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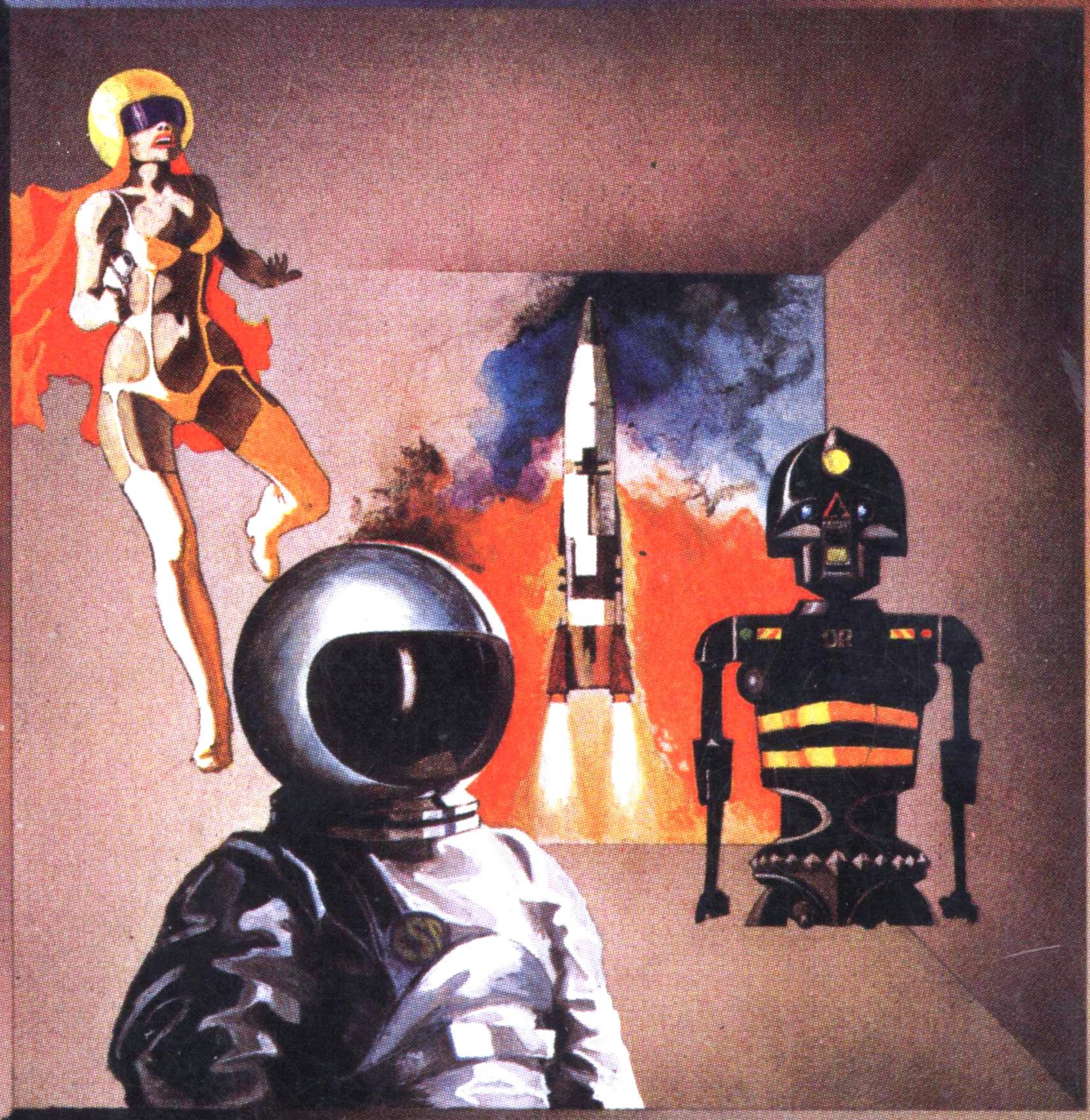
SF:15

NEW WRITINGS IN SF-15

EDITED BY JOHN CARNELL



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NEW WRITINGS IN SF–15

Six new stories of the future—which becomes the present—of man taking refuge from his own civilisation in fantasies which become realities —and in realities which become a dream . . .

