Conway did not know what these people called themselves—the rollers called them Protectors or Healers or an almost certain method of committing suicide because they killed more often than they cured. But then the most famous Tralthan surgeon in the Federation would probably kill an Earth-human patient if it had no medical knowledge of the species and no physiology tape available. The tool users worked under a similar handicap when they tried to treat rollers.

“But the important thing is they do try,” Conway went on. “All their efforts go towards keeping one big patient alive instead of many. They are the medical profession on Meatball and they are the people we must contact first!”

There was silence then except for the gargantuan splashing and smacking sounds coming from the shoreline. Suddenly Harrison spoke :

“Camsaug is directly below, Doctor.”

Conway nodded, closed his visor and fell awkwardly into the water. The weight of his suit’s propulsor and extra air tanks made him sink quickly and in a few minutes he spotted Camsaug rolling along the sea bottom. Conway followed, matching the roller’s speed and keeping just barely in sight. He had no intention of invading anyone’s privacy, he was a doctor rather than an anthropologist and he was interested in seeing what Camsaug did only if it ran into trouble of a medical nature.

The copter had taken to the air again, keeping pace with him and maintaining constant radio contact.

Camsaug was angling gradually towards the shore, wobbling past clumps of sea vines and porcupine carpets which grew more thickly as the bottom shelved, sometimes circling for several minutes while one of the big predators drifted across its path. The vines and prickly carpets had poisonous thorns and quills and they lashed out or shot spines at anything which came too close. Conway's problem now was how to drift past them at a safe altitude but remain low enough so as not to be scooped up by a giant flatfish.

The water was becoming so crowded with life and animal and vegetable activity that he could no longer see the surface disturbance caused by the helicopter. Like a dark red precipice the edge of the land-beast loomed closer, almost obscured by its mass of underwater attackers, parasites and, possibly, defenders—the situation was too chaotic for Conway to tell which was which. He began to encounter new forms of life—a glistening, black and seemingly endless mass which undulated across his path and tried to wrap itself around his legs and a great, iridescent jellyfish so transparent that only its internal organs were visible.

One of the creatures had spread itself over about twenty square yards of seabed while another drifted just above it. They did not carry spines or stings so far as he could see, but everything else seemed to avoid them and so did Conway.

Suddenly Camsaug was in trouble.

Conway had not seen it happen, only that the roller had been wobbling more than usual and when he jetted closer he saw a group of poisoned quills sticking out of its side. By the time he reached it Camsaug was rolling in a tight circle, almost flat against the ground, like a coin in slow motion that has almost stopped spinning. Conway knew what to do, having dealt with a similar emergency when Surrehun

was being transferred into the Hospital. He quickly lifted the roller upright and began pushing it along the bottom like an oversize, flabby hoop.

Camsaug was making noises which did not translate, but he felt its body grow less flabby as he rolled it—it was beginning to help itself. Suddenly it wobbled away from him, rolling between two clumps of sea vines. Conway rose to a safe height meaning to head it off, but a flatfish with jaws gaping rushed at him and he dived instinctively to avoid it.

The giant tail flicked past, missing him but tearing the propulsion unit from his back. Simultaneously a vine lashed out at his legs, tearing the suit fabric in a dozen places. He felt cold water forcing its way up his legs and under the skin something which felt like liquid fire pushing along his veins. He had a glimpse of Camsaug rolling like a stupid fool on to the edge of a jellyfish and another of the creatures was drifting down on him like an iridescent cloud. Like Camsaug, the noises he was making were not translatable.

“Doctor!” The voice was so harsh with urgency that he could not recognise it. “What’s *happening*?”

Conway did not know and could not speak anyway. As a precaution against damage in space or in a noxious atmosphere his suit lining was built in annular sections which sealed off the ruptured area by expanding tightly against the skin. The idea had been to contain the pressure drop or gas contamination in the area of damage, but in this instance the expanded rings were acting as a tourniquet which slowed the progress of the poison into his system. Despite this Conway could not move his arms, legs or even his jaw. His mouth was locked open and he was able—just barely able—to breathe.

The jellyfish was directly above him. Its edges curled down over his body and tightened, wrapping him in a nearly invisible cocoon.

“Doctor! I’m coming down!” It sounded like Edwards.

He felt something stab several times at his legs and discovered that the jellyfish had spines or stings after all and was using them where the fabric of his suit had been torn away by the vines. Compared with the burning sensation in his legs the pain was relatively slight, but it worried him because the jabs seemed very close to the popliteal arteries and veins. With a tremendous effort he moved his head to see what was happening, but by then he already knew. His transparent cocoon was turning bright red.

"Doctor! Where are you? I can see Camsaug rolling along. Looks like it's wrapped up in a pink plastic bag. There's a big, red ball of something just above it——"

"That's me . . ." began Conway weakly.

The scarlet curtain around him brightened momentarily. Something big and dark flashed past and Conway felt himself spinning end over end. The redness around him was becoming less opaque.

"Flatfish," said Edwards. "I chased it with my laser. Doctor?"

Conway could see the Major now. Edwards wore a heavy duty suit which protected him from vines and quills but made accurate shooting difficult—his weapon seemed to be pointing directly at Conway. Instinctively he put up his hands and found that his arms moved easily. He was able to turn his head, bend his back and his legs were less painful. When he looked at them the area of his knees was bright red but the body around it seemed more rather than less transparent.

Which was ridiculous!

He looked at Edwards again and then at the awkward, dangerously slow rolling of the wrapped-up Camsaug. A great light dawned.

"Don't shoot, Major," said Conway weakly but distinctly. "Ask the Lieutenant to drop the rescue net. Winch both of us up to the copter and to *Descartes*, fast. Unless our friend here can't survive in air, of course. In that case haul us both to *Descartes* submerged—my air will last. But

be very careful," he added. "We don't want to risk hurting the Doctor."

They both wanted to know what the blazes he was talking about, but he said that he would explain later. Conway felt very weak and he had, after all, lost a considerable amount of blood even if it had been returned to him.

The Doctor lay on the floor of the lock antechamber like an enormous, translucent slug. It was still tinged pink with a pint or so of Conway's blood but he did not mind that. If a small blood transfusion was the only fee it demanded for its valuable professional services it was welcome to it. The being seemed just as happy in air as it had been under the sea.

In the early days of medicine on Earth doctors had often been referred to as leeches, but this doctor really *was* a leech. It had withdrawn the blood from his body, neutralised the lethal dose of poison it contained and then returned it to him—most of it, anyway. It had also done a very fast and almost traceless job of repairing the lacerations which the vines had caused on his legs. Conway bent suddenly and stroked the smooth, transparent skin.

It wriggled under his touch, but whether it was with pleasure, revulsion or through sheer reflex Conway could not be sure. He straightened up and spoke.

"We have found our local opposite numbers," he said, "and with them helping and advising us the solution of the medical problem here is simply a matter of time. But you will have to be quite tough with Surrehun's people, sir. I don't want to tell your cultural contact officer his job, but the problem is medical and very urgent. As things stand the rollers don't even know what happens to their bodies after death and this is something they should be shown in a hurry.

"I suggest retaining one of the roller cadavers and sealing it in an air bottle instead of allowing it to drift away," he

went on grimly. "Then force them to view it while the processes of decomposition are well advanced. If it was explained to them that their whole planet would end up looking like that if they didn't stop——"

"We'll be firm but a little more diplomatic than that, Doctor," Captain Williamson broke in drily. He added, "Right now I'd like to widen contact with your . . . colleague. Can you help there?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," said Conway, smiling. "It has eyes, eight of them, situated underneath the transparent tegument for protection, so you can try visual communication techniques. It *may* be able to hear and it is certainly very sensitive to touch. Eating habits, well, an ounce or so of blood each day should keep it happy until you reach the stage where it can communicate its own requirements. When this happens I would like to be told at once."

He hesitated, then ended awkwardly, "You see, not only is it my opposite number, I owe it my life as well. There is a close, personal bond between us as if we had become . . . become . . ."

"Blood brothers?" said Edwards.

# IF YOU'RE SO SMART

by

PAUL COREY

*Empathy between human beings and animals is often strong but indefinable. Perhaps it borders on the telepathic. We may well need a different kind of link to find out, as Paul Corey brilliantly defines herewith.*





## IF YOU'RE SO SMART

It is all there in jiggles on paper printed with little squares. Doctor Marley says those jiggles show the changes in the electricity made by my brain. That is all that he and Mr. Rothy and David Homer ever see in the jiggles. But the whole story's there. If they were as smart as they think they are, they could read it.

Only David's brain ever touches the edge of anything it does not know. It feels the surface a little and is kindly. When Doctor Marley and Mr. Rothy and Erika realised what his brain did they killed him. Yes, they killed him. Oh, not like they did old Ozzie to make him dead-dead. They killed him so that he was dead like they-dead.

The technicians hooked me to the machine they call an e.e.g. and it began to tick. Doctor Marley asked, "Ibby, why did you try to strike me with the hammer? Did you think I was your father?" I felt a great hardness around me.

They have hooked me to the machine many times. They have asked me: "Did you love your mother? Did you hate your father? Did you love or hate your brothers and sisters? Did you wet the bed when you were a little boy?"

Whatever I answer—maybe "yes", maybe "no"—does not matter. They already have a hard answer in their brains and they look at mine through it, and the shadow of it hides mine.

But this time one word would not say it. I did not want the saying hidden by the dark shadow in Doctor Marley's brain. The answer was soft and full and all around, but I could not easily make words of it because I am a moron and have seizures and walk with a shuffle. It is not a noisy shuffle.

That is why I am in this hospital. They call it a hospital. It used to be called The Home and of course a Home is what it still is.

In those jiggles on the paper is the saying of it. If they were made into words the saying would go like this :

Saturday morning I took the weekly reports from the "farm" to Doctor Marley's house. The farm is where they do their experimenting with animals to find out how the human brain works, they say, so that they can help morons like me who shuffle and have seizures. They also call it "the lab". Doctor Marley doesn't come down to the farm on Saturday mornings. They let me take the reports over to him. It makes me feel round and full and kindly.

Erika let me in. She is very in-living and looks like sun coming up and a cloud. She told me to go up to her father's study. The edge of her brain felt kindly.

The Doctor sat at his desk with his back to all-windows. When he swivels his chair he can look out over a deck and around a great valley. I like this place because here I can out-live without effort. The wrinkles of the valley are woods and vineyards and meadows. They roll on me greenly and I flow into softness like touching a great soft body. It is me and I am it. All of me is round and green and buoyant and kindly.

If I were to say this to Doctor Marley he would nod. "Yes, Ibby, your mother." I would feel a great stone.

Many things do this to me or something like it. And if someone is around they tell me, "Stop daydreaming, Ibby, it isn't good for you."

This morning Doctor Marley took the reports. "Thank you, Ibby." He was in-living like his daughter, but it too was kindly.

Then he leaned back and began talking. Often times he does this with me. I know he is not talking to me. He is just thinking out loud. He doesn't want anyone to hear him talking to himself, and he thinks better when he puts things into words. So I stand there out-living in the rollingness of

the valley. Around him is the feel of no interruptions. That is why he thinks aloud to me because I am a moron with seizures and a shuffle and do not interrupt.

His thought words were, "Strange thing, Ibby. The Charles Adams cat lay on the deck asleep in the sun. Then he got up and looked towards the end of the deck. I followed the direction of his eyes but didn't see anything."

Mostly I never listen to out-loud thoughts. I hear words but don't know their meaning. I let the words surround me while I sport in the rollingness of the valley. But this morning my out-living brain enfolded all he said because they were words I knew.

You see, Charles Adams is a black cat with a white shirt and white socks. He washes only the white on him and it is the whitest white there is.

The Doctor's thought words flowed around me. "Maybe he had seen a fly or a grasshopper. But no. He got up and started to creep towards the end of the deck. His ears were flat and his tail straight and his legs short. I looked into the trees beyond the deck. Maybe a bird? No bird."

I have not made clear about the deck. It is one storey above the ground. One end is above where cars are parked. The drive comes up a steep, steep hill and curves into a turn-around.

Doctor Morley went on thinking. "I got up and went to the window that overlooked the parking area. I looked into it. Nothing. Charles Adams crouched at the edge of the deck and his ears stayed flat. I looked down the drive.

"I moved along the window to where I could see past the curve in the drive. Charles Adams couldn't. And there, a hundred yards away, came Tiki our Siamese. When Tiki got to a spot where Charles Adams could see him, Charles Adams got up and went down the outside stairway to meet him. I went back to my desk.

"A little thing, Ibby, but I asked myself, how did Charles Adams know that Tiki was coming up the drive? From where he lay sleeping he could not even see the driveway."

I said, "But he felt a cat coming."

Then I shuffled my feet. I had interrupted. But these thought words I knew. What I did not know was why he did not understand the reason Charles Adams did what he did. I smelled no thought of understanding around me.

Doctor Marley laughed. "Thank you, Ibby. I knew I could depend on you for the right answer."

He was laughing at me. But I didn't mind. All the doctors and technicians laugh at me when I speak, but they are kindly.

I saw the flyswat on a pile of magazines and I picked it up and gave it to him. He killed a fly. Then he looked at me and did not understand why I knew he wanted the flyswat.

If he is so smart, why didn't he feel it all simply? He had been laughing at me. A fly sat on the corner of the reports. He saw it and I saw it and he thought, where is that flyswat? And I gave it to him.

He took up the reports and read. His face became a grey hill crossed with cloud wrinkles. He began thinking aloud again.

"It's impossible. Old Ozzie couldn't have finished that new test without an error this morning. He's getting too damned smart. We'll have to work a switch in the routine and make it tougher."

Why did he say old Ozzie couldn't? The report said old Ozzie did. Maybe you have already felt Ozzie. He's a big tomcat, a very big tomcat that looks like fog prowling the valley. He is one of five cats they use at the farm. They don't use other animals. I have heard Doctor Marley think that a cat's brain is more like the human brain than any other animal's brain.

This morning I was at the farm when Mr. Rothy tested Ozzie. He explained it all to me. He always explains things to me the way Doctor Marley thinks out loud to me.

"Ibby, when I put Ozzie in this box he will have these little plastic rings hanging around him. If he pulls the white

one, he will get a blast of air. If he pulls the green one, that block will fall down. If he pulls the yellow one, he will get an ultrasonic sound. And if he pulls the red one, he'll get his breakfast.

"He can't tell colours. They are to make my reporting easier. When he learns to pull the right ring I'll change them around and see what he does then. Those things fastened to his head are electrodes and the wires go to an e.e.g. here and will make jiggly lines when his brain makes electricity."

Mr. Rothy put Ozzie among the dangling rings and hooked the wires. I felt the electrodes on Ozzie's head like whiskers in the wrong place and they troubled him. But Mr. Rothy says he does not even feel them. How does Mr. Rothy know?

Big green eyes looked at me from an oval of fog and there was out-living between us. But I am a moron and have seizures and walk with a shuffle and should not feel anyone, not even a cat. Yet there was hunger in the air. Ozzie stood high and I knew the red ring meant breakfast. He could feel the colour between us. Mr. Rothy doesn't know there is such feeling. And Ozzie hooked a claw in the ring and a door opened and his plate of hamburger came out.

"I'll be goddamned," Mr. Rothy said. "He's lucky and I'm unlucky. We'll have to change this before we even start."

Ozzie ate his breakfast and sat among the dangling rings and washed. When his paw brushed an electrode or made a wire pull, he stopped his washing. Once the green eyes looked at me and the out-living ended between us.

Then I interrupted Doctor Marley's thought words again. "They're coming," I said.

"What? Who's coming, Ibby?" I smelled startledness. He looked around and out the window.

The black and white cat and the Siamese cat came from somewhere out of sight. Buttercups and forget-me-nots looked at me and I looked at them and there was warm

sun between us. And the two cats stretched out on the deck.

"Did you mean the cats, Ibby?" Doctor Marley laughed. It was in-living but kindly. "I suppose they told you they were coming." There was no smell of anger at me for interrupting.

They had not told me they were coming. I had felt them coming. That was all. It is not new to me. I did not answer him.

He picked up his thought words. "We'll stump old Ozzie. We'll leave the red ring where it is and add an orange one. The orange ring will give the food."

He made little words on the margin of the report and asked me to take it back to Mr. Rothy.

I walked down the hill and across the street and across the bridge to the farm and gave the report back to Mr. Rothy.

He thanked me. He read Doctor Marley's little words and said, "Now we'll see how long it takes old Ozzie to learn which one hits the jackpot."

I looked at the five cages and the five cats and they looked at me. Green eyes prodded a remembering of Doctor Marley saying that an orange ring would give the food. Ozzie washed his face. Then the other four cats washed their faces.

That day a new technician reported at the farm. Mr. Rothy said, "Ibby, this is Mr. Homer. He is going to help us this summer. He is studying psychology at the University." Then he said to the new technician, "Dave, this is Ibby. He does all the brain work around here." He laughed. I felt his teasing, but it was kindly.

A hand smooth as madrone bark shook mine. "I'm glad to know you, Ibby," Mr. Homer said. And I said I was glad to know him, and I felt him kindly. I knew that the study of psychology was about the brain. I would like not to be a moron and have seizures and walk with a shuffle so that I

could go to a university and study about the brain. But he did not feel that.

Around the farm I did the usual things. When evening came they made the test again. I wasn't there because I had a seizure. Next morning I heard Doctor Marley and Mr. Rothy and Mr. Homer talking. I felt running in darkness because old Ozzie had hooked the orange ring first off. And the running smelled of anger in the darkness, for the other cats had pulled the orange ring after only a little hesitation.

"We must be tipping them off," Doctor Marley said. "Are you sure you didn't leave some smell of food on the orange ring?"

"I didn't put in the food until after the experiment was set up," Mr. Rothy said. "Then I touched none of the rings."

Doctor Marley looked at the cages. "Cats aren't that smart or lucky. Maybe it was the warmth of the colour that did it. Next time use the green ring for the food pull."

David Homer listened and said nothing. He was new here. I do not interrupt on the farm either. But green eyes looked at me out of a fog-oval and I looked at them. I felt a softness of fur touched and went away.

Later I heard that all the cats pulled the green ring when next they were tested and the test was abandoned, at least for a time. Another test was taken up. Blinders were placed over the cats' eyes and glasses were used with different types of lenses. The reactions were recorded in jiggles the same kind as Doctor Marley gets when he asks me why I tried to hit him with the hammer.

One day I came in when Mr. Rothy and David were making a test. I heard Mr. Rothy say, "Goddamn, look how that jumped. What the hell triggered that increase in the impulse?"

David looked at me. I felt a thin blade prying. Then he asked me to go over to the dairy and get a pint of milk.

Mr. Rothy said, "We've plenty of milk right here."

David said, "Let him go anyway. Huh?" I smelled a roundness like wanting.

When I got back Mr. Rothy said, "It could be. It must be his shuffle. They hear it. Ozzie hears it."

David said, "But why should that make a difference?"

"His shuffle disturbs them."

"But they should be used to that by now. And he doesn't have anything to do with their feeding. Maybe there's some uh-uh rapport, something like that that we are missing."

"Come off it, Dave. You're getting way out into ESP country. That's a dirty word around here."

"No. This is different." I smelled roundness again and wanting. If David had been a cat he would have purred, "There are emanations from the brain," he said, "electrical—we know that. Maybe their emanations meet and overlap and are absorbed and they feel each other or something."

"Nuts. They're cats and Ibby has an IQ of 76. They can hardly produce enough electricity to jiggle the e.e.g. Don't let Doctor Marley hear you say anything like that. Hundreds of guys would jump at the privilege of working with the old man like you are. And don't forget Erika. You let her find out that you have ideas her father doesn't agree with and she'll cut you up into little pieces. No. There's something about Ibby that upsets our subjects and spoils the tests."

I rubbed a wall of ugly stones. Mr. Rothy asked me to go over to the dairy and watch the cows eat. David didn't say anything. I smelled roundness again, but the roundness was like a wrinkled apple. So I went. I liked to watch cows eat. It feels kindly.

I came and went about the farm. When I stopped in the cat place I felt sharp lights tearing at my eyes and once I heard Mr. Rothy say, "Don't be a fool, Dave. It's his shuffle, I tell you."

Then Doctor Marley operated on the cats and took away part of their brains, a different part from each cat. He talked gently to old Ozzie while Mr. Rothy prepared the needle. I felt a smooth wall that was very high and no one



could climb it. But with David it was different. The wall crinkled like a thin curtain.

All around old Ozzie was the smell of running and no place to hide. He lay very still and Mr. Rothy pushed the plunger of the needle a little more. He snapped old Ozzie's ear. "I guess he's ready," Mr. Rothy said.

I went away because the feeling all about was not kindly. It was full of wanting: a high tree to climb; thick soft brush to hide in; a cool dark house to get under and lay in shadows and be safe. I smelled no place that did not feel go-away, that did not feel blackness and scare.

Days became tall. I watched the cattle eat and felt kindly. I stood by the wide hospital lawn and wrapped myself around with soft greenness and snuggled in it. A technician said, "Stop your daydreaming, Ibby, it will make you have a seizure." So I looked up at the sky and felt the softness of a cloud as my hands moulded it into the shape of good feeling.

When I came to the cat place again there was emptiness. I felt only a little smoothness of madrone bark, like the feel of soft fur not touched.

They set up tests with the cats wearing glasses made to shut out one eye or the other. Mr. Rothy recorded the findings and about him was a bubbling. David helped. I heard the sound of a still lake with underneath the feel of storms remembered.

Mr. Rothy said, "Here, Ibby, take this over to Doctor Marley. Dave, the old man's going to like this one."

I took the report over to Doctor Marley. Erika let me in like always. I felt blossoms and water singing. She said, "Ibby, have you seen Dave Homer?"

"He's at the farm," I said, and went up with the report.

Doctor Marley thanked me and read and thought aloud: "I saw it coming. The parts of the brain left have taken over the work. This can be rechecked in a lab and I'll be found right."

My ribs scraped a great rock in the meadow. So I withdrew to only a little out-living and it was there. "The black and white cat is coming out to the deck," I said.

"Yes, yes, Ibby. You felt him coming." Doctor Marley laughed. And the black and white cat came from out of sight and sat down in front of the window and washed his face. The Doctor saw him and I felt a riffled wall harden and took my hands away from it.

Then Doctor Marley made small words on the report and told me to take it back to the farm. I walked back the way I came. Around me was softness. My feet left prints in the sidewalk that faded slowly. Mr. Rothy read the small words and said, "The old man wants us to try the food test again."

They wouldn't let me stay now when they made the tests. I went into the young corn field and swam through the leaves. Twice I swam the length of the field, then I went back to the hospital lawn and wrapped it around me. David came by and I felt the smell of a smile and of laughter. I felt Erika sitting on a flower. Then he saw me and the fingers of a seizure hunted me in the blanket of the lawn; but I crawled away fast and hid in the folds.

David said, "It took old Ozzie a full twenty minutes to find the green ring to pull. It was the last one he pulled."

The fingers of a seizure went away. Tears like drops of rain came through the blanket of lawn and wet my face. I said, "The green one was the food ring."

He said, "The green one, Ibby." And I felt Erika sitting on a flower and he ran his mind over her body with softness.

There was a nettle in my wrappings of lawn and I heard itching and burning and I died a little with a seizure.

The next time I walked past the cat place I stopped and sat on the step. All around me felt kindly, but the sound of soft fur came faintly through the thin colour of sickness and I heard the memory of "the green one".

Mr. Rothy's voice pounded through the open door. "For a

week they've fumbled and messed around. Today each one pulls the green ring first time up. The probabilities of that happening are way off the blackboard."

I rocked on my hunkers. The screen latch clicked. "Ibby, how long have you been sitting there?" It was David.

"A while. But I did not shuffle."

"But you thought, 'the green one'?"

"I thought the green one."

"Oh, come off it, Dave," said Mr. Rothy. "That can't happen. They haven't even half a brain left. They can't read minds."

"He thought 'the green one', and they pulled the green one."

"Why don't they read our minds then? How come it is Ibby's mind they tune in on?"

"Our brains are walled around with an insulation of what we call truths. Ibby's brain, what there is of it, may not be so restricted. His seizures are caused perhaps by strong electrical impulses. Maybe he can put out more than we know."

Mr. Rothy used a bad word. 'We'll change the food ring back to red. And Ibby, don't you come around here any more.'

I heard the red ring. The sound grew big and rang loudly on the faintness of soft fur.

Then I was up at the reservoir sliding on the smooth water. I cupped my hands around my eyes to catch the smell of bluegills in the under-clear.

A seizure or two later, I was a grey house-tit and flew down to the duck sanctuary in the park. In the bamboo around me was the smell of ducks sleeping. I heard ducklings shedding their down in the shadow of words from a park bench by the pond walk.

"It has meaning, Erika, I tell you. The next test and the next they pulled the red ring."

I smelled a hand patting a child's head. "Yes, David. But you said yourself that Ibby wasn't around."

"But he had heard Rothy say a red ring before he left that day."

"Yes, and when you changed the colour of the food ring again, they fumbled, not knowing which one to pull."

"But Ibby wasn't there and he didn't know of the change. I want to run a real test, Erika. I want Ibby there knowing the colour of the food ring and see if the cats pull it right away. Then I want to change it without his knowing, and have him there and see what happens then. Then I'll let him know the new colour and see if he communicates it to the cats."

Erika's laughter smelled of a dirty barnyard. And I felt thoughts as stiff as the bamboo around me with sharp leaves cutting my cheeks.

"You've got to be joking, David. A moron like Ibby can't communicate with cats. I wouldn't even suggest the idea to Father."

"I'm sorry, Erika." There was the feel of hurt.

"Don't kiss me. I don't want you to kiss me."

They got up from the park bench and I flew to the cedar tree by my window and went to bed.

Out of the sound of greyness next morning came Mr. Rothy's words like winter rain. "Ibby, come bury old Ozzie. He finally ran out of brains."

Dave was there. "All we do is hack away their brains bit by bit and put them back together to see if they live until they have no more brains left. All we prove is the obvious."

"It's a job," said Mr. Rothy. "It's a project, and don't you forget it. It's the kind of project that looks good on paper and brings in research money. And that's what figures."

What was old Ozzie and what was me stood there and all around was greyness. The soft fur sounded like stone and lay like blackness in my arms. I stopped at the barn and we smelled the new hay and the cattle. Old Ozzie had been a barn cat. We went to the edge of the cornfield and the

singing meadowlarks felt kindly for us in the greyness. I dug a hole in the ground and Ozzie and I got into it and I pulled the dirt over us. Then I shuffled back to the cat place.

Doctor Marley was there and Mr. Rothy. David cleaned and repaired old Ozzie's cage, and tools lay around him. Doctor Marley asked Mr. Rothy to go over to Administration and get the cost records on old Ozzie.

Then Doctor Marley said, "David, I'm not satisfied with your work." I felt the sending away of Mr. Rothy had purpose. "You haven't shown the proper attitude towards scientific discipline."

David said, "I'm sorry, sir. It seemed to me there was a proper correlation between the behaviour of the cats and the presence of Ibby. I wanted to see it checked out."

To both of them I was still in the ground with old Ozzie. "Young man, I just finished saying that your attitude is unsatisfactory. I direct this project and it is presumptuous of you to suggest deviation."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"I had great hopes for you. You showed promise. But now your work must be re-evaluated."

It was then that David began to die. The hammer on the table raised its head, listening.

"I realise that I was wrong," David said. "It won't happen again, sir."

He died more and the hammer rose higher.

"Your toying with ESP or whatever you wish to call an imagined relationship between the lab animals and a moron is nothing short of a mockery of all I stand for."

"Yes, sir."

"And don't try to see Erika again."

Then David was as dead as Doctor Marley. Not dead-dead like old Ozzie, but dead like Mr. Rothy and Doctor Marley.

The hammer raised very high. My hand clutched the handle. I was trying to keep it from hitting Doctor Marley.

I wasn't trying to hit him. It was David who helped me stop the hammer and bring it back to the table.

That is what the jiggles on the paper will tell you. If you're so smart you can read it all there.

# THE BALLAD OF LUNA LIL

*by*

SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

*Take an old ballad based officially on fact and try to analyse it. Providing that you had some historical records to work from, the "facts" could be a long way from the truth.*





## THE BALLAD OF LUNA LIL

*In the long-gone past, long ago  
In the time of the Kings,  
Black Bart to Mockers Moon did go  
On ancient rocket-wings.*

THIS first verse is, of course, a revised and up-dated version. For Gerard the Rhymer, who lived through and participated in these events, wrote his ballad from living material and would never have written "In the long-gone past, long ago". Naturally not; he was there, and it was his present.

Neither would he have sung of "ancient rocket-wings". For the record and as a matter of historical fact, Bartholomew Sparrow (better known as Black Bart) travelled to Mockers Moon in a late model for that day and age. Powered by a thermo-nuclear drive, the *Rogue Queen*—the size of a small asteroid—could whisper up near the speed of light on a long journey. Her crew was small—pilot, engineer, astrogator, radarman—and the ship was a free trader with most of her bulk taken up by storage holds.

There are many versions of the ballad—as many as there are stars in the universe—but here we are concerned with the traditional, still the most popular even today.

Mockers Moon, a satellite of Prince Rupert's star, was one of those non-tariff worlds that sprang up like bubbles around the edges of the Empire; as soon as one was pricked, another developed somewhere else.

No definite reason can be assigned for its rather odd name, despite unlimited conjecture. Schmidt's theory that the inhabitants mocked the Kings' rule is too romantic a notion to be taken seriously. Gridbane's proposal that they mocked the victims they cheated, while intrinsically more

likely, cannot be regarded as proven. The simple truth is, we do not know.

"The time of the Kings" refers to the era of the Space Kings, those few interbred families who came—by financial trusts and centuries of accrued interest—to own a galaxy. The events of the ballad occurred near the end of their reign.

The epoch was already centuries old, and their interests spanned the whole of the known galaxy; growing decadent, the Empire was still strong at the centre, but its influence weakened the further out from the hub.

It was a time of regimentation and boredom; of automated government and factory food; cities were composed of geometric blocks, planned to the last detail, housing a vast populace controlled by tranquillising drugs and social pressure—this last exerted by the hidden persuaders of the advertising screens. For the great mass of the people it was a time of spartan living and grey monotony.

*Black Bart he was a ladies' man  
His beard both full and black  
A wolf from out of the rim of Space  
Looking for worlds to sack.*

Bartholomew Sparrow may well have been a ladies' man. His only surviving pictograph shows a spare dark-skinned face, hooked nose and sharp bright eyes; the famous black beard sprouts like a bush from his jaw. The eyes twinkle, the firm lips curve upward. Perhaps in his mid-thirties, he wears not the universal spaceman's coverall but an exotic "dress" suit; it looks dated now, and obviously posed. He seems a free-and-easy sort—but there is no record that he ever married.

He was captain of a free trader, and came from a long line of captains. His owner was a Company. Apparently he served a couple of terms at the Space Academy on Tyrone, but the faculty released him; the men of Doon were apt

to be too individual to fit into any academic institution.

As for being a "wolf, looking for worlds to sack", perhaps and perhaps not. It all depends on viewpoint. From our present vantage point in time, looking back, he appears more an entrepreneur, an adventurer—and so ill-suited to the robotic society of the Kings.

Whether he ever plundered another world (other than by sharp trading) is a matter for mythology rather than history. But certainly the Kings and their law enforcers would so regard him.

For the Kings lived by a monopoly of commerce; their space lines linked all the worlds of the Empire. And men like Black Bart (there were many others who did not have ballads written about them) traded on a black market. They bought and sold what they could, wherever they could; this as a matter of survival, yet the consequence was an undermining of Imperial influence.

It is true, of course, that he came from the rim of space. All the rebels did; the critics and free-thinkers, all those dissatisfied with the established way of life.

Doon, bleak unfriendly Doon—Bart's home world—was so far out from the hub it was only theoretically in the galaxy at all! One of those strange planets that do not orbit a sun but follow a long looping track that takes them far out into the intergalactic void. Out beyond the stars, touching the outermost Imperial worlds only occasionally and then for the briefest period.

*He set right down and took his fun  
Inside the Pleasure Still  
And saw a girl who caught his eye—  
That girl was Luna Lil.*

The exact spatial co-ordinates of Mockers Moon and Prince Rupert's star are no longer known with any accuracy. Obviously, they were closer to the rim than the galactic hub. But non-tariff worlds were many in those

days; they flourished wherever authority was thin on the ground. Once discovered and neutralised, they were quickly forgotten.

One of the satellite's myriad clubs may actually have been called the *Pleasure Still*, or the name may simply be invention on Gerard's part to provide a rhyme for "Lil". It is not important; one such place was much like any other.

Reconstructing the *Pleasure Still* from historical sources we get, basically, a warren of sleazy rooms (structurally unsound and so available at low rental) overlain with a false glamour, several intimate bars, stairs leading to gaming tables above. The food was apt to be poor in quality; liquor was invariably absolute alcohol flavoured with whatever local fruit-juice happened to be prevalent; gaming was rarely the automated lottery of Centre, but genuine games of chance played with plastic chips.

And, of course, there were the usual hostesses to induce spacemen to drink and gamble and provide a good-time atmosphere. It was certainly noisy. A few tapes of the music of the period have survived; raw rhythms, blastingly loud. They sound hideous in isolation.

After *Rogue Queen* set down, Black Bart—and his crew, shadowy figures in the ballad, but we imagine them physically hard and mentally shrewd as rim-types tend to be—would hire a racer at the spaceport and soon be at the *Pleasure Still*. The place would be crowded, smoke-filled, a strange mixture of garish lighting and shadowy tables. The drinking would be enthusiastic after the long lone voyage through darkest interstellar space:

And Bart would be sizing up prospects. For clubs like the *Pleasure Still* were more than the hives of malcontents, as authority branded them; they were very much places of business. A dozen black markets thrived in the back rooms; contacts were made, deals completed, payments arranged in trade or bootleg Imperial credit. It was a mart to get news of whatever interested the captain-trader at the moment—and there was tough bargaining.

This, then, was where Bartholomew Sparrow first set eyes on Luna Lil . . .

*Luna Lil, the video star,  
Handsome she was, and fair,  
World-weary of dull robots' rule  
And caught in love's sweet snare.*

Perhaps it is fortunate that no pictograph of the famous Luna Lil has survived to come down to us, so we may still dream. Let us take the ballad at face value then and imagine her, "handsome she was, and fair"—and, of course, young. To seek for historical truth about a woman's age or appearance is apt to be disillusioning and best left alone.

But she existed; that much is certain. She was a popular singing artiste on the video (a three-dimensional coloured moving picture medium, much in vogue at that time).

She sang ballads, sad ballads and gay, romantic or risqué, and her accompanist on the *gittar* (an obsolete many-stringed musical instrument) was Gerard the Rhymer. It seems that Gerard composed ballads especially for her; they travelled together and he made up his rhymes as he went—from contemporary events, to suit the local audience—to a few simple chords.

We know even less about Gerard than either Luna Lil or Black Bart. One story has it that he was a roving minstrel, passing the hat round, until he teamed up with Lil. Another legend states that he was old enough to be her father; either is possible.

Presumably, as a video star, Lil would be on tour at Mockers Moon; the *Pleasure Still* would be just one of the clubs where she made a personal appearance.

Black Bart, long in space without sight of a woman would (naturally) show interest in the opposite sex. And his eye fell on Luna Lil . . . more important, Lil fell for him.

Lily La Lune (to give her full stage name) was, like so many others of the Central worlds, disillusioned by the

Space Kings' rule; sick and tired of regimentation, automated existence and robotic supervision. She came of Earth stock, yet where her parents were redundant ciphers living on the universal hand-out she, at least, had a name and a profession.

So, on this off-track planet, in an illegal club, she would look at the dark hawk face, the twinkling eyes and black beard of the rim-world adventurer. And, no doubt, ponder how very different he was from the zombie-men of Central system.

Certainly, Black Bart would have caught her fancy. She must have realised immediately that here was a real man . . .

*Love for Black Bart struck down our Lil  
And with him she did flee  
To a lone world without a sun  
Where they could both be free.*

"Our Lil" may simply be a reference to her popularity on the video circuits—or a later insertion as the ballad became famous. Yet another version gives "My Lil"; and if this is the original, as some authorities insist, it would seem to indicate that Gerard himself was in love with her.

There is, alas, no proof either way; but it is interesting to conjecture the relationship between Gerard and Black Bart if such was the true situation. Did they revolve like satellites about her, competing for the crumbs of her affection? It is tantalising—but unprofitable—to imagine.

"Flee" might indicate pursuit; and it is possible that Black Bart had trouble with the local law and took to space in a hurry. The owners of such clubs were sometimes tardy in the matter of paying a bribe to the police, and then the place would be raided; it was not unknown for visiting spacemen to join in the ensuing fracas with enthusiasm. Violence appears to have eased the tensions brought on by space voyaging.

On the other hand, the term "flee" may simply be artistic licence. After this gap of time we cannot be sure. But Lil and Bart left together on *Rogue Queen*, destination Doon. That much we have evidence for.

Bart's home planet was one of those rare celestial bodies; a wanderer. Heated by its own internal radiation, it had no need of a sun. A large world of low density, with gravity somewhere above the human one-G standard (and no doubt Bart had muscles to match, added attraction for Lil). To this day, Doon's fantastic orbit has never been calculated in detail; enough to say it was intergalactic, looping out beyond the Imperial stars.

The ballad implies that she went of her own free will; and why should we doubt it? Considering the era, Bart must have had a magnetic attraction for any woman. Moreover, Gerard went with them, and he should know.

"Free" implies free from the rule of the Space Kings with its network of stultifying laws and robotic enforcement. Free to live and love as the submerged millards of Centre could never do.

So Bart's ship carried the lovers across the black infinity, out where no stars shine, out beyond the Rim to the strange wandering planet of Doon—and their own dreadful destiny.

*Now came the maker of the news  
One Vileman, with his art,  
His voice a wail: "We must save Lil,  
Taken by badman Bart!"*

On this ironic curtain, Gerard's ballad leaves Lil and Bart for the moment, and whisks us into Centre to reveal the opposite face of his coin . . .

Note "maker of the news", not reporter; indicating that then (as, alas, now) newscasters were more apt to invent some nonsense to titillate the mass taste rather than strictly report the facts of any given situation.

"Vileman" is almost certainly artistic licence. No newscaster existed with this name. Gerard is stating his opinion of the man (and the type, no doubt) and "Vileman" sums him up admirably.

Some authorities identify Vileman as Ed Moore, a big-time video columnist of the period; this may be correct, but cannot be regarded as proven. There were others of the ilk, some brash and boastful, some smooth and soft-spoken. But all alike in their disrespect of the truth.

Just how Vileman (to retain Gerard's name for him) learnt of this minor incident on the Rim we shall never know. It is unlikely that he ever visited Mockers Moon personally; we can only assume that a local contact informed him.

We can, however, be confident that it was a dull time for hard news and Vileman saw a chance to foist a big story (even if a lie) on his public—a trick not unknown today.

Ed Moore, for instance, was a clever exploiter of the device of blowing-up a story out of all proportion to its merit. "With his art"—the black art of the big lie, of slanting for effect, of selecting detail to bolster a theory . . . ignoring everything that doesn't fit.

So he wailed (and don't they all, these Vilemen?) that Lily La Lune had been "taken by badman Bart!" With one stroke, he creates a crime and stigmatises Bart, automatically putting him outside the law—thus providing a puppet for his viewers to hound down.

Ed Moore is known to have used this particular trick twice in his career. Vilemen habitually leech on to those who hold the reins of power.

*Spurred on by popular demand  
Robot police sans heart  
And their stern chief set off to search  
All space for Lil and Bart.*

Vileman (Ed Moore, for example) would certainly have



had a huge audience on such a popular medium as video; he would, with the tricks of his trade, have had little difficulty in rousing the mass of viewers to exert pressure on the authorities. After all, if a video star had really been kidnapped by a rim outlaw (as was implied, to state the case mildly), the police would have moved swiftly into action.

And he was successful. The public clamoured for the excitement of the chase, the hounding down of the quarry, the rescue of their glamorous star. . . .

The police of this period were metal robots, clumsy in an over-bearing way; some fashioned to the shape of men twelve feet in height, others mounted on caterpillar tracks; a third type was fitted with helicopter vanes. All were heavily armoured, equipped with built-in weapons and crudely programmed. A formidable force for law-breakers to reckon with.

Their chief, the human Beldon, was no more stern than was necessary for his job; a study of official records shows him to be unimaginative, inclined to follow the letter rather than the spirit of the law—or the result might have turned out very differently.

Beldon, short, a girdle of fat about his middle, totally bald, looks out of character in the black and silver uniform of his office. He was something of a cipher; a man as unlikely to start thinking for himself as the robots he commanded. A cautious man, he went by the book, never deviating a fraction from the politicians' orders—and that was Lil and Bart's bad luck.

"All space" need not be taken literally. Bartholomew Sparrow, as captain of the *Rogue Queen*, was not unknown; neither was the name of his home world. The local police on Mockers Moon would have alerted Beldon when requested. It was fairly obvious Bart would head for Doon—and we can assume the pursuit also headed straight there.

*Their orders were: "Bring back our Lil!"  
And so to Doon they went*

*Demanding up the stolen star—  
But Bart would not repent.*

The automated law-makers of the Space Kings printed the order to apprehend Bartholomew Sparrow (not necessarily prompted by public hysteria either). For some time, the wheels of Empire had been running down. Anything that took public interest out towards the Rim and away from Centre with its total taxation and meagre standard of living—anything that provided light and innocent relief from the day-to-day cares—would be more than welcome to those in authority.

Gerard gives no indication of the time taken by his events. We assume the distances involved were not great by standards of the day. So the police corps might well have arrived at Doon shortly after Bart and Lil landed there.

Again, no indication of the size of the police action is given; but in view of the result, it must have been considerable—probably a squadron of space cruisers carrying nuclear weapons was involved. A formidable fleet to rescue one romantic young girl. . . .

And now the threads of the ballad draw together, tighten into tragedy. The lovers' honeymoon was short; we hope it was a happy one.

The mind boggles at what the unimaginative Chief Beldon thought and felt as his fleet of cruisers crossed the empty void and he set eyes on Doon for the first time. A lone wandering planet, without a sun, far beyond the stars of his own familiar galaxy and moving further away with every passing second. One wonders if he felt or thought anything as he orbited with his robot ships high above the bleak unfriendly surface of that strange world.

He put little enough on record.

Beldon called down over the ship-to-planet net, demanding the return of Lily La Lune, unlawfully taken from Mockers Moon against her will—and calling on the criminal, Bartholomew Sparrow, to surrender his person to

the forces of law and order. Probably he expected to be obeyed on the instant!

Beldon seems to have handled the situation as mechanically as one of his own robots.

Black Bart, being the sort of person he was, would have simply thumbed his nose at this demand, once he'd got over the immediate shock—no doubt with Lil's enthusiastic approval. It is unlikely that *she* wanted to be taken back to Centre.

*The dark world spurned the Space Kings' law  
And so that was the start:  
Destruction for the rebel world  
And death for outlaw Bart!*

Doon, far removed from Centre's dehumanising mode of life, bred a world of hardy individualists who were naturally opposed to any attempt at domination by the Space Kings. There would be immediate, indignant resentment of the law enforcer orbiting their bastion of freedom and making (to them) such outrageous demands. It was the equivalent of throwing down a gauntlet. Some, no doubt, laughed. Others, the more hot-headed, would be all for launching armed rockets immediately. Certainly, Bart was a highly respected member of the community. . . .

At the very least, angry words were exchanged.

Chief Beldon, knowing the true strength of his automats and conscious of the authority vested in him, would be equally indignant with these rebel upstarts. Conflict was inevitable.

Equally inevitable was the outcome; a vast police machine, developed over centuries, against a single planet taken by surprise. The men of Doon could not have been expecting an actual attack; to the very end they probably doubted the cause of it.

No declaration of war was ever made. The people of Doon possibly had not the weapons to fight back on equal

terms; or perhaps they were simply disorganised. They were, after all, a race of individualists with competition high on their list of virtues—co-operation could only be effective after a common threat was known—whereas the Empire had been in business a long time and was fully equipped for planetary policing action.

Beldon—far from his base and in sole command, a slavish follower of orders—flung the whole panoply of his robot police at Doon. . . .

The few accounts that have come down to us make horrific listening. They tell of almost total destruction, of nuclear weapons blasting great chasms across the planet's surface, loosening whole segments of continents, annihilating cities and destroying agriculture. There were quakes, subsidences, frozen lakes boiled away; hundreds of thousands died in the first few seconds.

And, apparently, it went on long after it need have, with laser beams incinerating the ruins. Neither women nor children were spared. Beldon seems to have been intent on gutting the whole planet, perhaps as an example to any other world that might feel inclined to defy the Space Kings' rule.

To this day, the resuscitated Doon advertises itself with such motifs as: *Visit the ruined world—see the death of a planet!* and *Here died Black Bart*. Tourists flock from all over the galaxy, paying out a fortune in credits. . . . Doon has never had it so good.

Yet exactly where or how Bartholomew Sparrow died is not known, despite many varied and heated claims. Perhaps heroically, fighting for his love (we can hope); more probably obliterated in those first few moments, along with most of Doon in the general holocaust.

*Set free by metal monsters, Lil,  
Back to video came  
Taken from her dead love in tears  
By popular acclaim.*

Presumably Beldon landed a small force of robot police on Doon before letting loose his wave of destruction. How else can we imagine he rescued Lil? And the records are positive on this point: she *did* return.

Blood and bone and flesh would stand little chance against the armoured might of the Empire. So, ironically, Lil was snatched away by force. . . .

And where was Bart at this moment? Organising a hopeless defence? History does not tell us . . . we know only that Gerard alone came back with her.

After Doon's end, she was rushed to the nearest video broadcasting station for a live hook-up with all the major planets of the Empire; a special performance was advertised. It was probably the largest audience ever known and Lil had their full attention and sympathy.

Vileman would naturally be prominent, smiling all over his oily face and bragging a mile-a-minute. But the result was not quite as anticipated, by anyone.

In fact, the whole stunt backfired because Lil refused to play the rescued heroine. She accused the promoters of mass murder—and swung the viewing audience with her.