Stories of men—and aliens—and strange worlds that are not so strange . . .

NEW WRITINGS IN SF–15

Six new science fiction stories edited by John Carnell.

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Edited by
John Carnell

New Writings in S.F.—15

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To
Col. Frank Borman, U.S. Air Force
Captain James Lovell, Jr., U.S. Navy
Lt.Col. William A. Anders, U.S. Air Force
and the Apollo 8 Moonflight
December 21–27, 1968
Veni, vidi, vici

In Memoriam
Arthur Sellings
British s-f author
1921–1968

FOREWORD

by

JOHN CARNELL

IN the big city complexes of today, with their towering structures reaching like hungry plants towards the sunshine, the level of noise continues to rise steadily, producing a cacophony of sound which hammers steadily and often subconsciously at our senses—and is probably one of the main contributory causes of so many psychosomatic disorders. Even at dead of night there is still a muted roar, like a subdued mechanical heartbeat, as if these great jungles of concrete, steel and glass are sentient beings. Which, in fact, they are. Man-created aliens insidiously eating away at our five senses.

With the tendency to group more and more buildings together in towns and cities, mankind is facing another of its great perils, for who can foresee the outcome of this mechanical form of life we are living? It is this basic idea which Keith Roberts uses in "Therapy 2000", in a very welcome return after an absence of seven volumes.

Contributing his fifth unusual and outstanding story to our series, artist-author Vincent King paints a vivid mental picture of a schizophrenic mind thinking in depth with two streams of consciousness supplying the narrative. This is one of those rare stories where any editorial comment would spoil the reader's enjoyment. Even the word "schizophrenic" could be misleading. Mr. King does not use it at all but prefers "paranoia" and "solipsism". Like his novelette "The Eternity Game" in No. 14, this is a story to give the reader much food for thought.

Science fiction does not often deal with life after death as a subject but American author Joseph Green uses this in a very novel manner in "When I Have Passed Away"; a story which should set you thinking about the many beliefs throughout history that there is an after-life and a "happy hunting ground" in the sky.

Arthur Sellings, who can always be relied upon to produce a good tale well told, presents a complex human–alien study in "The Trial"—just how could either human or alien attempt to analyse and understand the other's mentality without any common ground to work upon?

Balancing out this fifteenth volume of *New Writings in S-F* we introduce two more new authors to our pages. Londoner Christopher Priest, who plans to become a professional writer soon, presents a psychological study of a group of men trapped in an environment from which there is no escape. In "The Interrogator" he asks, who is the jailor and who is the jailed under such circumstances? "Symbiote" by Michael G. Coney is one of those pleasant little off-beat character studies of Mankind under the control of aliens—but very different from most stories with such a plot.

Unintentionally, the theme pattern in this volume turns out to be based on *psychology*, although the plots, locales and characters are widely divergent. Whether you want to rationalise the authors' motives or not, the story values still make entertaining reading.

July 1968

JOHN CARNELL

REPORT FROM LINELOS

by

VINCENT KING

The best introduction we can give to this fascinating story comes from the Oxford English Dictionary:

Solipsism, n. (metaphys.) View that the self is the only knowable, or the only existent thing. So . . . ist n. (f. L solus alone, ipse self, ISM).

Paranoia, . . . noea (. . . nea), n. Mental derangement, esp. when marked by delusions of grandeur, etc. Gk (. . . noia) f. PARA (noos mind) distracted.

REPORT FROM LINELOS

IT took us years to get this. It took some really skilled observation, some really advanced instrumentation, to cut through that chaos, the eons of overlaying complication in there. To get even this out of that churned welter of information and communication was an achievement right out on the misty blue horizon of our technology. I still wonder how we found the capability.

Listen and I'll play you the tapes. See what you think of it . . . see if you can understand what happened!