It was a black day for the Space Kings. Their authority, already weakening, suffered a severe slump from which they never really recovered. Rebellion flared up on many worlds throughout the galaxy and, eventually, the Empire was swept away.

Beldon, hastily promoted, was posted to some backwater planet and soon forgotten.

Not so Vileman. As you know from your daily transceiver, the name has passed into the language . . . "Here is the news, and this is your local Vileman spieling it."

Now came Gerard's moment, Gerard the Rhymer with his *gittar* and ballad—the ballad made famous with a single performance, when he sang his new composition at a funeral attended by tens of thousands. A ballad that started a legend.

*It was the end of her. She pined  
Away, love-sick and ill  
To death . . . a chord, thus ending this  
Ballad of Luna Lil.*

# THE ETERNITY GAME

*by*

VINCENT KING

*One of our new experimental pieces of writing, portraying the birth, death and rebirth of a galaxy as seen through the eyes of various players in the drama.*





## THE ETERNITY GAME

N: IMAGINE a goldenness. An illumination, airy, animated, spangled, precious stones and autumn leaves, modulating crystals, shifting in forms and relationships. It talks, it thinks among itselfs, speculating on deep arrangements.

A: Vast. Neither here nor there. Infinite perhaps. Vast as ocean to that first, lowliest, protozoa.

Z: Sometimes he wrote on the walls . . . not regularly, or often . . . but when he remembered, as the mood took him . . . as need presented itself.

A: Not obscenities. Obscenities were irrelevant. There was no one, perhaps, to read or see them.

Z: Mostly he did not bother with writing . . . not words—that would have implied communication—words were useless anyway . . . too absolute for the hair-breadth considerations of his thought . . . the fingernail grip of his existence.

A: Rather he made drawings. His *mark*. A statement of his identity. Scored into the malleable surfaces of the *Place's* white walls.

Z: Not quite drawings . . . ideograms rather . . . expressive of his thoughts, so that, later, he, himself, coming, perhaps, that way again, discovering the marks, might decipher them and, understanding their portent, be convinced, not only of now, if such existed, but then also.

A: Words were too difficult anyway. He couldn't remember enough.

Z: Drawings were almost as difficult . . . he would strive for hours to remember, scouring his memory labyrinths for some concrete form to endow his scratchings . . . deep in his thought the forms were indistinct.

A: A face. Possibly his own. A city.

Z: A dim vision of spires; misty . . . laden with time and distance, remote and haloed in vapours of ages.

A: A country. A way of living. Life. A girl and moist warm softness.

Z: Sea gulls on mud . . . galaxies and sea drift.

A: Crystal. Rounded, perfect. Vastly high. Burning things. All vague, forgotten. Known rather than seen.

Z: The *Place* was perfect, vast . . . silent . . . clean . . . the ways identical, unfathomable in repetition, light . . .

A: Not exactly light. Rather brilliant. Dark—undark. Vibrant with blazing spectrums beyond the thresholds of his perception.

Z: Perhaps also not quite empty, sometimes, on the walls were things that, just possibly, in the tail of the eye, might have been shadows. Evocative, pregnant with indeterminable meaning . . . shadows of shadows . . . or perhaps there was nothing.

A: He travelled, traversing the *Place*.

Z: Walked the endless perspectives in dulling awareness . . . having no knowledge of how far he had progressed, if he had, or how long . . . perhaps the *Place* was truly infinite, somehow circular, some timeless treadmill. Once, twice, possibly three times he remembered the sudden tightening of gut, the start, as he thought he had found one of his graffito images.

A: He peered and probed. Rubbed dirt to clarify any possible pattern. Looked again and not been sure. Not recognised with surety the half obscured scratchings.

Z: Perhaps, possibly, they were his own . . . but they were so ancient . . . so *old*, worn by the abrasions of the very air molecules, by the soft fall of dust almost to smoothness . . . then, perhaps, they were someone else's, or natural . . . but he could not know, one way or another.

A: Then—at last angry—he'd scrawl suddenly remembered obscenities—shout foul words he hadn't known into

the echoless distances. Later, neither elated nor depressed, he'd walk on.

Z: And the *Place* was vast, its time repeating . . . he grew no older, he was never hungry, rarely slept, about him the walls passed . . . or possibly he passed them.

A: The floor was regular. Sloping gently up, or down, or running level. Impervious as the walls.

Z: Above him, blue, a light source . . . sometimes he thought it was sky, on other occasions he knew it was ceiling.

A: He travelled the *Place*. Hardly believing his own existence.

Z: Hoping for a finish to his traverse . . . sometimes there was nowhere to go . . . and on other occasions there was, or it was the same everywhere.

A: Man . . . he knew possibly he was a man. But he was not sure, and sometimes perhaps he was.

Z: Man . . . he sounded the word . . . tasted it . . . moulded it on his tongue . . . squeezed it off the roof of his mouth . . . probed its meaning for him. Wondered what men were . . . what was their condition.

A: Aeons seemed to pass. Possibly, perhaps they did.

G: I must have heard the water a long time before I knew it. Before the sound penetrated. There—in the *Place*—all that time I was more than halfway mad . . . stupid anyway. Doped with emptiness, self doubt, all that time just walking in the silence. Even after the water it was a while before I was what you'd call awake.

I stood for an hour listening, trying to separate the water sound from my heart-beat, the sound of blood in my veins.

I went forward a few yards and there it was. Deep and swift, a yard wide, coursing diagonally across the *Place*, disappearing almost at once under a low, flat arch.

I crouched and looked at it. Surprising . . . that's what it was. I was frightened. I mean, this new thing . . . a constant,

moving thing . . . in all the uncertainty and stasis of the *Place*.

It all might never have happened. I might still be there, crouched, moronic . . . reaching to feel the stuff, making vees and rippling sounds, thinking how *odd* my hands really looked, but I overbalanced and fell in.

Deep. I went deep. Plunging down in a forest of white bubbles, a last after-image of the *Place* stretching out ahead, spinning in front of me.

It was the shock of the water started me to think. Not that it was cold, body heat I suppose. But I had to struggle back up and that brought me a bit more out of my stupor. I really started worrying just who I was. Fighting down there, deep in water, wondering what it was all about . . . wondering who men were, what my people were like.

I came up in time to see the roof close over my head. I grabbed, but the arch was soft, my fingers slithered through and off. I whisked away with the current, into the dark on that blood-warm torrent.

I remember one or two stiff places. Constricted water roared about my ears, my hands and shoulders slipping between the soft pressing walls. I soon lost track of time and direction, but it was some time before I went to sleep, floating on my back in sensationless blackness.

The next thing I knew, I was out. Head first, down this great chute, into sudden depth and space of very cold water.

That's how I knew I was out. That sickening plunge into the cold depths. There were no stars, no moon . . . no light . . . just my skin shrivelling in the sudden cold. I wondered what stars were and what I knew about them.

I don't know if I swam or if some subtle current carried me over that icy calm. Years later there was something under my feet. Nightmare brushings first, like some monster sniffing me over. Then it was seaweed . . . land again.

I came up the shore, crawling deep in the mud, out of the clinging water. I dragged on, hands plopping and squelch-

ing, trying to find a better place. In the end I gave up and went to sleep again, in the mud, where I was.

P: Dark is the night. COLD. Oh, the tangible, velvet, syrupy blackness. I am here. HERE. On icy mud banks, the cold slime of this world. ABSENCE. The absence of radiations. WAIT. Waiting for what may be.

VIBRATION. A sound of thoughts. CONFUSION. QUESTION. Question the confusion.

A thing they call man. G. Him. Geo. The confusion of his vibrations. CONFUSED. Confusing. Obscure. But it will be clear. I will understand.

Turning. I sense you turning, Geo. You turn your . . . your *body* . . . in the mud. A blind sea bird walks near you. LIGHT? You require *light*?

“LET THERE BE LIGHT! Please?”

A: It is morning anyway—nearly.

Z: Now rises the senile red sun of this ailing system. Blinking up on the stinking littoral. Light winds come to clear the fogs of night.

G: I stirred, rose on my knees . . . wiped at my mud-smeared body. I looked up.

A soft grey cloud floated a few inches above the mud. Bird marks marched between us, a few inches from the gathering water where my head had been.

That Alien . . . like a mist—soft grey, mother of pearl, opal . . . but finer. An internal quality of small rainbow light. The edge was indistinct . . . pulsing . . . furred and filmed.

I blinked. The Alien *shifted*. The mist shivered, flicked and became a cat. A pearl grey persian, poised splay-footed above the mud before it plunged, scrabbling, in. It stood where it had fallen, up to its belly in mud, scowling at me. Then it spoke in my mind.

P: Literal. LITERAL! Damned literal minded clod! Why

couldn't I be me? Why must I be your image of me? Representation! IMPOSITION! Why must I be representational for you?

G: "Who are you? What are you?" The Alien shifted, flicked and became a hawk of some sort. But man-sized and purple. It hovered, glowering at me under its brows.

P: CLOD. Think. Think that I am dependent . . . partly dependent . . . on a muddled bifurcated flesh lump for my form! SHAPE. To think that my shape may be determined by your crass imaginings!

HEAR ME. I will explain my functioning, My duty. I will tell you in your own simple terms of our possible relationship.

UNDERSTAND. My race is . . . parasitic? SYMBIOTIC . . . a more accurate conception. My people live with lesser orders—help them—living on their . . . their *life-force*. The conception is inaccurate—but in your poor mind I have no better, Clod. We help our hosts . . . effectiveness, efficiency enhances, life force is increased . . . vibrations magnify. LOVE. Love is the relationship. Mutual well wishing. Respect, a soft interdependence . . . helpfulness. I must love, have someone to love. YOU. Even towards you, Clod. I feel a certain warm softness creeping upon me. MASTER IT. I can master it, Clod. LET NOT . . .

"Let me not the marriage of true minds . . . admit impediments." Not bad. It goes on quite well. Not bad . . . I have it from the deep reaches of your mind. Not fully correct—and not your own, surely?

Name? NOMINATION. Must I have name, Clod? If you please . . . then I must be nominated. Proteus. PROTEAN. Well enough. Call me Protia.

Your race? Your race, sweet Clod? You wish to meet with *them*? INCREDULOUS. I warn you of this. Frightfulness, my Clod. But I sense you do not desire me. Yet I must help you in your purpose—it is my nature.

There is a place, dear Clod. FEAR. A Darkness, fear of losing you. A SETTLEMENT. I must help you even to this

danger. There is the direction—far across this clogged ocean. I have seen this settlement. There—that way.

POSSIBLY . . . Possibly I will follow you. Ride on your vibrations . . . in arrears . . . as befits a suitor.

G: That sure was weird. That Alien, that Protia, knew more about me than I did. Digging up that bit of poetry from when I was a kid. Then the way it shifted its shape. When it was a hawk it was bad enough, but when it was on about relationships and love it became a lamb. Muddy, on my shoulder, rubbing against my cheek. Soft, sweet, cute. Calling me “sweet” and “dear” like that. Clod indeed! All that suitor bit, I didn’t like it . . . a sort of perversion.

But I had to try for that settlement. I had to get *there*. To the men. Perhaps they would tell me what it was all about . . . who and what I was. . . our place in things. I had to get to my people, my companions and friends . . . they’d tell me.

I ignored Protia and took off for the settlement. If there were men about, who needed Aliens?

A: Stink . . . stench of the smooth rotting mud banks.

Z: Fluvial wastes of millennia. The washings out and down . . . the growing and rotting of kelp, the pale yellow-green forests . . . the slow washing down.

A: He moves towards the settlement, all under the pale sunlight on the thickening mud slime.

Z: Through the low lying fog stench of many mornings, through the flickering will o’ wisp nights.

A: The two of them. Protia and the man.

Z: Straggling spider track across the bright mud. P, hovering behind, follows, hiding from him below the mud dunes.

G: As the days passed the mud got firmer, more settled, like it was older. It didn’t smell quite so bad either. I got on a lot quicker then. Pretty soon I came across the ships.

Even then it was half a day before I stood in the shadow of the first, listening to the lapping water. Three quarters sunk in mud it was, surrounded by a deep, tide-washed moat, the stained, corroded flanks reflecting in the water.

I went on towards the settlement, picking my way through collapsed, bowed plates, among the distorted honeycombs of revealed structures. There were more and more ships as I went on, packed tighter and tighter. Some were piled up, I suddenly remembered seeing stacks of pipes someplace. Maybe someone figured they'd never need the ships again, or perhaps they thought they just might.

I caught a movement over and beyond the nearer ruins. A slab of side, a whole curving mountainside slipped, slowly moved down, buckling and tearing as it came. I saw debris, mud clouds splash up, fragments of rotten metal. Then, later, clearly, I heard the long thunder of collapse. I started in that direction, it seemed a good idea.

A : Naturally : . . . he wouldn't know why.

Z : The understream of his thought . . . the deep currents of his motivations . . . the intuitive guidance of his actions.

A : He sometimes rationalises. Simpleton.

G : When I made it there was a way in. I stood peering into the menace of the darkness. The wreckage moved and squeaked beneath me, there were dangerous eaves of torn metal far above. I looked into the dark receding bulkheads, thinking how I might go in if I could screw up the courage . . . or maybe not going in at all. It stank like the mud, but worse . . . older, more confined.

P : You are right. FEAR. Menace. Implicit menace. Something fearful . . . a power . . . a horror deep in those depths. It will be beyond you, Clod.

G : So I went in.

It was black, dank. The gangway ran down, it got colder and wetter as I went on. Protia followed a bit behind, grumbling. She was a bloodhound at first, but then she



remembered I needed light and turned herself into something unspeakable that glowed. So I had to go on. I got used to it after a mile or two, those ships were pretty big. There were doors, but they wouldn't open.

Deeper down I found an area that was lit. The lights came on as I went in. A flick of brilliance, then a dull glow. The power was pretty well down, the ships had been there a long time.

There was a row of lockers. Mostly they were empty but I found a silver thing kept perfect in one of them. In the end I found it was a sort of garment, so I took off my rags and put it on. It fitted perfectly. There was a helmet and gloves, so I put them on too. There were a couple of things in the pouch. I fished them out and started remembering. Cigarettes in a case and a lighter, but I remembered I don't smoke. There was a hip flask too, but that was dry. I handled the things, remembering.

But what kicked it all back, what really struck home, was the pistol hanging on the suit's hip. I put my hand to it and it sprang from its clip into my grasp. I palmed it, enjoying the cool strength. A plasma gun, fully charged and deadly. It was *good*. Purposeful . . . well made. I felt like I'd come home. Lighter than I remembered, compact, so you'd hardly notice it on your hip. They were my people's ships OK.

P: Do you really want that thing? Is it a necessary crutch for your confidence? Portent. A disastrous artifact. Leave it . . . come from this place.

G: Holding the gun down by my side I went on into the ship. Doors droned slowly open for me, opening the ancient distances.

Down a short corridor. The end door swung open. The stench nearly knocked me over.

The great hold was full of people, dead ones. Most had been dead long enough to be skeletons. A lot hadn't. Corruption flowed on the seamless perfection of the metal floor . . . a thick high water mark of the stuff reached a foot up

the wall. It was better than it had been once, but you'd hardly notice it.

I picked my way a little along a central aisle. Between the split and sagging plastic envelopes, the collapsed, rotted tiers of couches . . . the colour-coded umbilicals threading through the wreckage, the mingled corpses and bones.

P: Suspended animation . . . as fails the power of these star ships so must the mechanisms of stasis and storage. Horror . . . but given the passage of time, only to be expected. . . .

G: I found one that was alive . . . still in the stasis I mean.

A girl. White, bleached . . . naked on her back for death in her helium envelope . . . umbilicals plastered to the insides of thighs and arms. Breasts flattened . . . lips and nipples the same dead white . . . long blond hair . . . a ghost of a smile in the sweetness of her dreams. . . . Young . . . as old as the ship . . . as old as her dead friends . . . those discoloured bones . . . that slow bloating purple flesh.

P: There are others alive. PATHETIC. Pathetic. A few live scattered in these many ships. In places more than others. I sense their slow vibrations.

Do not grieve for them all, Clod. There is still the settlement.

G: I got the hell out. On the way I came across the control room. Tilting instrument banks, some still flickering with a pale life. There was more mud here. Forced through . . . extruded by pressure of depth through perforated bulkheads. Great coiled bars . . . like some filthy fungus . . . shoving into the clinical computer banks. It didn't seem to stink so bad as before, but that was when I remembered to shut my face plate.

Then we were out. Into the fresh airs and vapours.

A: Now he hurries for the settlement.

Z: To see what will be there, to see if he is in time.

A: He has seen his race.

Z: He knows his membership, he has seen its corruption.

A: He wonders how and why.

Z: Some days pass and he sees the magnificence of the settlement. Soaring its five mile height, spreading its forty-mile-sided pentagonal bulk. The age-fallen debris, the subtle working of time on the adamantine surfaces. The colossal age of this construction.

A: He must find entry. Pierce the thick walls. Find what is to be found.

Z: But the *size* . . . the *age* of this conurbation . . . fortress against time itself. The fallen parapets. The cragged pinnacles of eroded walls . . . the falling rust stains of mighty re-enforcements . . . the sealed gates . . . the heaped debris of the settlement mountain's foot.

A: Now he must find entry.

G: When we got near the settlement the mud stopped.

P: The out-fall is naturally set some distance from the settlement itself. These were parklands and woods. Desolation. Pleasures in remote times, dying with the fading sun.

G: Broken, old tree trunks . . . sucked dry by fungi. Desolation . . . broken paths once pleasant walks.

There was one thing though. Further away the barren undulations had a greenness on them. Nearer, under your feet, it disappeared. In a while I figured out why. It was grass shoots. Looking down, end on, you couldn't see them. Further away you saw their length and their greenness. As we went on they got thicker. At the end of the week there were even some flowers.

It was a great thing. The land coming green under my feet, at my touch. I forgot the ships and felt marvellous . . . beneficent . . . a life giver.

P: Even here there is spring. Later and slighter, but still spring. All you need is light . . . a little warmth . . . the sun a little higher, to rouse the dormant land.

G: The settlement was something else. Towering up and up again almost to the cirro-stratus, little cumulus clouds sailing on its sides, their blue shadows on the weathered concrete, a glint of wet from their small rain. The long flat sides tailed away into blue distance, curving over the horizon. We saw birds, coming north for summer. Sea gulls too, with eyes like owls, dense downy feathers.

P: The non-migrators, they live through this latitude's winter, in the low sun, the two-hour days, among the phosphorescences of the settlement's wastes, with the white-skinned fish in the luminescent shallows.

A: The settlement watches his approach.

Z: Circuits open and close, well protected mechanisms glide to position. Triggers close.

A: There is silence. Ammunition, connections could not survive so long.

Z: Time passes. He begins to climb the piled debris at the settlement's foot. Painfully, slipping on tilted slabs, among shattered, stunted trees.

A: Reluctantly, further behind, Protia follows.

G: I picked my way along the masonry crest until I came to an opening. Maybe there was a balcony there once, a viewing place. I'd got a leg over when Protia showed up. She fluttered in my face. A bird form with short broad wings.

P: Take warning. Take thought before you penetrate. Turn again, Geo!

G: "My people are in there!" I climbed on to the sill. I could see she was unhappy, but she didn't try to stop me again. Not that I cared. I watched her sweep away, swooping down the slope on those strong wings.

When I'd walked through the thickness of the wall the Settlement was lit inside, but not well. It was cold and wet, deserted. It all looked dead.

At first there were no lights at all. Wire hung ravelled

and discoloured. There was broken glass on the floor. I still couldn't see any people.

I groped my way in. Two hundred yards on there was a wall set with lights. I worked my way left.

Somewhere I heard a motor start. Then it was louder, near, racing towards me. I waited for it . . . breathless to talk with at least one of my kind.

The motor stopped, then came slowly forward. The main lights came on. Sudden glaring brilliance lit the massed cross-bracing of the roof, the flaked concrete and deep shadows. I peeled off my right glove, to shake hands, I suppose.

The machine came. I saw its sensors quest and fix on me. The armament looked me in the eyes, then lowered to my belly. I saw the firing mechanism move.

Robot! You don't argue with a robot guarder, not when you haven't got the code. I dived right. The pistol slid into my hand as I rolled.

Energy thundered from the machine. The crash of falling concrete scattered and echoed away. Debris glowed white hot in the distance.

I was on my knees firing back. I saw the sensors switch towards me.

I was lucky. My first blast took out the sensor lenses and then it was easy. There was armour, but nothing stands up to a plasma gun.

About then the floor tried to electrocute me.

Hard radiation sliced from the walls . . . the power was low so my suit was ample protection . . . it was just enough to trip the alarms in my helmet.

I snapped my face plate shut and dragged on my glove. I moved through the fat smoke skeins and splattered metal. Fire control came on. Then nerve gas. I walked through the falling chemicals.

Remarkable it was, beautiful. I hadn't had to think about a thing. All reflexes. Brilliant. It was good to know I was that good. Somewhere I heard motors start.

A: Very creditable.

Z: A lethal animal, efficient . . . an ideal predator.

A: Now he must quickly find a door.

Z: Stumbling in the half-dark, taking shelter from the ceiling's lightning blasts, stumbling through abandoned carriers, pleasure gondolas . . . at last into that long broad passage, to the end door, smaller set in large.

G: A door, green. I shoved and it opened.

I stepped on to thick green grass, into brilliant golden sunshine, under lush trees. The door closed behind me. I couldn't see where it had been in the blue sky there.

I walked down the slope through the clumped rushes and tumbling small moths. A soft warm breeze, there was water someplace . . . bees . . . a cow lowed.

I didn't see the people until I almost tripped over their bodies. I didn't recognise them for what they were for a moment.

The woman was underneath, the man's bare backside bounced up at me from the trampled grass. It was pathetic . . . funny too. All my thoughts of power and humanism . . . of meetings and welcome . . . intellects and explanations—then this. My mouth opened, I struggled with hysteria. The foolishness of it!

I found words and spoke to them . . . asking for comfort for my long loneliness. I suppose it was something to say. They said I should go away.

P: "‘The beast with two backs.’ Expressive-witty. Not bad, Clod, and not yours either, is it?"

G: Protia and I went on together. That was the first time she spoke to me, really I mean, not by telepathy. Her thought and speech got more and more like mine. I couldn't help liking her.

I asked how she'd caught up with me so quick, through all the danger, all those thick walls.

P: "Osmosis."

A : So he sees for the first time his people. It is not without humour.

Z : Later, when he has left, the couple uncouple and stand, they bow. There is applause, a bouquet for the girl.

A : They meet many more of his kind.

Z : Protia guides him, sensing their path through the complexities. He talks with those that will bother, advancing at last, through many meetings to the central parts of that layer of the many floored settlement.

A : Many occasions. Some of significance, others not.

G : It was all one big party. Music and pleasures, fine white buildings, ceramics and decorations, under dark trees and eternal blue sky. I walked among the tall, laughing people, their elegance, the sophistication of their pastimes and their happiness. There were blossoming trees everywhere . . . roundabouts, games and swimmings, diamond lakes . . . a sort of paradise.

Sometimes I dared speak to people, sometimes they answered, or didn't seem to hear, or maybe shrugged and smiled. Mostly they didn't see us . . . I reckoned they were absorbed in their high thoughts, the significance and beauties of their ever present music. I didn't like to seem to push too hard. Protia didn't give me much time, always seemed to be hurrying us on.