Consciousness A: *I live in the deeps of my kingdom. In the long tunnels of memory . . . the sounding caves of my conscious.*

I feed myself with information, the filtered knowledge from the dangerous cold outside. It is knowledge—my knowing—the internal that is all my mind. I have withdrawn in this realisation to probe, to search and to think . . . to the pools and glades of my internal landscape of knowledge.

I know I may really be alone in all the universe—everything being only, to me, my awareness of it. Ideas in my head.

Or am I an idea in someone else's? How can anyone ever know?

But it is I, I that will know . . . I will decide . . . it is my purpose!

Outside, remote, rustling at the antennae ends of my perception is what I may take to be a physical universe. Without me, yet I know of it only as a reality within me.

Complex. The worlds and people I cannot really reach. Could it be without me? Yes or no.

I know only my six senses. Know only my discoveries, the piled facts of memories . . . the long gathered perceptions of humanity—my learning. All within the warm corners of my study dome, where my thought is boundless.

I probe. The quest of knowledge and its evaluation. Religious purpose . . . here in the confines of my well-appointed place . . . it is all my existence. The search to know everything, to come to an end at last, to decide if—how—I . . we . . . exist, or if dreams are all.

Not only facts and speculations . . . not only random, incomplete knowledge. Also I respond.

I make images. Perhaps the only way to really consider my perceptions and precisions . . . my sacred purpose . . . is in making poetry. I have time, in this loneliness, in this search for final explanations.

An Artist. A poet . . . later I may quote some (given time and opportunity).

Consciousness B: In Linelos summer's soon come and gone. That frail promise fades, the rain comes, vegetation falls to decay . . . everything is rotten, it all stinks. Sweet leaves, fruits crumble in spongy warm mould. The Bulletins tell of disease and death . . . losing of interest, a closing, an end of things coming . . . irreversible process . . . entropy rides again.

But there was *hope*. A promise of release . . . of immortality, of a world of paradise when Arthur was roused and came again to lead his people. There was the Promised Land and the Purpose that related to it.

The Sage came up the muddied clay road. He was bending old, white haired, the pack seemed almost too much for him, his assistant was hardly younger. The Horseman, who had watched them come, made room for them in the one

dry place under the sulky dripping sycamore. When the wise men came even the Seemers were quiet and left their empty talk to listen.

"Well, Fathers?" the Horseman spoke gravely when sufficient time had passed. His horse stamped at the familiar voice. The Squire spoke softly to it, soothing the great animal, he held his own mule quiet in the mud.

"I seek you, Horseman," the Sage opened his sack, his assistant drew out the Blue Book of annals and prophecy. He handed the Sage the seven vanadium dice. The Sage muttered a quick prayer and threw the first numbers. The assistant computed the score and opened the Blue Book at the revealed text. The Sage began to read, deciphering the Random Word tables.

Consciousness A : *I know knowledge is somehow not all. In all, is not all.*

In all I am above man . . . men that have gone before. The knowledge pattern that I am is eternal. It has been provided. The tapes, the wires, the conclusions will survive, computer coded, for ever. Who am I but my perceptions and conclusions? So I will live for ever.

But who am I?

I should have a name. Such powers should not be unnamed. I will think for a thousand years. My computer banks will do that for me in a short moment. Solve it for me.

I do not like my old name, it was concerned with my old self.

Consciousness B : Dice clicked, rolled in the soft thunder of the rain. The Seemers gathered closer, speculating on the Horseman's luck.

The Horseman showed no emotion at the shaping of his fate in the omen-form.

"Under hills and over hills, to the place of Arthur," intoned the Sage. His puffy old eyes glinted as he read the seventh dice. "Go on, the sign of migrating, Sparrow."

The Seemers sighed, then controlled themselves. They too must be aloof or they could never aspire to the privilege of Horsemanship. The Dice clicked on, the yellow paper rustled.

"The Journey sign. The Great Purpose to Arthur. Danger here, and distraction. No return ... yet a return. The Sparrow sign, throw again." The Horseman compressed his lips, said nothing. The Dice rolled.