It was Protia who found the lift. She led me forward and showed me. Pointed it out with her mind, like I was seeing with her eyes. A flick of brighter vision.

P : "Things are not always as you see them, Geo."

G : I wondered why I hadn't noticed it. It like appeared out of nothing. Like scales fell from my eyes.

It was a good lift. Fast and luxurious. We sat near the windows. I pushed the up button.

P : "Why up? Why not down and out? You have seen your people."

G : "Well . . . you found it."

P: "In response to your unspoken wish. Why up . . . why attempt the summit?"

G: "Well . . . because it's there."

P: "Scales . . . eyes . . . because it's there. The thievery of this man! The stolen images!"

Z: Up . . . yes, up he must go . . . a basic drive. When there is nothing else to subjugate, then gravity will do.

A: Up and on.

G: The floors shot past in a golden kaleidoscope of successive suns, of colour and laughter. A thousand floor party. They were sure enjoying themselves. Protia didn't seem much interested. She was experimenting with girl forms, she'd picked up some ideas since we'd come into the Settlement. She ended up brunette, creamy skin . . . not too thin . . . really lovely. She sure could manipulate herself.

P: SATISFACTION. His approval is my joy.

G: The lift thudded to a halt. We stepped on to the quiet marble of the upper levels. It was muted up here, tasteful, even the sun didn't shine so bright, like indirect. All that non-stop music was gone, there were more diversions too, like you could be alone if you wanted to.

The people were all together though and there was the sound of music with them. I listened to what they were saying.

"Has anyone got a match? A great conception—real creative publicity . . . Top of the polls for ten successive minutes . . . It would help if I could be seen talking to him . . . But heterosexuality *isn't* fashionable . . . Archbishop's on a contemplation in Liverpool—withdrawn from public life—poor dear, his agent won't speak to him . . . Twenty-four sex images in the rear light alone . . . Hasn't anyone got a match? . . . I prefer good old napalm, Major—really burns 'em up—sheer poetry . . . Cyanide liquorice—TNT dollies—you got to hit the enemy right at his roots. ("What



enemy?" said Protia, who was a lamb, pink. "Don't worry," said the soldiers, who'd had their forearms amputated to make way for small arms. "We'll think of someone.") . . . I'm late . . . I'm late . . . It's your image that counts . . . You can be anything you like if you've got a good image . . . Oh, my ears and whiskers—I'm late . . . ! On the skids—his painting only had two wobbles—everyone knows it's three this week . . . Lovely . . . lovely burning conflagration . . . Dead under a week—virgins some of them—but I charge more for that . . . Really efficient—burns them on their own natural fat—what there is of it . . . It's easy—they think they're going for a shower . . . I'm late—I'm late . . . Where *are* all the matches gone? Off with his head!'"

G: I turned to Protia, who was still a lamb but with a yellow fleece. "Isn't it wonderful, Protia? All these great conversationalists. All these great minds . . . I . . . *me* . . . I'm here! The cream of humanity and I'm with them!"

P: "Can't you see . . . can't you see the poverty? Can't you see they're like this because they've nothing better left to do? There's nothing in them better to do? It's all a stupid game?"

G: "I don't understand what they're saying—beyond me—but it's wonderful . . . wonderful!"

Z: The cream of humanity . . . all the powers . . . all the most rewarded . . . all the top.

A: All the best.

G: Protia leapt on to a convenient critic's dais. She flicked, changed, was a bearded revolutionary. Seven feet tall, an enormous archaic tommy-gun in her brown hands. A blast of enormous bullets shattered into the marble ceiling.

P: "GRINGO PIGS!"

G: Protia . . . my Protia up there! They were all looking at her, all the wonderful photographers, singers, models, salesmen, critics and politicians . . . they were all looking at

her . . . my Protia! There was horror on her face. I didn't understand.

A scream of delight.

"GREAT! Marvellous publicity!

P: "Harlots . . . CRITICS!"

"Publicity Agent . . . GENIUS!"

"WONDERFUL!"

G: Protia started to protest, but gagged and gave up. She flicked into a heavy sea bird. She flew to the big cornice and began being sick on to the crowd. There was a moment's silence and the cheering redoubled.

"GREAT!"

"Be mine! Be my agent!"

"No, Publicity Pet, be mine!"

"I'm the prettiest!"

G: I got in somebody's way in the crush and he punched at me. It was a painter, I didn't feel a thing. Automatically I thumped him back. I felt ribs break. He sure broke easy . . . they all do . . . no bones to speak of.

Protia looked at me, smiled, and began firing into this crowd. The room cleared. Screams and hysteria faded into the distance. The old guy who wanted matches was going through the pockets of the painter with the broken ribs, who was screaming. There was a writer who some critic had knifed lying in a pool of cheap red wine. Otherwise the room was empty.

P: "The army'll be here soon. Get a carriage off the President!"

G: "President?"

P: "The matches man!"

G: I asked the old boy where his carriage was. He asked me for matches. I remembered the lighter in my pouch and offered to swap. I filled the thing from a decanter there. Ether it smelled like. I flicked and the lighter burned like a class sixer blasting off for Pluto.

"Oooh," said the President. "Pretty . . . flowering flickering blue burning flame! GIMME." He grabbed.

I said: "Carriage first." He jerked his thumb towards the arches at the end of the room. "GIMME!" I handed the lighter over. He ran off towards the lift.

"You shouldn't have done that," groaned the painter. "He's a pyromaniac."

P: "You wouldn't chuckle."

G: "Conflagration!" came the President's voice, tailing away as the lift bore him down.

Z: A fine feeling about it. A symmetry . . . an inevitable quality . . . like Greek Tragedy.

A: You think so?

G: I saw olive drab figures, chromed helmets, dark goggles, glinting weapon forearms, move below. Protia sent another burst to ricochet among them. The riot squad scattered. Arms pointed, white hot beams flashed upstairs. Marble splintered, melted then bubbled.

We ran for the arch. Radiation grenades, nerve-gas-riot-bombs burst where we had been.

G: The big hoverer hissed towards the centre of the layer. Protia had got over her courage and was a small white mouse within my helmet.

At the layer's dead centre a great white ribbon way led up and down. A spiral stair, the myriad steps brilliant light and dark, a dazzle pattern.

P: "Up! Go up! Fool them!"

G: I turned left, on to the steps and up the slope. I rammed open the throttle.

A: The pilgrim's way.

Z: The great white way to the stars, the venerated summit. The way of the wise. They go screwing and flogging up, the hoverer screaming and lashing, throwing the dust of centuries in billowing clouds.

G: We weren't on the stair long. We were near the top to start with, in seconds we burst into a great concourse. Bow waves of dust flew on either side, the great tail of our wake settled, choking behind us, seeming to hang still in the vast space.

Then there was a wall. We slowed, dust sprang up in front too, so we had to stop.

A: They must disembark.

Z: Walk through the silky dust, clear of their disturbance, into the calm greyness. Visually the low grey dunes are very like the mud.

A: Older marks than theirs too. Footprints. Some daring, original and free spirit, penetrating here alone.

Z: Footprints leading at last to dry split skin . . . old bones.

A: He must find exit.

G: The doors weren't all that impressive when we found them. Milled steel and armoured glass, not too big, practical, you might say. They swung open when they saw us coming.

There wasn't any dust inside, it must have been well sealed. A dome, made of three-foot glass . . . tinted against the ultraviolet. I jammed the doors open, thin dust flowed in like water, small machines got busy cleaning it up. The controls were mostly in pretty good order, everything was labelled, in case someone forgot, I suppose. There was an air-lock at the other end, leading to the outside. I turned to get the hoverer.

P: "Wait. There is something we must do. This is the main control hall . . . the master consoles."

G: We went down between the banked instruments. Protia pressed against my face plate, her tail twitching, reading the labels as we passed.

When we came to the one that said "STAR SHIPS—Re-

suscitation and Disembarkation" she had me throw the main switch and adjust the procedures to motion.

P: "There. It wanted doing. Somehow it had been turned off. Now those few that are alive will be roused and released at last to the world."

A: An end of stasis.

Z: Returning . . . , ordered to return, to leave hostile alien systems, the struggle among the airless and waterless, to leave the fruitless quest in the explored, re-explored, exhausted galaxy. . . .

A: It was done. The race had dared all, won all. There was nothing left. . . .

Z: All to return to the home planet. To bolster the failing population, to bring fresh blood . . . a calling in of genes to this bastion against time and extinction, to answer ten thousand years of slow diminution, the failing intelligence . . .

A: Artificial means had proved ineffective . . . and were distasteful in this context . . .

Z: A calling home, to live forever in the controlled, riskless environment . . . the infinite provision of the settlement . . . this citadel against time, this living and eternal monument to the race and its power . . .

A: All in stasis . . . suspended animation of transgalactic journeys . . .

Z: This last warm place in the scoured galaxy, to live their lives in power of speculation . . . pleasures . . . a good life. To search for purpose . . . having done everything.

A: Vast time elapsed. The people left the barren, the hard. The ships came home. Landed. Were forgotten.

Z: Vast time had elapsed, in that time people had forgotten even the settlement where they lived . . . forgotten the real world outside, the real galaxy, believing only their luxury, the projections on their ceilings . . . desiring nothing . . . dreams their reality. Ignoring even the alarms of

approaching ships. Wise men might have known . . . but who hears wise men?

A: They built the settlement and it deceived them. Perhaps someone had good reason to leave the ships unroused—or thought they did—or perhaps thought it might be a good joke . . . funny.

Z: So the ships sank into the mud . . . now they are roused . . . mostly too late . . . it wanted doing.

G: There was room. I eased the hoverer down the main aisle.

P: "Behind us! Look!"

G: A scream of motors at the doors. Troopers burst in on a great cloud of dust. They tumbled from their hoverer. Arms came up. Gleaming rays sparkled at us. They had their weapons on low power—some lingering superstition of the control room, I suppose. That's how we won.

Protia leapt from my helmet. She was the revolutionary, she opened fire. I swung the hoverer with one hand and hosed my pistol with the other.

My blast cut through consoles, computers and troopers alike. It was a hot five minutes, there were smoke and sparks everywhere. Orange flame mingled with smoke, explosions . . . wires twitched, circuit boards shattered . . . bullets crashed into the wreckage.

I straightened the hoverer. We sideswiped through a forest of mechanisms and charged the air-lock. It needed a solid half minute with the plasma gun and we were out. Exploding out on the pressured air of the settlement in smoke and dust . . . out into the cold thin air of the summit.

Z: Slow revolves the great tragedy . . . the masterful flow of events and consequences.

A: Power fails all over the settlement. Controls go . . . vision is out . . . fire control shattered.

Z: This slow majesty of events! Even now the President,

looking furtively over his shoulder, thumbs his lighter at his vast piles of oiled plastics, clothes, gas tanks, the coal and oils that is their source . . . his kindling, piled in the lowest layer. Ether burns bright, flames begin. Bullets have shattered the fire control, its vital computers. Such noble, slow progress of events . . . such fate.

A : Such childishness.

G : Out in a great burst of expanding smoke and condensing vapour. The dome dwindled behind us, its aerials matted against the hard indigo sky.

When I had time to look around there were these globes. Thousands of them, crystal, spread all over the roof. Perfect seeming, refracting and condensing rainbow light on to the snow.

P : The globes. The bubbles. The highest thought, the highest reward of solitude and contemplation. Awarded by their peers, a prize, a recognition . . . thinkers, artists, scientists, sages might be awarded a globe. Unlimited access to all the settlement's resources and information. Provision and solitude up here in the cold air of reason, the isolation of meditation, trying to think of something that might be new. Pilgrims came to view them, but not many now. The race is gone too far. Up here, the stars and the long nights, the vast vistas to help them, searching for answer, a new goal for humanity, an object for a decadent race.

G : I saw men in the bubbles. I'm sure I saw one move. But when we got there they were all dead, their globes cracked and vented, littered with dried bones of thought and wisdom, desiccated in the cold drying winds.

P : They contemplated until they were dead.

A : It's all the same. It makes no difference.

Z : Their bubbles burst. Possibly their thought lives.

A : Palely, if at all.

Z : How dieth the wise man? How can a wise man be counted dead, how can he die, if his thought survives?

A : As the fool.

G : We headed back for the control dome. I thought we might have to fight, there was no other way down. But when we got there all the troopers were dead. Blasted or asphyxiated. The hoverer was pressurised so we were OK. We found the great white way and went down, but fast.

A : The lower layers are well afire now.

Z : The heat may be felt on the sixth level. Smoke and sparks issue from the ventilators, spreading the fire like cancer about the body of the settlement. People with burning clothes are running.

A : A giraffe aflame is seen on the eighth layer.

Z : The President salivates and surveys his work. He coughs in the smoke, his eyes reflect the fire.

A : He plays a small violin.

P : "Here is the layer of our entry. Let us exit the same way."

G : The people separated for the presidential standard on our hoverer. At first I thought it was smoke and the dim emergency lighting, the soot on people's faces that made it all look so different. Dirty they were, ragged, hollow faces, hungry looking.

P : "I warned you things were not as they seemed. I showed you at the lift you did not see all. The vision machinery was destroyed with the fire controls. Now you and all humans know things as they really are."

G : The hoverer threw up dirty paper, discarded clothing, broken glass rattled on the rusted steel street, pattering on the tattered plastic buildings.

The falling rain stank of urine. Sick hydroponic trees grew in the mean streets, their poor branches draped with thick, plastic flowers. Tarred nutrient pipes led to them, some split, leaking. Narrow, pocked faces watched blankly from dark places, there was gunfire over the buildings. A



tilting loudspeaker told us in the President's voice how wonderful life was, how much better it would be the day after tomorrow. Behind were the brightly lit, gift-wrapped surgical stores, the three dimensional nudies, forty-eight inch busts, the four-inch nipples, all lightly greased for photography. We passed the great hoardings bleating about how the rich weren't happy, brain softening pop told us how contented we were, what a good life it all was. By some freak the machines were intermittently working and there it was OK. Iron streets became cool glades, the endless jingles and advertisements beautiful and significant.

Then we were back in the smoke again. Up ahead someone was killing a girl. He slashed her face and breasts with a broad butcher's knife. She screamed. Dark blood ran between her fingers. She turned away, he slashed her back, then began stabbing her . . . again and again. I bundled out of the hoverer with my gun, but he was gone in the crowd. Cameras clicked and whirled. Someone moved in close with a microphone for the death rattle. The crowd began to disperse. In a way it was worse than the ships, at least the people were dead there. Something heavy crashed on our windscreen, someone threw a petrol bomb, so we got out of there.

A: The President plays selections from the "Noise of Music".

Z: There are flames ahead. Falling sparks, red hot blasts of air . . . burning gobs of plastic.

A: The president is playing selections from the "Student Queen".

G: Protia guided us out. We skirted great blast holes through the floor, around blowtorching geysers of flame. At last we made exit over that same broad sill into the blessed air, we raced down the masonry slopes I climbed in such hope so long ago.

Later, smoky and tired, we halted. I looked back to

the remote fire-flecked mass of the Settlement. Then I slept.

Z: Fire spreads all through the towering building . . . all from that lighter . . . casually found . . . casually given. All the best things are casual . . . accidental even.

A: Enormous temperatures are reached. Steel splashes through the layers . . . burns like magnesium. There are some survivors . . . some make it out . . . animals and humans.

Z: By chance . . . by luck. The deaths . . . the numberless deaths within the fiery pentagonal settlement . . . all from the lighter . . . the lunacy of the President.

A: Lunacy seems to run to pentagons.

G: When I woke the whole sky was lit by the glow. It burned that bright for weeks. Cold gales of fresh air sucked into the great furnace to replace the upward drive of its convection cycle.

P: "They did not even know they were in a building . . . every sensation monitored . . . conditioned . . . all information controlled. The projected stars beautiful to them . . . they were happy. Now all they have is the chaos of reality. Is freedom so much better? Poor surviving wretches."

G: "Watch the Settlement burn! Watch it go! See the masonry cliffs coming tumbling down!"

A: A sight to see.

Z: The fire-cracked mountain falls in blazing ruin! See the white-red revealed heart of the fire! See the great piled and turning heat-generated cumulus . . . the mingled fiery debris . . . the black thunder, tearing lightning spread slowly above and from the settlement.

A: Power sources explode.

Z: The fire balls kindle . . . bright white heat . . . rising turning to violet in the yellow fire fountain, then dying, losing even their brilliance in that conflagration. The smoke

is half around the world . . . the stratosphere stained with the rising ash.

A: Sunsets will be particularly colourful for perhaps a hundred years.

G: Even when we were in sight of the ships you could feel the heat—like warm sunshine. The nights were like day, the mud began to dry and crack . . .

P: "You could see survivors, a few thousands of them, straggling down the newly trampled tracks from the fire."

G: When the mud cracked, the edges turned up . . .

P: "Those poor people. The millions of deaths, terrible burns . . . radiation scarrings. Those poor people driven from their womb into the stern world. . . ."

G: It's better to live outside . . . to be born free. It wanted doing.

P: "Those people from the ships . . . how will they make out? That awakening . . . horror, down there in the dark. . . ."

Z: The fire was beautiful while it lasted.

A: Most impressive. A four-mile pillar of fire in the desert of duned mud.

Z: Yes . . . it wanted doing . . . and it was beautiful. The President thought so too.

A: Yes . . . it wanted doing . . . and it was done.

G: Protia was looking at me. She was crying.

"Don't look at me," I said. "All I did was give a guy a lighter." She nestled up in my arm. Nice it was, I always liked brunettes. Then she said we'd have to help the people. So that's what we did.

Actually it wasn't so bad. The ships had machinery and animals, seeds and stuff like that, in their emergency stores. Like Noah's Ark it was, all over again. We started some of the ship's engines, so there was plenty of power to get us

started. People are pretty resilient when they've got their backs to the wall.

We sealed off the rest of the ships. The people from them go and just look at them, those great hulks with all their buried youth and friends . . . the memories. People go and look at the Settlement too—what's left of it. A low desert of black, fused concrete . . . still burning . . . for years it will burn. . . .

P: So we watch the returning year cycle . . . sit in the brightening sun. The planting and harvest . . . the regenerating race. The green trees and the rain.

G: Protia's a good wife. Perhaps she made the biggest contribution of all. She got up one night, reverted to her grey mist form and started dividing. Like cells, but speeded up. Fantastic it was. Pretty soon the sky was black with Protias—all with more than a little human in them. She said she couldn't have done it without me. She looked tired after, when she was human again. Effete, I suppose you'd have to say.

I wonder though. Things must certainly be better for them. All those Protia-humans, all that Protian blood coming in . . . they'll see that things go right this time. They're human enough, you can't tell any difference at all . . . they think of themselves as human so they are. But it's a new race really . . . it doesn't seem right . . . relying on aliens for our improvement, for virtues . . . like the race will never be what you could call human again. . . .

P: "Can that be bad? When were intelligent, worthwhile things—humane things . . . ever regarded as human?"

G: My thoughts kept turning to the *Place*. A sort of nostalgia . . . I kept getting images of rest and solitude there. Hell—the race was on good footing now. Things were getting better all the time. . . .

P: "Solitude . . . privacy a reward much to be desired. There is a way to the *Place* . . . I could show you."

G: "I have this vision—going back . . . you and me, Protia. They're getting too dependent on us anyway . . . I've

seen enough of them. We've done enough. I've done plenty...."

P: "If you think it's all right."

G: So we did. Through a sort of slit in space, six feet long, two wide ... infinity deep. Back to the *Place*. I can't explain any better than that.

Here we are now. Walking the *Place*, hand in hand in happiness, living and loving away the millennia. We've seen enough of humanity ... done enough—sometimes I almost think we deserve our immortality.

It's a good life, Protia's a girl most of the time—except maybe when we've had a spat and she changes into a tiger or whatever and chases me some. But it's what she is really ... what they used to call a good woman. She's good in bed too ... beautiful ... all those millennia of love stretching away ahead of us ... I've got what I want.

Now we've finished scratching this on the wall we're going to forget it all, relax ... let it go.

P: Sweetness. JOY. Relaxation ... content in the companionable aeons. I don't think it's too bad on earth ... that is I think it's getting better all the time ... that is I hope I think it's not too bad.

A: So it is complete.

Z: The experiment closed. I collate the last results. Now all begins again ... the cycle returns, coming again to a start ... to a beginning.

A: The experiment is closed. From protozoa to galactic travellers and almost back again. Now we must begin.

Z: Re-kindle the dying stars ... re-arrange orbits ... re-determine the limits of light ... the drift of the cosmos.

You were right ... a deadly species ... only one needed to pull down all history ... remarkable!

A: You are happy—you wish to begin again?

Z: Yes ... we will watch them ... watch their dynasties and pathetic scramble ... the hearts break ... the terrible will to subjugate and destroy ... the feral bloodlust of our

children . . . the sophistication . . . the genocide, the spreading blood trail across the galaxy, The return at last, exhausted, to decay in some new settlement, to flood the very oceans with all history's humanity's little daily contributions . . . when we will again bring G from his *Place* again to destroy or liberate them . . . and then begin again.

A : You are happy to go on ?

Z : Content . . . what else is there for us to do ? Let them struggle up again . . . possibly, this time, with Protia's blood . . . perhaps it may be better.

A : Bet ?

N : You imagine the Goldenness, this illumination . . . this crystalline, talking and watching Goldenness. Watch it as it thinks it watches us . . . wheels within wheels . . . full circle again . . . recurring . . . repeating outwards and also inwards.

It's a sad tale I've been telling . . . a sad, sad song to sing. Look out for the next one.

# TILT ANGLE

by

R. W. MACKELWORTH

*With the world in the grip of another ice age, humanity managed to live safely within the City, while outside strange forms of life began to inhabit the ice fields—as exploration teams were quick to find out.*





## TILT ANGLE

THE wind had heaped huge drifts of snow into lumps which had since frozen. Here and there the surface underfoot was the base ice, but mostly it was covered by a gritty, powdered snow. Now the wind had died away the cold was bearable, as a thought; its reality was kept at bay by their efficient suits.

Behind them, as they ran, the sledge slithered over the ice, leaving two parallel dark lines on the rough surface. The runners were heated to prevent them sticking. This happened, even when they paused for a brief moment, if the runners were cold. Not that they intended to stop before nightfall. Then it was essential because during the short hours of darkness all life hibernated or died.

But the whole afternoon was theirs. It was a clear, generous afternoon following on the storm of early morning like a sparkling draught of crystal water. Such good hours were rare, even in late spring. Later, in the height of summer, stretches of clear water would appear and a sudden profusion of strange, bright flowers springing from green moss.

They accepted their protective suits as second skins. Only the globular helmets were in any way unnatural, but these sat on their shoulders lightly enough and the clear perspex was never dimmed.

The voices of the City hummed and whispered in their helmets and kept them in touch with the comfort and safety they had left far behind. Sometimes music took the place of speech. Music was a constant companion, something they had grown up with; its background melodies filled their conscious minds as they slipped over the iron-bound face of the ice to their distant goal.

Beyond the high blue slopes, growing up from the horizon, was the place they had been set to find. Their chances of reaching it were calculated but, nevertheless, not more than fifty-fifty. The chances of a safe return were little better, but experience was an acute teacher so one in three did return.

In the dip of the valley, between the highest blue peaks, a diamond halo shone brightly. Slowing the pace they both gazed at it for a while. The parhelion, creature of the cool, bright sun, was merely an image of the ice crystals in the high air. Like the swirling Aurora it was a beauty without apparent purpose and nothing to fear.

But there were things they feared.

They feared the blue balls of gas that rolled over the frozen plains without sound and the roar of the shambling white giant that might rise, unexpectedly, from hiding among the jumbled rocks. Every enemy had its own special ferocity and purpose.

It was rumoured that there were other dangers, dangers which the homecomers wouldn't talk about.

Tomas muttered to the girl and they moved on swiftly. Soon they reached a gradual slope which swept down to a twisting river of hunch-backed ice. A glacier had burst free from its original channel and the ice river was one of its long limbs thrust into the plain.

They put on their skis and skimmed down the long incline.

For a second or so they hung together like swooping birds, then they parted. He glanced anxiously as her slim, silver figure parted from him. He glimpsed the uptilt of her impish face turned to smile at him in its glass sphere. She engaged his eyes for a split second but, in the blink of an eye, turned sharply away and widened the gap between them.

He wanted to go after her, but first he checked the smoothly running sledge as it skidded along behind him. It kept its distance, but he was afraid he might misjudge its

speed as he turned and it might run him down or career on to the jagged ice below.

His fingers touched the controls lightly. The sledge swept to the left with him; its jets keeping it in its place precisely, as if it was fixed to him by a steel rod.

The control box was fixed to his waistband. The box was the only link with the sledge and if it was broken they were doomed. If the link was intact, even if they were parted from the sledge, he could bring it back to them. For that reason he prided himself on his skill with the controls.

The broken ice surged nearer and threatened them. He shouted a warning to the girl, but she held on until the last moment and turned with inches to spare within the rough arc of the ancient river bed. He made his turn within her sweep.

"Donna!"

She didn't laugh at him. He appreciated that because she usually took censure carelessly. Instead, she merely ignored the anxiety in his voice and stood still until he was close to her. Her sudden smile was half for him and half for her own daring, as if she was delighted with the free rush down the long slope.

"Tomas," she said softly, sure of herself, "do we have to cross that?" She pointed at the ugly back of the glacier itself.

His anger was distracted. "We only have to follow it as far as the cleft of the valley in those mountains," he answered her. "From there we will be able to see the place we want."

"And then it's over."

"Half over," he corrected her.

His face was uneasy. She made no comment on that; she had always trusted him implicitly, even when he wasn't sure of himself. From the first moments she had begun to form judgements she had known he was capable, someone who would instinctively do the right thing.

That was why she had fought off the others who wanted him.

"It's two days to the mountains and then a few hours to reach the . . ." Somehow he choked on the last word, frowning at some secret thought.

She smiled at him again knowing he was questioning the moral right of the community in asking them to take the risk. But, as always, he was hugging his discontent to himself. He suffered his sense of injustice silently; his revolt was secret. Only his hesitations gave him away and then only to her. "Hadn't we better go on—while there is still light?"

Her prompting was enough. He slipped off his skis and put them in their place on the sledge. He packed hers too, with the same care, before they set off again.

For a while they walked slowly, but gradually they increased their pace until they were running with the same old easy persistence.

The wind picked up in the late afternoon. It brought a cold mist with it and Tomas searched the closing horizon for the rolling blue devils which could end their journey so ruthlessly. Donna was as alert. Fear and training made it an instinct.

There were puffy clouds in the low sky and a drifting powder of snow dust scudding across the ice. The wind buffeted them as they bent to meet it.

Tomas was torn with anxiety. He knew he should ease up to find a place where they could hide and take cover. But time was precious too. The longer they were away from the City the longer they were at risk.

It was Donna who stopped, without warning.

For a moment he continued, but he felt her absence and swung round immediately. She was standing, frozen into a silver shadow, half hidden by swirling white mist.

He wondered what was wrong but dropped his eyes to the ground and saw the hump encased in the ice. She had

run into it and there she had stayed, instead of striding over it and going on without another thought for it.

"What is it?" he demanded.

She looked at him but seemed to find it impossible to speak or even to drop her eyes again. Slowly, she took a step back from the lump, like a child on the edge of a sudden cliff.

He understood and was in awe of her intuition.

"I shall have to use the heater," he said coaxingly. "It may be nothing." All the same he knew that was an empty hope.

He didn't wait for a reply but quickly unshipped the heater from the sledge. He was aware of her tense anticipation yet he worked with a precise economy of effort, the same neat drill he had learned through constant practice.

He mounted the heater on its tripod legs so that its heat would be directed over the whole length of the lump uniformly.

Soon they knew all there was to know.

The face that stared up at them was blank and blue.

He turned off the heater and bent down to touch the clear perspex globe protecting the dead face.

"I don't know him. He has been there a long time."

Donna looked down and was both drawn and repelled by the blue marble perfection of the frozen features. Tomas's calm, matter-of-fact tone didn't give its usual consolation. It was this dead thing, caught in the ice, she ultimately feared and no amount of reassurance could help her. "Please, let's go . . . now!"

She was not pleading with him. He realised that mixed up with her fear was a selfishness he had recognised in her before. It hadn't worried him until this moment.

For a split second, and for the first time, he found himself doubting her. The idea was so painful he rejected it at once but the resentment lingered on. Knowing she was only waiting for his word, to leap away from the dead man, Tomas still refused to forget what was necessary.

"We must find out about his sledge first."

She was angry with him but wisely held her tongue. She didn't care much about the opinion of the City, but she did care what he thought of her. Even if he knew about her weaknesses she didn't want to confirm them, finally. He would, of course, protect her just the same, but she wanted more from him than duty. An inspiration saved her.

"His box may still be working."

Tomas had already thought of that, but it relieved him that she had suggested the idea. He didn't know why he should feel so relieved but he was grateful all the same.

He turned on the heater and soon the body was fully exposed, formal and isolated on the ground, a purple ice needle projecting from its chest defiantly.

Tomas carefully avoided the dark tip of the needle and pushed the body over on to its side. The box was intact. He heated it gently and tried the controls. Finally, he set them in the correct pattern and rocked back on his heels, his face absorbed and intent.

The hum of voices from the City had ceased, but suddenly the voices burst into their helmets again. The sound of them was an overwhelming jubilation.

"It's on the way back home again," he breathed triumphantly.

A brief and vivid imagining brought Donna a vision of a long imprisoned sledge breaking loose and quietly, efficiently, setting off for the City, its human companions left behind, long lost and forgotten.

It seemed important to her they had only found one body. She was glad it was the man and not the woman.

To her relief Tomas allowed them to depart. She saw the grimly set face and knew it was shut up tightly against her, like a trap.

They went on, side by side, neither of them looking back and a new kind of silence between them, a silence that made her wish they could go back.

Soon the whirling torment of the storm caught them up.

All dangers were now multiplied. The threshing arms of the wind-driven snow struck at them like whips. It was a matter of shelter or death. Not just death from the elements. Other kinds of attack were frequent during storms.

Tomas saw the high rock in front of him and the yawning black wound in its lower flank. He turned towards the rock and found it was an isolated projection, rearing up from the plain. Also the cave was on its protected side, away from the main thrust of the wind.

He closed with the cave entrance, threw in a flare on the turn, stopped abruptly, in case the brilliant light sent forth an enemy, then called Donna.

Swiftly, working together, they unpacked the tent and carried it to the main entrance of the cave. Tomas called up the sledge, but stopped it again at a safe distance. He directed a torch beam into the darkness and sought out the further recesses, discovering nothing but the rough architecture of the rock.

He pushed the tent inside and it expanded into a luminous ball in the centre of the floor. They entered the cave and stood in silence by the tent. Nothing stirred.

Tomas's fingers flickered over the controls of the box and the sledge lifted itself over the ridge at the entrance and slithered to a halt at their feet, its bulk taking up most of the remaining room.

Confident they were secure, Tomas set up the heater at the mouth of the cave and set it to throw up a curtain of warm air that would exclude the biting wind.

Although their security was illusory they could have relaxed, spoken even, but instead, as if by mutual consent, they stripped off helmets and suits and set up their sleeping quilts in separate places in the tent.

The light dipped and was barely a glow, but for a long time neither could sleep. Eventually, sleep came, when their tired bodies undermined their restlessness, and took them safely through to morning.

Tomas woke and put on his suit and helmet. He went to the entrance and looked out on to a clear morning. From the moment of waking he had made up his mind to put things right with Donna. Their unexpected estrangement was neither useful nor logical. The rift had to be healed and he was the one to make the first move.

He stared into the bright whiteness and thought of waking her. As if to make sense of his change of heart, a small white creature scuttled out of the cave. He stepped back, startled, and watched it as it lifted on to its hind legs to inspect him. Its tiny pink nose wrinkled at him busily.

He guessed it was a rat. He had never seen a rat, but he had been told the unbelievable truth that other life did survive in the wilderness—relatively defenceless life. He couldn't despise confirmation.

Neither could he despise the truth that Donna was his only companion in the same wilderness.

He turned to go to her.

Outside, the rat screamed. The scream was oddly human. It flashed through his mind it should have been less of a scream, no more than a squeal.

He swung round and crouched low, seeking the hurt animal as he did so. It was transfixed fifty feet from the cave. He knew it was fear that held the animal so rigidly and he knew what was still to happen. He waited for it.

A blue haze infiltrated the outside whiteness and he sensed, rather than saw, the rolling shape moving towards the rat.

But soon the cave was darkened by its shadow. From the high places in the City he had seen such blue clouds. Because he knew that one day he would have to make this trip they had impressed him subtly. It had shocked him to discover that those who had survived their journeys were even more fearful than he.

As the blue ball of mist concentrated over the body of the rat he knew why.

It hung, low and brooding, where the rat was and pulses



expanded through its tenuous sphere like solid rings of smoke. He felt its immense cold infiltrating into his suit and was afraid of its choking mist as it sat over its victim.

His eyes were trapped by it as the rat was trapped.

He heard nothing else and saw nothing else. He knew, when it had finished with the small animal, it would come for him but he couldn't move.

The flare arced over his head and fell into the frozen cloud and lit it up from the inside. His eyes were still fixed on it and the blue diamond shape of the rat at its heart. Even when the substance of the ball fell apart and drifted away in the light wind he was still hypnotised by the little creature it had left on the ground. The flare was a mere happening, a small intrusion.

A cry of triumph broke the obsession.

Donna was standing just behind him, her face passionate with exultation. "I killed it!"

He stared at her. "You couldn't kill it. It wasn't alive in the first place." His voice was cold and flat. It was as remote as the bleak land outside. "I've studied them. They are phenomena of extreme cold."

She was about to answer him angrily, but had the insight to recognise shock. Quietly she returned to the tent and began to pack.

They looked down on the sharp angled valley as it cleft the flanks of the mountains. Far away, the valley fanned out into a wide plain. The plain crumbled into another kind of landscape. This was riven by dark cracks and fragments of its surface had reared up, as if great pressures had torn them apart, only so that they could be cemented by intense cold into strange, distorted shapes and conflicts.

On the horizon they could see similar movements were still going on in microcosm as if, out there, the landscape was still being formed in primeval torment.

Tomas found himself thinking what he saw was alive and therefore dreadful, even though it had been explained

to him that it was a huge expanse of water; the sea. Here, inexplicably, warmer waters were clashing with frozen land masses and their meeting was violent. He realised that calling it the sea made it somehow alive, just as Donna thought the blue ball of mist was alive. In the City some of them called the deadly blue mist the Welkan. He frowned on such gifts of personality.

"There is the place." He pointed down at the very edge of the frozen sea, where a black cliff reared unexpectedly from the plain, far to their left. "It's where they said it would be." He was satisfied. Things were falling into their rightful places again—utterly predictable and safe.

Donna looked and only saw the ugliness of the cliffs and the way they loomed threateningly over the frigid shallows. She shuddered and averted her eyes.

There were other constructions, dark and indistinct, on the foreshore but they didn't make sense to her. On the cliffs there was a high obelisk that might have been made by human hands or rough hewn by the elements from the rock. This interested her a little; if it was made by people then they were her kind of people.

The first mile of mountainside was steep and smooth. From then on, for another mile at least, there was a dark mass. It was like a web made up of abstract strokes in black paint. It had a curiously secondhand look, as if nature had worked it over in one style and had changed her mind in a panic. There was more, as the eyes distinguished lesser landmarks. At some time or another practical hands had wrought changes.

The first was a flight of worn steps cut in the ice and rocks. The steps were covered with a black coating of ice and were therefore dangerous, but there was a possible way down, alongside the steps, where the sledge could go also.

The girl wondered; it needed more than skill and patience to cut the steps. Somehow, she felt, those who had made them had possessed enormous strength. They had carved

the rock as easily as wax and that appealed to her, appealed to the wakened instinct within her.

She jumped as Tomas fired a grapnel into the ice. The beautifully constructed metal claw gripped the ice and its fine line spun out, slithering down to the lower plateau. He tested the line and clipped it into his belt. She did the same and they descended, allowing the line to check their descent where it was bad underfoot.

The dark mass was below them and now it was closer they could see what it was. The look of it was as bad as the atmosphere of evil the girl had sensed issuing from its silence. It was a jumble of gnarled limbs stretching across the whole of the lower valley. They were less than limbs, they were black and grey bones stripped of their flesh.

Tomas said: "It's a dead forest."

They looked on the savaged trees, hardened to stone by time and eternal cold, and crept closer. "They said there was a way through for the sledge," he said. She looked back at the silent, self-satisfied hump of the big sledge and her look was very like contempt.

"There's a way through for us too," she said, suddenly content again. Then, impatiently, because he seemed to miss her point: "Where the sledge can go so can we. If you set the controls it will find a route for us." She was aware she had taken the initiative because the sledge was too important to Tomas. It was a threat to her and to what she planned for them both.

He set the controls and the sledge skimmed along the edge of the dead forest. It swung, without warning, into the trees and they followed it. It went in under a high arch of twisted branches and they entered too. Inside, they felt trapped—as if they were in the gut of an unending skeleton.

The sledge stopped.

Slowly, it backed up the tunnel towards them. They halted and allowed it to pass between them, waiting grimly for the cause of its retreat.

There was nothing.

Tomas said : "I know what it is."

Donna stared at him.

"We must go first."

Donna turned on the sledge, her eyes blazing. "Why us? Why not that thing?" She went for it with a frenzy of little kicks, as futile as a small child's.

"It's only a machine," Tomas reminded her quietly, "and it's programmed to avoid danger. If we hadn't relied on it to find a route for us we would have found a better way." The sledge followed him into the tunnel like a faithful dog.

Donna caught up with him.

They reached a place that might have been in the centre of the devastated forest. Here they stopped again.

It was different. The confusion of grey bent arms and white fingers were fiercely entwined. Thick limbs hung down, sharpened to needles at their lower points. Others thrust upwards from the forest floor like blanched and hard breasted sentinels.

In the very heart of the tangle was a blue diamond.

Tomas immediately thought of the Welkan. He associated the blinding blue light with them, but illogically because there was no proof of the connection.

He took a step forward and Donna caught his arm.

"Leave it!"

He stared down at her hand and then into her face. What he saw in her face was genuine concern, but all the same he gently disengaged her fingers. "I shall find a way round it."

He faced the octopus of ice.

"I want to go back." She thought if she said it firmly enough he would change his mind.

"There may be no other way. We haven't any time to waste and until we have done what we have to we can't go back to the City." He looked back at the sledge. "Perhaps we could use a flare."

The blue diamond sparkled as if it was turning slowly, too slowly for the eye to catch its movement, but enough to change the position of its inner facets.

The ground beneath it reflected its blueness and the intense colour shot through the whole framework of ice. In the same moment cold infiltrated their suits and struck at their bodies. Both of them knew they were facing disaster.

Tomas whirled round and pushed Donna back down the long tunnel. When they were in the open once more he rushed her along the barrier of dead trees until he felt they were safe. Then, for a long time, they stood together, sharing their mutual despair and wondering how the others, those before them, had found a way through the canopy of stricken trees.

It was Donna who made a decision.

She made for the higher slope of the valley where the mountain rock slid down into the forest. On the high shoulder she found the gap. It was so clearly the right way she was angry with herself and Tomas.

"Here!" she shouted.

He ran to her, the sledge following.

"Can the sledge get through?"

"Of course it can," she answered him irritably. "And why didn't that thing come this way in the first place? It must be known what is in that terrible place. We were nearly led into a trap . . . by that!" She pointed accusingly at the sledge.

He went to push by her.

"Which is most important, Tomas?" she asked calmly.

He had no answer for her.

On the other side of the trees they found themselves with a view of the cliffs and one ugly rearing buttock pressing into a long huddle of black buildings. On top of the nearest cliff the tall pyramid of stone stuck up into the grey sky, mysterious but obviously a landmark.

The huts were long and low and nothing to look at. Donna was curious about them. She lingered to look in

through their broken windows. Some were completely broken, their frames hanging out of the walls like empty pockets from worn trousers. Inside, she saw, the floors were crushed and splintered and every room was bare.

Her eyes strayed from the desolate huts to the stone quays. Huge rough cut stones snuggled to one another along the edge of the frozen shallows. The weary arms of rusting cranes were collapsed on the quay and beyond, under the great face of the cliff, there were warehouses. Their huge areas of roof dipped into their empty guts.

Only the biggest, which ran right back to the cliff and seemed to go on into it, was undamaged and not yet emptied. It was to this warehouse that Tomas went, without looking at the other buildings or waiting for Donna.

She not only explored the vast dock area but dallied on the quay where the topsy turvy hulks of rusting ships still lay alongside. She crossed to the stern of the nearest and read the faint letters of its name and the name of its home port. The port was familiar to her; she had heard of it with other such names, names whispered at quiet times by the older people. But she had never got much further than the names. Sometimes it was the music and sometimes it was other, more deliberate, interruptions. She knew why; the vague hints had stirred discontent in her.

She walked down the quay.

A long chain hung from the bow of the ship and fell, one heavy link after another, to a ring fixed in the stone. She touched the links and wondered at their thickness. It occurred to her that she and Tomas could explore the ships.

“Donna, help me.”

His voice was angry and she ran at once to the entrance of the warehouse.

He was far down the wide expanse of floor, his arms around a huge container, attempting to lift it from the end of a stack. From where he stood the lines of containers stretched endlessly into lines of perspective that joined in

the far distance. The lines were precise, almost a military precision and for that reason impressive. The bright light that came from nowhere was impressive too. It was as significant as the steps in the rock.

She helped him take the strain of the weight of the container and lower it to the floor. Together, they rolled it on to the skeletal frame of a slave sledge. Tomas had already assembled a dozen of these to be linked to the giant sledge and hauled back to the City.

That was their next task—the return journey.

“Were all the warehouses full once?” she asked.

“Most of them were emptied at the beginning. They contained the basic materials for the City. This one was reserved for food.”

She considered it practically. “How much food?”

“Deep into the cliffs. Thousands of tons.” He allowed himself to think about the seemingly endless store and knew it must be less than endless. One day it would be finished. The City was a hungry locust.

The girl watched his face covertly. “Is it right?” she demanded quietly.

He knew what she meant but merely raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“I mean it’s like being a parasite.” She waved her hand at the long rows of tightly packed cylinders. “We live on charity. Is that right?”

The secret rebellion boiled inside him. That was the way they would make the food eke out, he thought. Because some of them, like the girl, questioned the source of supply they forgot the drill and only one in three returned. Fewer mouths to feed. There seemed no alternative to the system, but he objected to the waste of life. Why hadn’t the food been taken to the site of the City when they first built it?

He took the next container and loaded it by himself.

She turned her back on him and looked towards the distant oblong of the warehouse door, at the white light reflected from the snow on its threshold.

"There's more to see here," she said decisively.

He nodded, as if he accepted her attitude. He led her to a small door in the side of the building. "Climb the ladder up the side of the warehouse. There's a door at the top that leads into a place high in the cliff. I was told there were rooms up there. Perhaps there is something for you to see. In any case you will be able to see the whole of the dock area from there."

"Aren't you coming?" she enquired gently.

The long ladder clung precariously to the blank wall and went up to just below the roof. She was a small insect, a black spot moving towards the opposition of the high cliff and roof. But she climbed quickly and confidently.

Her hand touched the door and it swung open.

She entered the first room timidly.

There were desks and chairs. The walls were covered with dusty charts and faded maps. She lifted a cover and found a typewriter. Her fingers rested on the keys and they clicked against the roller, sticking together because she had pressed too many at once.

Leaning drunkenly against a closed window, as if a frightened hand had swung it wildly, was a big telescope on its mount. She tried to straighten it but the window prevented her until she pulled the telescope away from the window. She put her eye to the lens, but the glass in the window was dirty and obscured the view. She looked for something to smash the thick panes.

There was nothing in the room she could use.

She turned to a door, next to the door she had entered by, and tried the handle. It turned, but the door didn't open easily. It was as though the hinges were tight or the frame warped, but she guessed that it was caused by unequal pressures. The place beyond was virtually sealed against the outside.

It was less than a room inside; it was only a small cubicle.



There was a further door and she tried to open it, but it was firm.

The words on the door had an unfamiliar ring.

NO ENTRY FOR UNAUTHORISED PERSONNEL

She turned them over in her mind and was softly impressed. All the same she soon found the small peephole window by the door and put her eye to it.

Down below the room where she stood she could see a long hall. It was bright and clean and well lit. Row upon row of desks filled the hall from end to end and she sensed an air of expectancy as if the late occupants were about to return to duty any moment.

At the further end, facing her, was a huge translucent graph covering the whole of one wall. The graph was criss-crossed by fine lines, but there was another thicker line set at an angle to the vertical.

This thick line was bisected by what looked like a shadow of itself, but the shadow was at an even wider angle to the vertical. Donna felt, without apparent reason, that once they had been even further apart. She found some kind of reason, in the arc of a red trace of colour that joined the vertical and the two others: line and shadow. The red trace continued below the tip of the shadow.

As her eyes grew accustomed to the light she could make out the pale ghost of a sphere appearing three dimensionally in the graph which the lines dissected. Above the red trace, that courted the curve of the sphere, she could just read a title.

She thought of it as a title as if the graph was some obscure work of art.

"Angle of tilt?" She said it to herself questioningly.

Quietly she closed the door to the tiny lobby and returned to the other room. She opened all the drawers of the desks and in the last turned over a picture. It had been colourful once; its surface had been glossy. The edge of the

paper was torn as if the picture had been ripped from a book or magazine.

But it was the shape of the mountains and their balance against the green topped cliffs and the blue sea that made the picture special. There were only touches of white, here and there, on the waves of the sea—the blank, accursed white.

She knew, without the aid of the telescope, that the land and sea outside were the same land and sea, but changed.

She wiped a small circle in the dirt on the window.

Far away, over the tortured ice, she saw a dark curve on the horizon like a cloud curling over a desolation of broken rubble. She stared at it until her eyes hurt. Finally, she decided it was solid and real. Over the other side of the narrow sea there was a shoreline and above that the breast of olive green moors. The sea along the other shoreline was moving freely and breaking sullenly upon it.

“Tomas!”

“Yes?”