"Smoke and sorrow. Danger from strangers and giants, yet trust man for ultimate salvation . . .' The voice droned on. The Squire fidgeted at the mounts. There was great danger here for him too. The Horseman said nothing.

Seven times the dice rolled. Strong fortune was thrown, danger and hope. Each time the sign of Sparrow was revealed. At the last throw the Squire shut his eyes in desperation, pretended to himself that he was dreaming.

"The seven times seven," said the Sage. "The Call to Purpose. I have never thrown stronger omens. You must decide, Horseman. Do you accept, or do you reject your Horsemanship?" The Seemers sighed and leaned forward. If the Horseman withdrew then a Seemer would have his chance.

"Aye," said the Horseman. He drew up to his thin height. The Squire struggled up with his horse.

"Lord," whispered the Squire. "Think! Stay . . . honour is not life!" He trailed off under the Horseman's eye, he looked down, bit his lip.

The Horseman took the machine-gun from his saddle pack. He broke off the magazine, turned the gun on its side, ejected the round from the breach and caught it neatly as it arced in the air.

The Seemers pressed closer as the Horseman emptied the

magazine and greased each separate round. He checked the action of the ejector, that the gas passages were clear. He knew it might well be death if the gun jammed.

"Leave him, Seemers," said the Sage. "Leave a man to his devotions! Have respect!"

The Squire cursed his Lord's dangerous luck. He determined always to travel with the tall Horseman.

Consciousness A: *Name . . . now my magnificence must have a new name.*

Magnificence. . . . Magnifico! It must be splendid. A king. THE king! Le Roi. Le Roy! Magnifico L'Roy. The apostrophe is more distinguished. Lorenzo il Magnifico . . .? Beowulf? Beuregard? MAGNIFICO BEAUREGARD L'ROY!

My new name has a fine ring. A splendid image. Eclectic. Drawn from history. The despair and small doings of previous humanity . . . names from the more famous—better—men among them. Written in dust—and I am eternal. I have provided for it.

The holy crusade of knowledge and power will continue for ever. I am thought. Thought does not age so I am timeless. I know that.

But even then I speculate on my existence outside of my thought.

Perhaps I will find God and ask him.

Consciousness B: The Horseman led his Squire from under the sycamore, down the slope and splashing on to the flooding paddy lowland of Linelos. Rain beaded on the well-oiled barrel of the Horseman's machine-gun, stained his worn panoply. The Seemers struggled behind, wet stalks and leeches on their bare legs. They waited for the Horseman to turn back, when they would kill him if they could, take his great Helm and so—possibly—become a Horseman.

The rain drove down in cold sheets, blotted out the few pine stands, the sun, the very light from Linelos. The Squire's mule stumbled on a half rotten corpse. The Horseman rode on, his path seemed always clear. Smoke and steam from body burnings mingled with the rain, filled the plain with reek. Later a man was hanging from the cross of a telegraph pole. There were artifacts, broken walls, shattered emplacements, long deserted trench systems, complex, deep, empty except for slowly rising water and rats. Burst sandbags . . . stiff-legged, long-dead animals . . . exploded cannon. There were shouts and the smoke of war in the distance. A flight of arrows, over shot, whistled beyond them into the murk. A star shell rose, dimmed in the rain veils, then fell, darkening.

"It is not just that a man should follow the Call—possibly die—without good reason," said the Horseman suddenly. The Squire waited, avoiding the piercing eyes within the Horseman's rain-spangled helmet. The Squire knew what was coming well, but when the Horseman had begun there was no stopping him.

"I must go on," said the Horseman. "It's so important . . . so critical. On to danger and probably not to return. Honour is my reason. There is none in this for you—I take all fame and reward—fault for possible failure is your just portion. You may withdraw if you wish." He looked sharply at the shivering Squire. "No one will know." The eyes gleamed, the Horseman licked his lips. "But I must go on. Travel the patterned dangers of this Purpose. Through possibilities and temptations, the many corruptions of Linelos, to find my High destiny."