His voice answered her in her helmet with a hollow echo, devoid of sentiment and a little resentfully. She ignored his tone. “I’m coming down. I have something to tell you.”

He must have heard the excitement in her voice. “What is it?”

But she wanted to see his face, so that he knew her triumph wasn’t selfish, that she wanted to share her discovery with him. It was obvious after all. That was why so many hadn’t returned to the City and why they had only found one body. There was a choice. Others had gone elsewhere. Somehow they had crossed the sea to the warmer land on the other side. Then there was the graph. That meant something. The closing angle of the two lines were like a pair of open scissors. When they were closed the world would be changed. The colour, the beauty, the warmth would return again.

All she had to do was work on his sense of injustice, the secret revolution in his head which only he and she knew

about. She could show him the proof from the window. He would use the telescope, of course, because he would want to be absolutely convinced.

She swung on to the top rungs of the iron ladder.

She must have screamed. In the moment left to her she heard Tomas call urgently, but by then the white fury was smothering her, screwing her body as if it was torn paper.

He knew it was too late even before her body tumbled slowly down from the upper platform. He knew it before he reached the foot of the ladder. The terrible face of the big white animal seemed only feet away. It projected its evil at him with a force that was almost physical.

He should have gone to the girl. There might have been some life left in her. But he was afraid for the sledges. If the beast wasn't alone . . .

The warehouse doors were still open and they would wreck the containers in there.

He backed off slowly.

The white giant was an obscene blob against the cliff. He fumbled for the grapnel gun on the sledge and drew it round his body until it was aimed up from the pit of his stomach.

The cruel metal fingers slammed into the creature's chest and the line snaked up with it. He jerked at the line and the animal screamed.

He jerked at the line with all his strength.

The animal lost its footing and fell to the ground beside the girl. For a while it rolled in a contortion of agony. Then, slowly, remorselessly, it turned on to its belly. It began to claw its way across the ice to him.

He was aghast at its immense power. Incongruously, he was shocked as much by the tiny red eyes, open and staring at him. The beast's hate made his own resentments seem a mere nothing; its huge appetite for life overwhelmed the flicker of his own urge to survive.

But it wasn't just his survival.



He fought for self control. The animal could not reach him before he shut the warehouse doors and moved off with the sledges. Unless he stopped to help Donna. But Donna was dead and there was no sense in risking the sledge and its train.

Even if she was alive . . .

The girl had been selfish. Even when he had been loading the sledges she had wandered off.

She had wanted to tell him something. Whatever it was it had been important to her—not to him. But she had brought disaster on herself because she was selfish.

He backed off slowly to the warehouse doors.

As he closed them he felt a terrible urge to go to the girl. It was sudden and sickening. He realised she had held his discontent in check. By himself he might have rebelled against the futility and the danger of the journey. Now, paradoxically, when he was alone rebellion had lost its savour.

The animal had given up its pursuit.

Painfully it was dragging itself back to the girl's body.

Thomas fought off a new and tormenting temptation. Donna was dead. Taking her body back to the City would increase the risks and achieve nothing.

He fixed his attention on the smug hump of the lead sledge and followed grimly as it hauled its long load over the ice towards the mountains.

Sometime later he heard a scream.

He wouldn't look back. He knew it was the last cry of the dying animal.

He heard her voice once. It whispered his name desperately.

But he knew it was imagination and in any case the music of the City drowned it out almost as soon as he heard it.

THE SONG OF INFINITY

by

DOMINGO SANTOS

*Translated from the Spanish*

by

ARTHUR SELLINGS

*Now that science fiction is growing up internationally, we can expect to see many different treatments of plot ideas by European authors. Here is a delightfully poetic example from Spain.*



## THE SONG OF INFINITY

*To Colonel Alexei Leonov, the first man of Earth to have been in a position, perhaps, to understand the true significance of this story.*

*The song of infinity is sorrow and joy,  
is pain, solitude, tears, prayers.  
It will bear us down to the depths of nothingness,  
and lift us too to the most sublime heights . . .*

It was only an object floating in space. A tiny object barely visible in the unsoundable depths of blackness. It had been there a long time. Hours, days, months . . . how long does not matter. In space, time does not exist. All that existed was this object . . . and solitude.

*I am alone. I know that I am alone in the universe. Around me all is darkness, emptiness, silence. Of no account to me the stars, those small and distant lights that watch me. They are nothing. They can only watch me, without understanding my solitude.*

*I am alone, terribly alone. Nothing can relieve the vast loneliness that possesses me.*

It rotated on its axis. It may well have been doing so from the beginning, but he had not been aware of it until now. It was a slow rotation, very slow. The stars seemed motionless around him—until he realised that they were not quite motionless, that they drifted slowly, steadily, to his left. At first he imagined that it must be them, though he knew that thought was an absurd one. It was he who was rotating. But what did that matter in the midst of space and solitude?

*How could you have let this happen in the first place? I*

*called you over and over again on the radio. I shouted until my head rang and my throat was hoarse. But you didn't hear me, and you went away from me, little by little, inexorably. Until you were swallowed up in the distance, indistinguishable except as just one more luminous point among all the rest. You abandoned me in the midst of this terrible emptiness.*

*Oh God! Why didn't you realise!*

It had been a stupid accident. He had gone out of the ship to repair one of the auxiliary jets, damaged by the impact of a meteorite. The work capsule—a kind of shell used for any operation outside the ship—was tethered by a safety line. But, during one of his manoeuvres, the line got tangled, stretched—and broke. And he had found himself floating free in space, cut off from the mother ship.

That had been the start of everything. . . .

*At first I didn't notice a thing. I went on working, completely unaware of what had happened. It was only when I went to start back that I realised that the line had broken. And—I panicked. It was my fault, I know. I jabbed frantically at the controls—and only sent the capsule spinning like a top. By the time I got it back under control, it was too late. You were drifting slowly and inexorably away from me, your gravitational field attracting me less strongly all the time. I tried to get back to you, but the manoeuvring reactors of the capsule did not have enough power.*

*Space vertigo hit me. I was lost, completely lost . . . utterly alone.*

An insignificant speck in the universe. A fragment chipped from a stone. Less . . . just a grain of sand, a molecule of air, a drop of the sea. Lost in the immensity of space. Alone, alone, alone.

*How long have I been here?*

*Centuries, it seems. This solitude, this silence, this enormous emptiness all around . . . lie on me like the stone of an immense tomb. The instruments show that I have*



*enough air for another forty-two hours, though that is little enough. I do not know how many turns the hands of my watch have made. One, ten, a hundred . . . here time doesn't exist. Seconds, centuries . . . God, if I had to die, why couldn't it have happened cleanly?*

At first there had still been hope. Before long they must surely notice his absence, notice that the safety line had broken, and come in search of him.

That idea had soon withered and died. In spite of his apparent immobility, he was moving in space at a velocity only slightly less than the ship. But the steady loosening of the bonds of gravity—that and his first wild reaction—must have sent him on an arbitrary course away from the ship's trajectory. Now his distance from that trajectory could be a hundred . . . a thousand . . . a million kilometres. They would never be able to find him. He was condemned to die here inside this capsule, dependent on a scanty ration of oxygen and a heat reserve from the tiny batteries that would soon be exhausted. Without food, without water. He would die here, helplessly, lost in space, cut off from all humanity. Condemned to wander in this sealed tomb of the capsule, alone for all eternity. Until the end of time.

*Never, never, never, never. Never once have they called me. What went wrong?*

*Nobody will come to my rescue now. I will wander in this capsule for all eternity, silently crossing the immense void that surrounds me. Maybe the batteries will go first, maybe the oxygen. It doesn't matter; I am going to die anyway. My body will stiffen in absolute zero. I will turn into a statue of crystal, a shape of crystallised flesh freezing my last gesture of terror. And someday perhaps a ship will come across me, in some remote future, in some remote corner of space. And they will say: "This is the man who was lost from Procyon, way back in the year 3000." And they will take my frozen body back to Earth, and perhaps give me funeral honours.*

*But, far more likely, no one will ever find me. My corpse*

*will wander across space for all eternity. My God, for all eternity! Eternity! Eternity!*

And suddenly he was terribly afraid. He did not want to die here in the middle of space. All he wanted was to get back to earth—if only to die there. To be buried in the soft earth of his home planet. To know that his body would decay slowly, reverting in time to the dust from which it had sprung. Why had he ever come out here? So far away from life?

*Where are you, Earth? I have searched all around me, trying to pick out the sun that gave you life, but I can't find you. Searching among all the stars, among all those countless points of light, so near seeming, yet so far away. They seem to have all retreated from me, as if they would have me realise as clearly as possible my utter solitude.*

*Where are you, Earth? Where are you? My God, where are you?*

Perhaps it was that brilliant star that seemed to stand out from the rest. Yes, that must be the sun. In time, the Earth might come near, though he would never see it. If only he could steer towards it, cross that enormous distance which separated them! Millions of kilometres. Why were the stars so distant? Why should they want to flee from him?

*Heavens, it's cold. I feel that something frozen has penetrated deep inside me—and changed me. The heat from the batteries is powerless to dispel it. No, it isn't fear . . . but solitude. The solitude and silence that surround me. That will go on surrounding me . . . for all eternity.*

*For all eternity . . .*

He did not know how long he had been here, slowly turning in space. Perhaps years. But no, the oxygen meter showed that the tanks were still half full. Only a few hours had passed . . . but only a few were left.

How could a dimension so vast contain a time so short? Why couldn't hours be changed into years, stretching out to defeat eternity?

*I have been watching you, stars. You are only points in*

*space . . . yellow, red, blue, white . . . like little spots of light painted by an invisible hand on a black backcloth that stretches all about me: above, below, before, behind. I know that in reality you are huge furnaces, generating titanic forces in your interiors, immense confusions, apocalyptic sounds. But to me you are just points of light, unmoving, silent . . . dead. Why don't you cry out? Why don't you break just once this terrible silence of the tomb?*

A tomb; that was what space was for him. He shuddered inside his pressure suit, seized by a sudden impulse. All he had to do was turn off the oxygen tap, wrench the heater cable out—and finish it at one stroke. But he couldn't summon up enough courage. He was afraid. He would wait. There would not be much longer to wait.

But, in that very moment, when he least expected it, something happened . . .

*What was that?*

The sudden sound startled him. In the vast silence that surrounded him, the tiny whisper had sounded like a pistol shot. It had been something so slight, barely audible, yet . . .

*Did I imagine it? . . . but it sounded like a voice. A strange voice that called me by my name. A weak voice, very weak, as if calling from a long way off. I couldn't have imagined it. Are they calling me at last from the ship? But the Procyon is God knows where by now. They can't be. And yet . . .*

Yes, it was a voice. And soon another, and another . . . until there were many voices calling him from far off, by name. Softly, very softly. From all directions.

He felt a strange sensation inside him. It was like a deep murmur, such as the sea makes. Like waves lapping the sands of a beach, unendingly—the sands of his own favourite beach back on Earth. The murmur grew. Strange unknown voices, like the echo of a faraway choir, chanting some long-forgotten Wagnerian hymn. Pronouncing his name. Over and over . . .

*It is the silence mocking me. Making me hear voices—here where the only reality is nothingness itself. I have heard stories of men lost in space. The few found still alive had always been mad. They said they had heard voices.*

*No man can survive for long in space, isolated within himself. The silence changes and separates into sounds, the sounds into voices, and the voices seize a man's brain. Growing stronger and stronger, until they reach the depths of his being. And then they break him apart.*

*And now the voices grew stronger and stronger . . .*

*Shut up! Oh God, shut up just once!*

*And the sound stopped. The voices no longer called him. Silence flowed back, fearful and total. A silence more remote than the distant stars, more remote than the black depths which stretched beyond yet were the same infinity.*

*And the silence ached. He wanted to shout out, to shock himself with the sound of his own voice, but it died in his throat. The stars kept looking at him from afar, unmoving, as if studying him.*

*I realise it now—you are like enormous eyes. Great round eyes that contemplate me unblinkingly. You do not want to miss my death agony. That is why you have drawn back from me—to watch my sufferings. Leaving this deep space all around me. You are lying in wait. You are cowards, myopic sadists. I'd like to shout my defiance in your faces, but I know that you would not hear me.*

*Why are you so furtive? Speak! Speak, I tell you!*

*If only the ship would come close to him. Just to be able to see it, however far away. The Procyon would give him a certain sense of security, of protection, of company. Only if it were just a delusion, he would no longer be alone.*

*Because now I am alone, and you know it. I am the only man left in the universe, and therefore you contemplate my agony. Waiting for my end.*

*Why do you hold your silence? Speak! Let me hear your voice again!*

*And the murmur began again. The murmur of waves.*

The song of the sirens. It came, like the other voice, from a long way off, growing stronger and stronger, pervading everything with its sound. And this voice was very pleasant to him.

*The song of the sirens. Do you hear me, Ulysses? What would you do now, in my place? Is this the self-same song you heard from your ship, lashed to the mast to stop you rushing to its call? Tell me, what happened to the sailors who did? They died, did they? Or did they go to meet another destiny—one greater and more glorious?*

An odd legend of space came to his memory. He had heard it in some tavern or other, a long time ago. A man, a mug of beer in his hand, had said that the stars called to men who ventured outside their ships, to entice them with their calls. Someone else had butted in scornfully to say that the stars were nothing more than fiery masses of hydrogen and helium. The man with the mug of beer had sworn that what he said was true, that the stars had voices, that they enticed men because men served them for food. But the others had only laughed at him . . .

Of course the stars had no voices. They *were* only great infernos of hydrogen and helium. Yet . . . now the stars called him, seeking to ensnare him. And he felt happy at their call.

*Because I am not so lonely now. I have you to myself now, your voice, your presence. I begin to understand you. I am beginning to feel part of you.*

The voices spoke his name, over and over. The loneliness ebbed from him. He no longer felt abandoned by everybody; no longer felt that he was the only being left in the universe. Because the stars were at his side now, his comrades.

*What do you want of me? To devour me? It doesn't matter to me, since I have got to die anyway. It doesn't matter, as long as you are by my side. As long as I don't have to die alone, death does not frighten me any more. I can face oblivion calmly.*

The voices sounded now like echoes of thunder. The instruments showed that the oxygen had nearly run out, but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered any more, because he no longer felt alone. He would never be alone again.

*I feel cold, but you will give me your heat. I see that you come closer to me. You are no longer remote and unattainable. You have lost your fear. You are no longer cold and silent points. You speak to me. You want me to be one of you.*

*Stay! Come closer. Drown me in your sound and in your light! Blind me . . . deafen me . . . only so long as I become part of you. Raise me up to your kingdom.*

He felt a chill. The batteries were draining out, the oxygen too. That brought a moment of lucidness to him. He was going to die. But that knowledge, while giving him pain, also brought him a kind of ecstasy.

*It's a kind of space-drunkenness, I know. I am going mad. But, God, it is beautiful, this madness!*

And another memory flickered through his mind—something almost forgotten, the scrap of a conversation. Something he had heard from the lips of a spaceman, a man with a face furrowed by the deep lines of space. Curious words, spoken in some faraway place in some faraway time which perhaps no longer existed.

*"Man's destiny is out in infinity. We are bound to Earth by our bodies, but a day will come when we shall free ourselves finally and space will be our kingdom. But in order to attain that we shall first have to pass a great test."*

*"Test?"*

*"Yes, an initiation test. Of pain and purification. We will have to rid ourselves first of earthly dross, purify ourselves of all the miseries which weigh down our bodies. Only then will we be fit."*

*"And where will this purification take place?"*

*"Out there—in space. Where Man may meet himself truly alone for the first time, alone with his misery and his*

*grandez. And understand the truth—the real truth—of everything. Out there, alone in the darkness.”*

He became aware that he was no longer cold. The stars were kindling his insides with their fire. To cleanse him of the misery and corruption of Earth. Changing them into something nobler.

*This is space madness. I am going mad, I know. The stars coming close to me and talking to me . . . the whole universe waking into a new and strange life . . . sirens . . . purification . . . it is all a product out of my own mind, my own madness.*

*But, God, it is so sublime, this madness!*

The batteries were finished, the oxygen needle was almost at zero. The end was near. He had been many hours alone in space, many days, many years perhaps. For all an eternity, wandering through nothingness. He had seen strange visions, but they didn't matter any more. He had heard star songs, but they didn't matter, either. He was going to die. But what, in fact, was death? Who could say what lay beyond?

*It does not trouble me now to die, in such a beautiful agony. Perhaps everything is madness, but it is a sublime madness. Beyond solitude is life. All the universe is with me. Blessed madness that lets me die accompanied by such a great and universal homage.*

Space no longer existed around him; the stars had joined one to another, making one radiant light. Silence no longer existed; the voices filled his entire being. Come away, away, away . . . And, immersed in that supernal Nothingness, turning in that vortex, he floated free, drunk with light and sound, surrendering himself to it all.

The oxygen was finishing now; each time it cost him greater effort to breathe. But he felt immeasurably calm. After the great emptiness that had enveloped him, this was liberation.

*It's all madness, I rave. Sirens, spirits, stars. Purification.*

*Nothing matters any more. I have reached my limit. I am dying now.*

The voices were chanting a hymn of triumph. All was a torrent of light. Everything was turning . . . turning . . . about him. He had reached the end.

*But . . . is this really the end?*

Many centuries passed.

A transport, making its regular run between Alpha Centauri and Earth, spotted something drifting in space—an old work capsule. It was identified as one which had been lost, ages before, by a ship called the *Procyon*. A thorough examination revealed that both the capsule and pressure suit were intact, the capsule sealed from inside, and the suit's clips fastened as securely as they must have been on that fatal, long-forgotten day.

They got the capsule open. With the suit there was no need. One look at the faceplate . . . and they turned to look at each other unbelievably, only to find their own disbelief mirrored there.

And when they turned back to the suit, they saw what they had seen before. The suit, like the capsule, was completely empty.



# GREEN FIVE RENEGADE

by

M. JOHN HARRISON

*Power politics being what they are, when aliens and humans meet for the first time it would probably not be to the aliens' advantage. The problem would be to conceal the fact—and the contact.*



## GREEN FIVE RENEGADE

EVENING. It was cold, and the sun was split across the horizon in streaks of smoke and blood. A light, vagrant wind curled across the lifeless sedge-flats, ruffling the slow brown water of the dykes. Redeem the astronaut worked his way painfully along a straggling watercourse, through the rotting stems of reeds. His hands and knees sank into black loam as he moved; the mud seemed loath to release them, it sucked and clung tenaciously. His chest wound had begun to worry him again, nagging and burning; he sensed at least two broken ribs on his left side; the rest were bruised and tender. A wan mist, faintly luminescent in the thin grey light of evening, hung in the hollows. Redeem was unsure whether it was real or merely a product of some vision defect resulting from his pain. The reeds hissed and rattled around him. He made it finally to the bank of the dyke.

Some twenty feet from him, rising out of the peripheral vegetation of the stream, floated the pale blue trimaran *Lady Veronica*, swinging marginally on her mud anchor as the wind caught at her stern. She was beautiful: thirty feet long, slim and low with a raking bow. Stubby anedral struts fore and aft, each having a smooth aerofoil section, held on her outriggers. The chromed ramstacks of twin inboard Chevy V-8's thrust up aft of her cockpit. Redeem needed the *Lady V.*: he had watched her for two days now, studying her position, and he knew he could manage her one-man one-woman crew, barring accidents.

He hadn't, however, expected it to take half a day to approach her unseen from his bivouac among the reeking fens and reed-banks. He was tired; very tired; and dreading that he would hear the cough and snarl of the Chevys. It

seemed unlikely that they would move her so late in the day; but he could not be certain. *Lady Veronica* was capable of making a good ten or twenty miles before dark: more, if her crew were willing to risk tearing off one of the secondary hulls in collision with some floating log, or fouling one of the screws among the thick rubbery subsurface weed of the waterways. Because of this fear, he decided to move immediately, without resting the cracked ribs.

From the filth-caked denim jacket he had stolen from a fisherman after landing the capsule's emergency dinghy, he drew the Chambers 5-mm reaction pistol, wrapped in stinking bandage that had previously bound his wound. He shook the cloth free and gloated over it. He had been dreadfully afraid that it would slip out of the jacket during his long crawl. He fondled it like a lover infected by some strange soul-fetishism. It was his lifeline. He loved it. There were three charges left, one for himself if he failed: there was no other route out of the marshes; Moon's men would by now be covering all the roads.

The couple were lounging on the foredeck of the primary hull, forward of the steering gear and windscreen: a pleasant, ordinary-looking pair, wearing thick cable knit sweaters over summer shirts. Redeem had come to the conclusion that they had probably hired the *Lady V.* for a couple of weeks' holiday among the fens: to some, the reedy desolation might seem beautiful. The woman was young and blonde, a depressingly nubile Average Girl with vacuous eyes. She would be a loss to nobody—not even her rabbity squire with his nervous toothbrush moustache and watery stare—thought Redeem. And realised with that thought that he had already committed himself to killing the pair of them if the need arose. They were rattling plates and glasses, they had a folding table on the deck. Laughter fled over the grim marshes. Redeem shrugged. He was hungry.

He moved out of the reeds, clasp ing the gun with both hands, still neurotically worried about dropping the thing

in the black ooze. The thought of being weaponless and thus losing his chance at the *Lady* had become a fixation. He had dreamt about it in each bout of fitful sleep snatched since he first sighted her. In the dream, he was digging like a child in the mud, arms black to the elbows, frantic, when Moon stepped off the *Lady V.* and held out the Chambers, smiling his fat smile . . .

He was scrabbling over the port outrigger just behind the steering-well, when they noticed him.

The table crashed to one side as they leapt to their feet in a flurry of op-art holiday slacks; crockery glanced off the deck coaming and splashed into the dark water. Redeem saw his mistake. Sprawled across the gap between the hulls, his ribs on fire and both hands necessary to keep his balance, he couldn't bring the Chambers to bear on them. If the couple had anything in the way of a weapon, he was finished. It would have been easier to challenge them from the shore . . .

As it happened, he was safe.

The man piped "What the hell!" in a voice somewhere between a squeak and a yell, obviously scared stiff. He froze, his face white in the crepuscular glow, as he saw the shocked O of her mouth. Her breasts heaved. Redeem left hand. The girl slowly raised a hand to cover the shocked O of her mouth. Her breasts heaved. Redeem hauled himself into the cockpit and got both hands back on the gun. He rested it on the top of the screen, feeling more secure. He was swaying and his ribs were griping at him. Nausea welled up, and his voice came as a thick croak: "Get off the ship. Both of you. Or I'll shoot. . . ." He hoped desperately that they believed him. That way, he wouldn't have to do it. *Lady Veronica* rocked as they moved. He relaxed and checked the controls. Plenty of fuel, but the keys were missing. The couple were now standing among the reeds, looking foolish and uncomfortable.

"Ignition keys," he said. The man put on a blank expression. For a moment he was very near to death, as Redeem

wondered if he was going to be mulish about it. He waved the Chambers vaguely and repeated the command. They both began to fumble in the pockets of their slacks. A key ring described a brief glittering arc terminating in the steering well. Redeem secured it, tried the keys until the engines spat and growled into life. Throughout the whole performance, his victims stood like lambs, silent and uncomplaining. Redeem essayed a cracked grin as he left the Chevys idling and went to deal with the mud-weight. It was beyond his strength to lift the thing up on to the deck. Instead, he disengaged the rope from its mounting lug. *Lady Veronica* began to drift. Back in the cockpit, he cut in the screws and gave her power.

Nosing out into the waterway, he glanced back at the couple and waved an ironic farewell. The mad laughter of released tension cracked his chapped lips. Autumn piracy on a curlew-haunted afternoon. Two op-arted figures marooned in a lonely fen. The symbolism of it amused him inordinately. But he soon stopped laughing, because it hurt his ribs.

All day, sallow-faced Mr. Moon sat in his quiet little fifth floor office, surrounded by grey filing cabinets: obese, gently-spoken and altogether deadly. He spent a good deal of his time smiling out of the window—a small rosebud of a smile, not, one sensed, altogether indigenous to his face—and looking down at the motor cars as they travelled the complex of sliproads and freeways at the foot of the building; watching them create a mechanical Rorschach test, flowing and jamming at the traffic lights. At those times, he wondered what the Psych surgeons would make of the shapes their boss read into the surge and pattern of the traffic.

Today, fat Mr. Moon was angry.

He sat gazing down at the cars, listening half-heartedly to the smooth and boring voice of the young man in the cord Edwardian suit and black polo-necked sweater. Below, the

tarmac maze gleamed fitfully with steely highlights that were the reflections of clouds in the water-filmed roads. Each car was a bright jigsaw-piece. They formed and reformed, charting continents known and unknown. Mr. Moon discerned a fleeting representation of Tolkien's *Gor-goroth*. It metamorphosed almost at once into the sad profile of a clown with a sky blue Packard for an eye.

"Let's recapitulate, Henry," he murmured. He watched a white toy aeroplane rise from the distant airstrip and climb hurriedly into the cloudbase, as if fearing some kind of pursuit. Henry coughed uncertainly, fingered his lapels, shuffled his notes. "Come on, Henry," whispered Mr. Moon, "tell me *all* about it. From the beginning." The gentle chiding of his voice was a cold wind on a summer day, foreboding winter. Oh, Mr. Moon was *exceedingly* angry. He visualised the little white Boeing scuttling about the clouds, pursued by aerial sharks. Henry began at the beginning; his white, pretty hands moving expressively, fluttering like small snared doves. Little lines of worry appeared round his big soft eyes. His tiny touch of eye-shadow quite failed to cover them.

"Five days ago, the orbital capsule *Green 5* took up a stationary position six hundred miles above the equator——"

"Very good, Henry, very nicely spoken."

"—Piloted by Captain Charles Redeem of Aerospace Research. The satellite had been orbital for"—He consulted his notes—"thirty two hours, when Jodrell Bank detected an unidentified vehicle on a collision vector. They estimated that the UFO was hitting something in the region of .95 C."

"Pretty swift, Henry. Amazingly swift in fact. Go on."

"The craft came in so fast they were unable to say for sure where it originated. They picked it up in the region of the moon. They did say, sir, that—projected—its line of travel indicated a possible origin somewhere in the Belt of Orion. It was slowing from the moment they detected it: so it could have been an FTL ship——"

"Don't be silly, Henry. We don't know anybody with an FTL ship. Besides, Mr. Einstein definitely said 'No' to faster-than-light."

"I know that, sir——"

"Then get on with it, boy, get on with it." Mr. Moon's voice became even gentler. The cars below had formed the outline of Mr. Moon's favourite sculpture, Matisse's *Slave*. He admired it. Henry was saying: "The object braked heavily and matched Redeem's orbit at 0900 hours on Monday, London Time. *Green 5's* radio cut out completely. It never transmitted again. We don't know if he received our own transmissions. The two vehicles met."

"Forty minutes later, the UFO accelerated abruptly away. It left on the same course as it had come in on. The radio telescope lost it straight away. They wouldn't tell its G factor. I don't think they believed their own instruments."

"Silly fellows," murmured Mr. Moon. "Go on, boy. I might forgive you if you say it nicely." He beamed.

"Some time later, Redeem fired his retros and came down: but not in the arranged spot. *Green 5* fell into the North Sea. She should have come down off Arnhem Land, Australia."

"And you lost Redeem, Henry. I trusted you to get him for me. The government needs him, boy—and they're becoming impatient. They've taken the *G.5* to bits. Now they want Chas Redeem. They'll take him apart, too, to get what they want. Henry, they have to know what happened up there: and you and Redeem are getting in the way of that knowledge by not playing the game. What are you going to do about it?"

Mr. Moon spread his plump hands in a gesture of unhappiness. He thought that the boy should have perhaps one more chance. But he had to learn that there were plenty of other bright boys waiting to take his place. And there was also the problem of the Whitehall people. They were scared about what had happened up there, they



needed to know. Another bungle on Henry's part might bring down heavy breathing on Moon's neck. Interdepartment enquiries. Questions in the House. And, inevitably, a new broom to sweep the Department clean.

"It can't be that difficult, Henry my boy. There's nowhere he can go. The Other Side want him too. They're very interested. That's why we're so worried. They're interested enough for it to be nothing of theirs that fazed Redeem. And if it wasn't theirs, who *did* it belong to?"

"If they get him first, we're done, Henry. No more pretty suits for you if the Department goes under. Eh?"

"We have him located, Mr. Moon."

Moon's pale blue eyes brightened. He smiled the slightly unreal rosebud smile. He offered Henry a gold-tipped cigarette. Henry took it.

"That's nice, Henry. I think I've forgiven you now ... Where?" He spat the last word and stopped smiling beautifully.

Henry handed him a map of the marshes. On it was marked in red wax pencil a twenty-square-mile circle, whose edge touched the shore where they had found the abandoned dinghy and pressure suit. Mr. Moon's nicely manicured index finger tapped at the chart. "Get him, boy. Go out and get him yourself. Bring him back to me or I'll have your guts out on the floor and use them to predict your future: beware the hanging man, Henry, you will make a long journey. ... Understand me?" Henry left, smoking the gold-tipped cigarette. Mr. Moon hoped he was frightened enough to deliver the goods quickly. He sighed; he hated to discipline the boy, he was so slim and straight.

He studied the map for some minutes, tapping that one red ring pensively. Then he got to his feet and breathed on the window. When he had wiped away the condensation, he found that the cars had formed the head of a gargantuan Guignol, leering. Mr. Moon leered back at it. He breathed on the glass again, waited for a while, washing his hands in anticipation.

But this time there was nothing but chaos beneath.

The light had turned middle-grey and was toning towards charcoal. The sun was gone. The water lay dull like mercury. *Lady Veronica* huddled in the fringe of reeds round a small eyot in one of the broader waterways. She was moored bow and stern by thin nylon ropes. Redeem had attached these to grapnels and hooked them into a pair of sad and stunted birches. An east wind knifed down the stream. Twenty yards upstream on the north bank, a heron perched raggedly on a rotting stump, watching Redeem with suspicious beady eyes as he piled foliage on the deck. He had heard a helicopter ten minutes or so before, and run immediately at forty knots for what cover he could find—thanking whatever gods watched over grounded astronauts that he'd stolen the *Lady V.* and not some 10 hp cabin cruiser. He finished the skimpy camouflage job and regarded the heron silently. It stared back at him like a hunched and rheumy old man. Then it stretched its wings and flapped off. Redeem went below and tore up bedding, thumbtacking small squares of blanket over the ports before he switched on the cabin lights.

It was now pitch dark. For a short space, he stood stock still and channelled total awareness into his ears, straining to catch the harsh clatter and beat of the chopper's blades. All he heard was the wind rattling in the reeds, the gentle slop of the water against the hulls, and a curlew mourning out of the bleak flatlands. He relaxed.

He ate and began to clean up, showering the caked muck from his body and examining the inflamed area round his heart where the fisherman had hit him with a batten of bone-white driftwood: reflecting grimly that the man had paid heavily for the blow, too heavily. He wondered abstractly if the body had been discovered yet.

The previous crew of the *Lady* had left plenty of clothes, most without taste: Redeem finished up in tight and garish sailcloth jeans, and a towelling shirt in sick purple. He slung

a reefer jacket over the ensemble to cover as much of it as possible. He had a good deal of trouble getting into the jacket; his amateur attempt at strapping up the injured ribs gave him little comfort when he moved.

He glanced briefly into the shaving mirror—depressed by the way the bones stood out in his hungry, sunken-eyed face—and decided to leave the beard. The grey hollows under his cheekbones disturbed him no less than the hot, manic light in the eyes of his reflection. He was a stranger, this gaunt mirror-Redeem; a spectre from out the fenland night who had crawled into the astronaut's body. *You kid yourself*, he thought: *He has his origins up there, this alter ego. He has haunted deep space and found it unbearable. There's no fen ghoul as lonely as this Chas Redeem. . . .*

Later, he lay supine in the dark, smoking and re-enacting for the first time since his splash-down the visitation that had driven him back to earth fast enough to incinerate the outer hull-shell of the G.5. Redeem, the fallen earth-angel, blazing like Lucifer cast out . . .

. . . *Green 5* hung above the fat bulge of the earth, a dim little foetus strung on its umbilical cord of speed, a tiny envelope of life with an altogether ephemeral shell between it and an inconceivably hostile environment. Redeem was feeding routine particle analysis data back to Central when the microwave transmitter squawked as if someone had fed the entire output of a plasma-reactor through its circuits, and went stone dead. Four seconds of bent Martian garble later, the receiving gear followed suit. Redeem was suddenly alone. The sensation was strange but bearable.

He was checking the rest of the electrical equipment—concentrating on the firing gear because he couldn't go anywhere without it—when the capsule lurched fractionally.

At first, he thought he'd been hit by that million-to-one meteor they always told you not to worry about. Vacuum-fear surged through him: the monstrous death of decom-

pression confronted him, flung up by his imagination from some pit of horrors in his mid-brain: high vacuum was a beast with frozen eyes and exploded bowels. But the pressure gauges showed no drop anywhere in the coach-size ship. He hadn't been holed.

Then something was thudding on the forward hatch.

Stuck there in the reeking pressure suit, Redeem learned a lot about the kind of fear that attacks the bladder in a quick, uncontrollable spasm, and makes you feel that you were never a man anyway, just a puling kid. He learned about loneliness, too: because the sensation he had dismissed earlier was nothing: loneliness happened when you *needed* the people that weren't there. When they were six hundred miles removed, which meant they might as well have been dead.

He had regained some control when the hatch undogged itself and swung open.

They stepped in . . .

*They rode the light-lanes from ancient Betelgeuse, in a glittering organic cockleshell, all curves and re-entrants of crystal, so small it fell and drifted like an alien analogy for a sycamore seed; nothing more than a cocoon of spun silica and woven webs of energy. And that journey was nothing to them. That careless errantry of space and time.*

*There were two, he and she, with silver pelts and the faceted ruby eyes of insects and the dragonfly wings of seraphim.*

*And they came with a mere greeting for him, a hydrogen line "Hail" that was no purpose at all, and yet all the purpose necessary to impel them across the light years. Merely a greeting from one distant house to another: and Redeem at that time the doorwarden of Earth, hung out there in his dim shell. He took their greeting gravely, the gift of their presence: took it for all his people. It was a meeting of couriers, representatives of race.*

*Then he threatened them, and tried to force them from his ship.*

*They were puzzled as much by the weapon as the action. They took the pistol gently from him with the hands of their minds, and asked him Why, Why?*

*So he showed them his mind, the Human Legacy. They probed it, and were terrorised. Three billion of us, he said. He showed them the crystal seed-ship, torn apart for its secrets in some laboratory complex. He showed them themselves under the knife and the ECT machines. He showed them a million children born hungry and a handful of politicians born rapacious—hungry hands groping out along the light lanes on FTL webs—taking, taking, taking . . .*

*We want the stars, he said. Go away. Don't give us the chance . . .*

The insistent complaint of his ribs formed a drag-anchor on the present; the pain pulled him out of the hypnogogic currents, the drift of the dream; that, and the febrile buzzing of a crane-fly as it blundered helplessly around the cabin. Some freak aural condition of his trance-like state took and amplified the drone of the insect, subtly distorted it. He came wide awake, fast, listening tensely for the beat of the helicopter's rotors. When he had identified the sound and sourly rejected the intruder, he pottered around making coffee and considering the decision he had taken after the aliens had drifted off in their impossibly fragile coracle.

It had seemed to him—as he hung stunned in a void made doubly empty and inimical by their departure—that it was not sufficient merely to turn them away, thus keeping the star-drive out of the talons of the politicians below. If he had just kicked in the retros, splashed-down, and told the world innocently, "What UFO?", they would have put him through the Psych Section meatgrinder and extracted the truth within hours. Not that the truth would have helped them, with the aliens parsecs away and still

accelerating: but in Redeem's mind was also the knowledge of the home-star of his visitors: and that gem would have gone on record until Earth developed an efficient stellar drive of her own. If he was to insulate these naïve beings—with their total lack of violence—from contact with the savagery of his fellow-humans, he had to be sure on a long-term basis; he had to avoid the probes. So he had put down a hemisphere away from Central, and run.

But things being so, and he in a mood of God-sized altruism, why had he come back at all? Moon and his troupe of ghouls were bound to get him in the end. Why hadn't he blown his own head off on the shore, rather than the fisherman's? For that matter, why take so much trouble to bring down the G.5 in one piece?

He had no answer. He knew that he didn't much want to die. And he knew that his death would be imperative when Moon eventually showed up.

There would be no problem if he could believe in what he'd done, or in his motives for doing it. But he suspected that his compulsion had been aesthetic and emotional, rather than humanitarian. They were too beautiful to be dropped into the moist, grasping palms of the world, like so much small change. So where was the logic in that? Redeem gave up and drank the coffee. He went to his bunk and dreamt of Mr. Moon and his psych-surgeons. They had sawn off the top of his skull and were picking out titbits, their sleeves rolled back and their fingers delicate. Smiling Mr. Moon told him not to worry and tucked a pristine napkin into his shirt collar. When Redeem screamed, he said "Pragmatism, my boy: the world must eat——" Then there was a pounding in Redeem's ears, and he was stepping naked into high vacuum. A silver-pelted figure moved at each side of him, and he felt no fear, only a massive elation.

Dawn smeared bleak and pale over the fens. Silence but for the high lament of curlews. Nothing moving but the cold mist that feathered up from the stream in dissolving

arches and shifting columns. Redeem faced it greyly, hunched inside the reefer in search of a wholly imaginary warmth, his ribs nagging like a fishwife. The damaged area had become puffy and distended. He felt the vague fear of the man who has never been seriously ill in his life, and laughed at himself with graveyard mirth: it was a little late to start worrying about it.

He ransacked the cabin in search of charts, finding only a one-inch ordnance survey map of the area and a tourist guide marked with beauty spots, battle sights and Norman churches. His initial intention had been to try and make it back to the sea; he had some absurd notion of sailing the *Lady Veronica* to the Continent. (And here an inland water vessel: beautifully built and fitted, but none the less a weekend tripper's craft that would probably break up in the first heavy sea of the season.) But the nearest estuary was well out of her range, and he didn't dare put into a staithe for more fuel: or risk staying with her for more than a day, not among the fens. Her erstwhile crew might already have reported the piracy. She would stick out like chorea among the rest of the traffic; there was nothing else on the streams with the *Lady's* class. Or shape. Consequently, he was forced to reconsider.

A small metal plate screwed on to the fascia above the controls told him that her base was a small private yard well within a morning's travel of his present position. He decided to extend his neck a little. Working from the assumption that Moon had already learnt of the theft, he made up his mind to head for the yard: deciding that the fat man would hardly look for a stolen boat at its home staithe. Once there, he could perhaps take safely to the roads, while the Department scoured the dykes for a pale blue trimaran that was safe at its own mooring.

It was thin. But he was short on inspiration. He had lost his enthusiasm for the task.

He stripped the vegetation off the decks and slid the ship out into the mist, hoping it would last. The dark aliform

shape of a gliding heron hissed over his head, then shot upward into the murk, startled as he gunned the Chevys. He wished that whoever had built the *Lady* had fitted decent mufflers on the exhaust system. The low register snarl frightened him stiff and cut out any chance of his hearing pursuit until it was too late. He had been making seven or eight knots for half an hour when the mist lifted, leaving him nothing for cover other than an exposed feeling that crawled at the nape of his neck.

Henry lived in a bright mews flat with his best friend. They shared the domestic work but not the cost. Because of that, Henry valued his executive position with Mr. Moon. Valued it to such an extent that when they phoned to tell him that the crew of a boat called *Lady Veronica* had been found knee-deep in the marshes, he immediately cancelled his after-breakfast appointment with his analyst (one Kristodulos, an awfully saturnine Greek Jew of the Freudian persuasion). Henry slipped into a cream shantung shirt, mazarine velvet hipsters, and high-heel boots, and went personally to interview them. He was anxious to achieve creditable results.

They stood awkwardly in his office. Mr. Hodgeson was still somewhat nauseated as a result of his helicopter trip. He was unused to flying, he explained. Alice Hodgeson alternated a wan ichthyoid stare with a nervous giggle. Henry looked upon her with distaste. They were surrounded by five of Moon's special detachment; rigid men with tinted spectacles and cyclothymic (depressive-depressive) personalities; dangerous men. Henry was fond of them all, but he sent them away because they were scaring the woman. Henry was a talented PR man when the Devil drove.

He talked pleasantly to the couple for ten minutes, probing gently. What he learned made him recall the specials quickly. A little later he had picked up ten more men and was five hundred feet above the city, piloting the Westland



turbo himself. He really was extremely talented. And he could hardly believe his luck.

For two years, Veronica Marten, owner in name only of the *Lady V.*, had lived on two quite distinct and separate levels: a distasteful and vaguely schizoid existence. On one hand, she gave her life to her husband: to his money, his huge obsolescent house, his boatyard hobby. On this plane she joined—overtly happy—in the countless small scenes of the rich-bitch life; the ceremony of late dinner, the annual ritual of snipe-shooting, even a little desultory beagling with the local pack. These things she affected to enjoy; and her imitation of pleasure was remarkably convincing. On the other hand, a second Veronica—prone to sweeping fits of depression and nameless fears—walked the drab fens with a drab and unpeopled mind: utterly and devastatingly given up to boredom and ennui. This Veronica longed for a release she could not define or formulate, even to herself; to be able to explain or document what it was she needed would in itself have been a release.

She knew that it must be an emotional thing, but she had no idea how it might be fulfilled. So she became a stranger to herself; a fey, beautiful wraith of the marshes on one side; and on the other, a clever, charming and completely artificial wife to a rich, clever and charming man.

It was the second Veronica who stood—dressed in a short burnt umber and orange shift, cut in shot silk, giving her the air of a wild and shifting flame—in front of a slightly open french window facing the small staithe, watching the current carry dead leaves from the willow clump on the far left of the quay to the boathouse complex on the right. The garden that stretched between house and river seemed pale and, though well-kept, faintly etiolated in the late morning light. Grey clouds scudded overhead. A mist threatened in the hollows. Veronica was waiting for something to happen.

An unpleasantly handsome young man with beautiful

and patently artificial manners had called some two hours before and informed her that someone had stolen the *Lady*. He was now hidden in the boatyard with a contingent of faceless, dead-eyed men, waiting for the thief. Why he should wait in the yard was beyond her, one would have thought it the most unlikely destination for a thief.

Apart from the young man, there were fifteen of them; all unnervingly silent and moving with a repellent grace and assurance. They called him Henry in soft toneless voices. It was a grotesque pantomime; sixteen men to one, ridiculous measures for catching a simple criminal: but it was a charade with an edge of cold deadliness that sharpened as the minutes passed and the tension mounted. A curlew piped from the willows. She shivered, leaning forward. Nothing happened. This is what comes of hiring out the boats, she thought, irrelevantly. She wanted a drink, but could not force herself away from the window. The air chilled her bare shoulders and arms. Perhaps this macabre fascination was the stimulus she missed.

She was lost in an examination of what this admission meant to her when the raking bow of the trimaran slid slowly from behind the willows. Its engines were dead; it drifted at about four knots, slightly faster than the current. Veronica stiffened, anticipating the rush from the boat-house.

Nothing happened.

*Lady V's* starboard outrigger grazed the quayside. A tall scarecrow figure in lurid harlequin clothes climbed out of the steering well, moving stiffly. He held a glittering pistol. His free arm was wrapped round his ribs. Weapons: she hadn't realised that there might be shooting. He took up the bow mooring line. There was no movement from the boat-house. Awkwardly, he leapt to the quay, bringing the boat up sharply on the rope and hitching the loose end quickly to a tethering spike. All his motions were strangely slow and restricted. She supposed that the hidden men were waiting until he had cut off his own line of retreat by

immobilising the boat. She found her sympathies concentrated with him, this motley thief of her boat: the underdog syndrome: why did one always root for the underdog? He looked around. Perhaps he sensed something amiss. The curlew piped again from the willows.

They came running silently from the boathouse.

Amazingly, he laughed. She heard it quite plainly, ringing across the drab, pale garden. He went down on one knee and raised the weapon. It coughed twice and stabbed wan fire at the hurtling black figures. Two fell, carried tumbling forward by their unspent momentum. He remained rigid, arms at full stretch, pistol steadied in both hands.

Veronica saw the hipster-clad Henry raise his right arm. The onslaught ceased, froze into a tableau that resembled a child's game of statues. Henry stepped forward a couple of paces and shouted: "Give it up, Redeem! We have you bracketed!"

Again the laugh from her tatterdemalion pirate. He motioned with the pistol. His opponent winced. "Go to Hell!" he yelled back, then went on: "You won't kill me, young Henry. It would disappoint Moon. He needs me alive. So what are you going to do, old fruit? You don't dare shoot; but there's nothing to stop me picking you off one by one. I'm a killer, Henry, a big bold buccaneer——"

Henry smiled patronisingly. He looked unruffled, gestured to one of his men, who ran forward, crouching low, carrying a rifle. He knelt by Henry's feet and squinted down its sights at Redeem.

"Hard luck, Redeem. This is a big-game weapon. Bring 'em back alive. Fires a syringe of dope. We won't kill you. Don't worry about it."

Veronica understood little of this exchange, but two things had become plain: Redeem was certainly no ordinary thief: and Redeem was finished. His last, puzzling card had been trumped. Now it had come, she admitted that she had identified with him; that his failure affected her a level deeper than mere rooting for the underdog: she

had, in fact, ceased to be a spectator and become intimately involved with the action. She slumped, defeated with him.

Redeem shot the rifleman.

Absurdly pleased, she watched him lunge for the cover of the boat as Henry fumbled for the rifle. He missed his footing, sprawled across the outrigger. Henry took careful aim.

Then the hovercraft appeared.

It bored in from the east, directly towards the house, the moan and growl of its lift-jet clearly audible as it skimmed the low pasture land across the river. Its slanted cockpit windows caught and reflected light, making it seem like some huge saurian; blind, leprous-white, and inexorable.

Henry's too-handsome face set itself into harsh, rigid lines. He lowered the rifle and shouted orders that were lost to Veronica in the greater racket of the approaching juggernaut. His men redeployed in a ragged line along the water's edge and began to fire at it. There was some sort of heavy automatic weapon mounted in its bow: repetitive sparkles of light lit the blunt snout: tracer whipped and slashed. A lot of Henry's men fell. The 'craft's forward lift-skirt touched the opposite bank. Great white feathers of spray plumed up as it began the crossing.

The *Lady V's* fuel tanks exploded, enveloping her in an oily fireball. Henry caught fire and began to roll on the ground, shouting. His voice cracked and slid up into a higher register. He sounded like a woman.

Out of the chaos shot Redeem, sprinting like a broken-field runner.

Before she realised quite what was happening, he had shouldered the french window wide open and was standing swaying in front of her. He stank of smoke and sweat; his garish apparel was stained and scorched. He looked like Harlequin in Hell. He brandished the sidearm under her nose. Veronica felt an electric surge of heightened awareness, a buoyant sensation of sharpened perception. For the

first time in two years she felt assured enough to let her own reactions go unquestioned. She was alive.

"You won't need that," she said, and her voice was cool and controlled: "I wanted to help anyway."

A baffled smile appeared on his blackened and maltreated features. His grey eyes locked on to hers, calibrating her sincerity. Outside, somebody lobbed a grenade at the hovercraft: it dropped into the river and went up with a full, flat concussion. Redeem made his decision, letting his gun arm fall to his side. The smile broadened.

"I'm glad," he said, "The damn thing's empty. I'm not very good at the pirate bit."

Deep inside the house was a silence that trembled on the verge of frigidity, cool and dark. Redeem followed the dimmed fire of the orange dress, watching the woman's graceful but collected motions with an interest that came close to masking the pain in his side. She led him through a bewildering collection of service rooms, notably a warm kitchen whose single latticed window admitted only enough light to maintain a cloudy twilight at noon. The myopic nickel-chrome fascia of a microwave oven contrasted explosively with the leadblack sheen of an ancient wood-fired range, creating a conflict of time that somehow destroyed the room's drowsy serenity. They walked quickly down sparsely ornamented, stone-floored passages—the deserted servants' quarters.

Redeem found trouble in believing it all: he was inclined to think that he was still lying in the fenland bivouac, dreaming the place in a pain-fever. There was something of the oneiric fantasy in this juxtaposition of his ragged harlequin, the woman's living flame of a dress, and the oppressive maze of the eighteenth-century corridors: some quiet statement of unreality in the quality of the light. He accepted it equably, feeling a calm sense of *kaif* despite the urgency of the situation. She swung open a brass-handled door to reveal a large car port.

There were cluttered workbenches, a small lathe and two inspection pits. Standing alone at the other end of the port was a Lewis/Phoenix Sunbird, a two-seater hardtop built round a single longitudinally-mounted radial-flow turbine: an intractable overpowered vehicle which possessed the reputation of being built for potential suicides. It crouched black and baleful, a suspicion of the cockatrice stare about its big paired headlamps.

She said: "I—my husband and I—have a cottage on the coast. I don't know why we keep it"—she tried a laboured conversational smile, as if suddenly out of her depth with him—"It's so cold there. The east coast, that is . . . I'll take you there." She finished on a brusque note. She did not speak again until the Sunbird was burning up the long straight roads that characterised the area.

As they left the port, a bone-shuddering concussion rattled the casements of the house. It seemed that someone had scored on the hovercraft. A mushroom of roiling flame and smoke overtopped the roof-ridge by a good twenty feet. Burning JP4. Redeem had little doubt that the opposition was systematically wiping itself out. There was little doubt, either, as to the origins of the 'craft: Combloc was obviously taking an active interest in him, too. It was almost flattering, all this pursuit. He glanced at his brand new guardian angel, found her brooding dark eyes turned on him.

"I take it that it was your boat I stole?"

"Yes. Why?" She seemed remarkably unperturbed by the business.

"It's a long story, and you won't believe half of it. I'll tell you when we get there. I'm Redeem. Who are you?"

She told him, then concentrated on holding the front wheels straight as the Sunbird lost contact with the tarmac of a hump-bridge. She appeared satisfied by the evasion. Redeem settled back into his bucket seat to study her—not considering his next move because his escape was too recent, too immediate to leave his mind leeway for in-

volved thought. It seemed to be taken care of anyway. He hoped vaguely that she wasn't one of Moon's operatives.

She drove with a tense involvement that excluded everything but the road and the car; her thinnish lips were tight with concentration under a straight and unfashionable nose, a classic nose; her chin was well-shaped, her complexion milky (he didn't know how much of it was cosmetics, which of course is the secret of good cosmetics): it was, in fact, a thoroughly classical profile, with none of the forced *retroussé* coyness that was the current rave. He was glad. He eyed the lift-and-sway motion of her left breast under the shift. Her hair spilt over its upper curve like planished gilding-metal. Something caused her to look his way; she intercepted his appraisal; raised one eyebrow, humour touching the eye beneath. He found himself nonplussed.

She sequence-braked the Sunbird down from the high nineties and swung it into a degenerate sideroad surfaced with pebbles and flanked by twisted blackthorn bushes. The car began to buck and yaw on the loose, rutted surface. Redeem, shaken about like a pea in a tin can, became aware of his ribs again: this time as the focal point, the high spot of a dozen different aches. There was a new quality to the pain; it was sharper, and more urgent. He experienced a resurgence of his earlier nausea, feeling a distinct schism between psyche and soma—his mind reeling vertiginously away from his pain, seeking the release of unconsciousness.

Hemmed in on three sides by bitter salt marsh and pasture land abandoned to the damp acne of reed clumps, the cottage huddled against the landward face of an extensive, marram-planted dune. It was a small cube of white-washed brick with sand in its thatch, and it had the air of being terrified of the encroaching fens. The side road petered out at a rotting lych-gate, impelling them to leave the Sunbird and negotiate an ill-defined path—once more surfaced with the ubiquitous pebbles—between the reed-tussocks and pale, viridescent patches of bog. Beyond the dark green ridge of the dune—its flank incised by a flight of

white steps leading crestward from the cottage—the sea hissed and boomed like a monstrous caged beast. Redeem, struggling out of the Sunbird, aware that he was cracking up, heard it—and was suddenly and inexplicably afraid.

He followed the orange flame, forgetting it was a dress, forgetting the woman who wore it. He stumbled on the ovoid pebbles. Like hen's eggs, but grey. His vision hazed and contracted until its peripheries held only the icon of the tangerine flame and the section of path before him. The short walk became a journey as time telescoped away from him, isolating him in a continuum of heavy feet placed one before the other, spongily. He seemed to have no contact with the ground.

There was a pause in which he managed to lift and swing his heavy head, like a ponderous, injured bear; fighting to focus on the woman whose name he could not recall, as she fumbled with keys and the latch of a pitted brown door. The step was too much for him. He caught his foot on it. He fell into a soft pit of charcoal darkness.

In his coma, Moon waddled over the crest of the ridge. Smiling fatly, he descended the dune-stair on delicate feet, his paunch shifting and bobbing like semi-fluid gelatin. The wind keened greyly through the marram . . .

The smoking wreck of the *Lady Veronica* moved sluggishly at its mooring, still burning fitfully above the water line. Stinking ash scummed the river around it. Of the Combloc 'craft nothing remained above the water. Two fire tenders were still pumping  $\text{CO}_2$  foam on to the oil slick that had spread several hundred yards downstream, firing the boatyards as it surged past like a lava flow. A third tender was occupied there among the charred, collapsing ribs of unfinished boats. They had already lost one crewman among the debris, upon the explosion of a twenty-gallon drum of high-impact resin. An almost tangible pall of dank dejection overhung the staithe.

Mr. Moon surveyed the scene, his ulcer griping cynically.



He had flown from Whitehall after a somewhat undignified interview with the Minister: that, coupled with the fifteen minute helicopter trip and the fiasco that lay before him like a washed-out firework party, had turned his lunch into lead. He picked his way across the damp lawn like a cat—watching bright beads of moisture form on his shiny patent leather shoes—to where Henry slumped inert as a bundle of burnt rags under the ministrations of a medic.

The filing cabinet mind of Mr. Moon contained an astonishing store of unrelated information: it was to this he owed his reputation: his ability to dip at any time into a pool of overtly irrelevant data, and produce therefrom two or three ideas that definitely did have some bearing on the situation in hand. For instance, as he walked towards the body, he ruminated on the fact that the boatyard was owned by one Thespian Marten, OBE; a piece of information that meant little on its own. But Mr. Moon also knew that Thes Marten had made an abortive foray into politics as a candidate for the now-defunct Liberal party; had a wife who spent a good deal of her time in renovating a fisherman's cottage just south of Cromer because her husband was sterile if not actually impotent; had once turned up at his Harley Street specialist's wearing pink culottes and driving a black Lewis/Phoenix Sunbird. A motley enough collage of tales gleaned mostly from gossip; hardly biographer's material: but one never knew . . .

He considered Henry, not without revulsion. Mr. Moon deplored such open-handed violence; it was most uncivilised. And Henry so handsome, too.

"Well?" he asked the medic, a thin and ascetic young man who promptly switched on his professional manner: compounded of condescension, competence and camaraderie, in equal parts. He was not one of Mr. Moon's special young men.

"Oh, it's not quite as bad as it looks"—measuring Moon up—"Sir. I've used one of the new aerosols pretty extensively. They have to be far gone these days, to escape

our clutches——” He laughed, a curious distortion of his facial muscles. His eyes evaded Moon’s. “I think he’d even manage to get up and about again right away if we negated the sedatives”——again the nervous laugh——“He seems hopping mad about something——”

“Do it,” said Moon.

“Wha’?” The face went through its distortion pattern, this time without the thin excuse of humour.

“Do it,” repeated Moon, his voice softening. “He’s full of neocain, to cut down the pain?”

“Yes——”

“Then negate it. Get him on his feet . . . Doctor. Do it. Now.” The medic looked as if he was about to rebel. Mr. Moon’s voice became a languid murmur: “Doctor?”

All thumbs, the young man fumbled in his case for a syrette, found it, shot stimulants intravenously, his eyes big with astonishment and a certain Hippocratic indignation. Mr. Moon beamed. Offered him a gold-tipped cigarette. As he reached for it, Henry began to croon and bubble. The medic’s mouth twitched. Mr. Moon impaled him on needling eyes, daring him to complain that Henry was now in exquisite agony. Mr. Moon lit the gold-tipped cigarette for him. He didn’t seem to be able to look away. His patient moaned. He glanced down briefly. But his eyes flicked up immediately to meet Moon’s again, as if Moon had some actual physical grip on him. Little beads of sweat popped out on his forehead, like the beads on Mr. Moon’s shiny patent leather shoes. They remained like that for some thirty seconds: snake and rabbit, and the rabbit in tormented fascination. Then Moon let him abruptly off the hook.

“See to him. I want him useful, Doctor. Not too much pain. And mobility, I want mobility. He has work to do.”

And he ambled away to gaze at the hulk of the *Lady V*. He found it a melancholy sight: he was extremely susceptible to Melancholy. Henry began to cry out in a high, unmusical voice: repeating one wordless syllable over and

over again. It sounded like a curlew, screaming out of the autumn afternoon. Mr. Moon had a definitely poetic streak to his soul.

He waited until the noise had stopped, then walked back and ordered the medic away, this time without any difficulty. He sensed that he would never have trouble with that young man again. He knelt by Henry, heedless of the damp.

"You let him get away, Henry," he said. There was a wealth of gentle, saddened condemnation in his voice. He shook his head. "Silly boy, you let him get away——"

Henry tried to say something, produced a thick, liquid mumble. He threshed feebly about with his arms. Mr. Moon bent closer.

"... hurt, I ... face ... all ruined ..."

Mr. Moon listened hard.

"... fire ... it ... TONI!" he screamed. Then he began a slow struggle to get to his feet, his limbs waving like those of a dying insect. "... the woman ... she might have seen him go ... find the woman ..."

Mr. Moon steadied him, smiling because it had all slotted nicely into place. Henry was upright and swaying.

"She isn't here, Henry. But I think we might find her." He began to guide Henry to the house. "Come on, Henry. Careful. Good boy. There's one more job for you——"

"... Redeem ... he ran up here ..." mumbled Henry.

He stumbled. The sudden movement dislodged some nightmare in his skull.

"TONI!" he screamed.

But Toni was washing dishes in their little converted mews flat, and of course he couldn't hear.

"You promised to tell me about all this," she said.

Redeem winced. He lay supine on the single narrow bed in a dark cubby hole that passed for a bedroom. He was naked but for the harlequin jeans. Slanting bars of tawny afternoon light from a high-set quartered window splashed

across his legs, fulminating into a riot of colour. Bent over him, Veronica was dressing his ribs with small deft hands. Occasionally, she moved into the rays of light, and then the orange shift took fire and she seemed surrounded by a shifting, mystic aura.

There existed between the two of them now a quiet, unspoken rapport: a bond that neither of them had explored, but that manifested itself in a smile, a gesture, the turn of a head. Redeem, looking ruefully down at the swathe of crêpe bandage that swelled his chest, decided that it had been worth it after all; that the success of the whole three-ring-circus was embodied somehow in this meeting of two people.

Not that he had lost sight of his original goal: he knew that he would have to move soon, keep one step ahead—or die.

“Well?” she prompted.

He told her, keeping nothing back but the key-word, the home-star of the aliens. He discovered in the telling that he was not proud of the episode of the fisherman. It illustrated the sort of savagery latent in all men—the very quality against which he had wished to insulate the aliens.

There was no disbelief in her eyes. When he had finished she said, “And you’re not going to tell me where they came from?”

“I don’t think you heard me properly,” he answered, “If Moon gets hold of you, he’ll have your brains burnt out to get at what you know——”

“I hardly think he could——”

“Don’t make any mistakes: Moon is deadly. And he has the whole Whitehall machine behind him. If he misses out again, he’ll have the Psych boys unpick *your* mind at the seams. Don’t ever forget that—helping me put you beyond the pale. Moon has a digital computer for a brain. He won’t forget you, even if he gets me.”

She nodded gravely, impressed by the set expression of his features, by his low urgent tones. She went into the

kitchen. A little later, he heard her bashing crockery about in the sink, and grinned to himself. There was something maternal in her attitude towards him. He wasn't complaining: relaxed, watching the bright play of colour inch slowly up his legs as the afternoon wore on, he felt a calm sense of balance: two hours of rest made up for all the grim bits put together. He caught himself on the verge of smugness, and wished for a non-analytic mind—one that would allow him to be self-satisfied, without this continual dissection of motive, this perpetual watchdog introspection. Just for once, he *wanted* to be smug, to lose his anxieties in complacent self-assurance. But he could see no way out of the maze of action and reaction in which he had trapped himself; he doubted that a man forever on the run ever had a chance for complacency.

She brought food, and during the meal the last barriers between them evaporated. They came to each other: gently, and with a certain remorse: because in finding one another they also came to the knowledge that their shared time was already drastically foreshortened by events that had yet to take place. The future haunted them. But for all that it was good.

That future came to them in a knock on the door. They lay side by side on the narrow bed, faces lit by the pool of light, sharing the cool aftermath of their lovemaking. The three soft taps stiffened them with an adrenal injection of panic. Then Redeem said "You'd better open it——" His voice was level. As she left the room, he considered and discarded half a dozen modes of escape. Finally, he just lay still, thinking that those three delicate, unobtrusive taps were the essence of Moon's *modus operandi*. With Moon, there would never be any thunderous rapping, shouted orders to open up, or jackboots crunching on the gravel: merely the silent and unnerving approach, the deadly irony of politeness as he opened your skull or gave the knife its final twist.

Veronica returned, her face drained and livid.

Behind her, Moon stood framed by the doorway, obscenely fat, smiling his gentle, cherubic smile. Redeem discovered that he was afraid. He sensed that one might tell the obese angel of death anything he wanted to know—out of sheer, uncompromising fear. Moon waddled forward, extending his plump right hand. “Hello, Charles,” he said. “You’ve caused me a great deal of worry and trouble. It’s time to go now.”

Redeem ignored the hand, remained silent.

“Surely there’s not going to be *more* trouble?” Moon kept smiling. There seemed to be no anger in him. He had a preoccupied air. Redeem shrugged. He shook his head.

“You’ll have to take me, Moon. And that still gives me a chance to die.”

“Die? Dear me, what can it be you want to hide? There’s no question of dying——” His voice became brisk, he sounded like an infant teacher out of patience with a small and surly child. Redeem had heard that manner in countless security sweeps and de-briefing sessions. It still refrigerated his spine.

“—No question at all.” Moon proffered his hand again. A let’s-be-friends pause. “Very well,” he whispered.

“Henry!” he called.

Veronica Marten shrieked once, and vomited.

The creature that swayed through the door and stopped by Moon’s side, its arms hanging lax and simian, was a charred, fever-dream parody of a man. The raw, puckered surfaces of burns covered every exposed inch of it. It was hairless and faceless and it stank of incinerated flesh. Overlaying the obscenity of its wrinkled limbs was the bright film of a semi-plastic curative spray, which gave it a wet sheen. It still wore the blackened remnants of a pair of mazarine hipsters and a cream silk shirt.

Moon withdrew his hand—Redeem knew the gesture for a withdrawal of mercy—and turned to the bizarre, mumbling travesty. He handed it something small and glittering..

The raw-meat fingers closed over a one-shot disposable syringe.

"Fetch him boy," said Mr. Moon, "Fetch him out——"

Redeem rolled off the bed, went into a crouch, his muscles complaining about their own tenseness. He knew better than to under-estimate the hulk that moved towards him, its motions abruptly economical and assured as the killer relays clicked over in its brain. Mr. Moon never kept useless equipment: and even before the savage stimulus of pain had been applied, Henry had been well-versed in his own brand of nastiness.

And yet underestimate it he did. He misjudged the fury and fixation that Moon released among the wreckage of Henry's mind when he whispered:

*"He spoilt your face, Henry——"*

For a second, the glistening, distorted beast stood quite still.

Then it erupted. Redeem blocked the hooked fingers that reached for his eyes, countered the animal jab to his groin. But he didn't anticipate the boot that smashed under his kneecap, raked down his shin and ground into the small bones of his foot. He felt the kneecap dislocate. His leg buckled. Pistons exploded into his diaphragm, throat and crotch. He gagged, blacked out on his feet, collapsed. He came aware again, found himself staring up at Henry, unable to move, held in a strait-jacket of agony. The shining animal mouthed down at him. Spittle dribbled from its lips. The syringe didn't come immediately.

Instead, fixed psychotic eyes focused on the nexus of crêpe strapping that marked his damaged ribs. The ruined lips slobbered. Henry measured, calculated.

"No," said Redeem.

A foot stove in the remaining ribs.

"That's enough Henry!" rapped Moon. Henry giggled, swung his foot back again. Moon kicked him at the base of his spine, his fat body a blur of motion. He reeled away, mewling. Moon knelt, picked up the syringe. Redeem saw

the fat, sweating face bob above him, huge and yellow, eyes incoherent with pleasure.

But he didn't see the syringe make its ultimate arc. Or feel Moon check his pulse to make sure Henry hadn't overdone it.

In the fading light, four figures made a slow procession up the dune-stair behind the cottage. An off-shore wind rattled in the marram. The flank of the dune was dark and enigmatic, the steps very white. Two of Mr. Moon's special young men carried between them the limp harlequin body of Redeem, like a great op-art chrysalis. They moved with a stylised, choreographic gait. After them waddled Moon, the twilight emphasising his obesity, magnifying him into the timeless and archetypal Fat Man. Shambling at his heels, a misshapen familiar, came the burnt Henry, the sheen on his charred body trapping and re-emitting the dull, congealing red of the dying sun. They crested the dune: paused: disappeared down its seaward face.

A little later, Veronica Marten—her mind numbed, the edge of its responses blunted, so that she walked in a trance of virtual indifference—followed them. The wind caught at the orange shift, ruffling it into a feeble mockery of its daylight flame. She stood on the arris of the ridge, gazed down shivering at the foreshore, her arms folded under her breasts for warmth.

The beach sprawled silver and grey; paradoxically, there seemed to be more light east of the dune. A thin thread of surf roared, the sound out of all proportion to its size. She watched the procession—a succession of bloated limb shapes—her unfocused brain distorted them into a row of undulating, bifurcated *weirds*—as it moved sluggishly across the sand. A helicopter awaited them. There was an anedral droop to its stationary rotors. It looked like an enormous wasp.

Within ten yards of the machine, under the sagging umbrella-frame of the vanes, they stopped. Moon turned to



the sea, his head inclined upward. She made out the small pale spot that was his pointing hand. Automatically, she glanced in the direction he was indicating, as if it were her attention, not Henry's, he was drawing to the south-west quadrant of the sky.

At first, she saw nothing.

Then she located a single point of white light hanging as though motionless about twenty degrees above the horizon. It expanded rapidly. This expansion translated itself into a high-speed northward line, and in less than a second, it was directly above the dune.

Its velocity was such that it appeared not as a moving object, but as a searing line of light, not more than a mile above sea-level. It burned her eyes like the noon sun and highlighted the party by the helicopter in a harsh blue-white glare. A solid blast of sound slapped at her eardrums. Wind tore at her hair, wrapped it in a dark nimbus about her face.

She was blinded and deafened : and the thing was already well over the northern horizon, trailing its long explosion of displaced air.

Redeem came out of his coma to find himself sprawled awkwardly on the wet sand. Residual traces of the narcotic kept the pain in his chest down to a bearable level. He felt the damp cold grittiness where his cheek was pressed into the beach. From where he lay, he could see the four Department men huddled together about ten feet away from him. Moon's hand stuck out of the group, pointing south. Redeem began to try and crawl away. It hurt. Nobody took any notice of him.

Abruptly, his eyes were scalded by the trace of white fire. He froze. Moon and Henry began to gabble excitedly. Redeem, his head full of grey, choking spider-silk, couldn't understand what they were saying : his mind refused to transpose the sounds into symbols. The effect was of a meaningless soundtrack to a surrealist film. The pilot of the

'copter leaned out of his cabin and yelled something. Redeem's brain tripped suddenly back into gear. He heard :

*"It's blown the RT!"*

Probably, Redeem was the first one to realise what was happening. When the point of light reappeared in its original position and began to repeat the manoeuvre, his suspicions were confirmed. Lying uncomfortably on the foreshore, he laughed, softly and fixedly.

The thing was a ship.

And it had just made a low-level braking orbit of the globe.

Veronica, still stunned by the aural and visual concussion, remained unaware of the second approach of the ship until it was almost upon them.

A geodetic sphere of coruscating white and gold, perhaps twice as big as the helicopter, it stormed in a hundred feet above the beach, slowing visibly. It was burning. A flickering chimera of heat invaded its lattices. At its closest point to her, she was buffeted by a roiling vortex of warm air. She flinched instinctively away.

Above the dune, it veered sharply out to sea, losing height rapidly. Fifty yards out, it came down in a billow of spray and steam. The water boiled briefly about it.

It began to drift into the surf line.

The four figures on the beach stood like a group of obsidian statues. She picked out the slumped motley that was Redeem. He had got to his hands and knees again and was crawling towards the tide. An icy splinter of pity slashed her brain: him so hurt and yet still trying to die, still determined. The desire to help him, to go with him, was uncontainable. She started to run down the steps.

Half way down, she understood. There was no longer any need for him to die.

They were wading ashore to meet him.

They were grey in the half-light, and she caught an incredible glimpse of wings.

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