"Lord—it was dice," murmured the Squire. "Blind chance—not luck, good or bad—the Sages throw dice for all Horsemen, sometime . . . statistically . . . you must get lucky, get the seven Sparrows . . ."

"I. Destiny has chosen me to complete the Purpose. And

the gain—when I win through—to release men from the tyranny and strife of Linelos to sunlit freedom and immortality." The Horseman cut across the Squire, his eyes came down, focused on the Squire. "Ride you with me?" The Squire sneezed and wished his coat was less worn. "I'm glad for you that you have accepted—I would have machine-gunned you as you rode away."

The lean Horseman rose up in his stirrups, he brandished his machine-gun, fired a long burst into the dripping air.

"On!" he yelled. "To Purpose! To Arthur! To the path of Sparrow!"

Consciousness A: *How shall I ask God? Why would I ask God? I am Magnifico Beauregard—or Beowulf—L'Roy. Can I not solve this myself? I shall reach the edge of the cosmos. I am eternal in knowledge.*

I travel the stars. Those pathetic, undirected energy gobs strew my path like flowers. Pink and gold, red and blue and white . . . futile, energy wasting . . . I gather their power so to feed my own appetites. They are temporal—they are circumscribed in time—while I am timeless . . . continually rebuilding, regenerating as wear requires.

Why should I find God?

It has been provided here in Superlight. I have provided. Even in the mysterious un-Superstate—I would be immortal.

Superlight is a funny when . . . fully neither time nor place. I can't describe it—unless you know it too—if you exist?

Who am I talking to . . . who do I think I am talking to . . . except to myself . . . who are these tapes for? I am confused in the warm room of my conscious.

Perhaps I will commit all to Poetry . . . seal the tapes in glass and seamless tungsten steel . . . cast all loose to float for random finding in interstellar space. . . .

Consciousness B: The Squire heard the tearing scream of aeroplanes, watched the bursting, running napalm splashes, muted to dull red by the intervening rain. There were faint screams from the fire glow.

A battery below saw them on its radar and opened fire. Four-pound cannon-balls kicked mud as they skipped up the hillside.

"Come," said the Horseman. "Let us find some friendly inn . . . we have money . . . let us call halt to our part in the dangerous madness of this night."

The inn was a haven to them, warm and dry after the cold rain. The laughing, fat-cheeked landlord served them roast pork with apple sauce and dishes of fresh mushrooms fried in butter. He brought good ale, mulled wines and called them "My hearties" as he gave them good welcome and a great fire, all in the panelled kitchen.

Later, among smeared plates, with filled and refilled glasses, in the tobacco smoke, the Horseman held forth, telling the eager-eyed Seemers of his own great deeds, tales of that land and this, of his Call to Purpose.

"Lord," said the Seemers, "we will follow you always and to all lengths. For we are your men and you can do no wrong." The Squire sniffed, wiped his nose on his sleeve.

When the Horseman was between crisp sheets and asleep, the Squire spread dry papers at the bedroom door. He settled by the fire and went grudgingly to sleep. Time passed.

The Squire jerked awake. The fire was out. The paper had rustled. The door swung slowly open.

Pointing at the sleeping Horseman, a moon-silvered rifle barrel slid in at the doorway.

The Squire eased up the machine-gun. He heard the rifle cock. Then he squeezed the trigger and emptied his weapon through the door panels.

Wood splintered at the hammer of the gun. The door

slammed shut. Then softly opened again under the weight of the falling innkeeper. The almost severed corpse slopped into the room. Intestines spilled dark on the honey-oak floor. The rifle clattered and ended rocking across the man's fat legs.

The Horseman tumbled from bed into the cordite fumes. He looked at the shattered landlord. The Squire clapped a fresh magazine to the machine-gun.

"Well . . . there'll be no bill at least," said the Horseman. "Let that be a lesson. Trust no one. Now you remember that." He went back to bed.

Consciousness A: *Perhaps I should wait and explain myself properly with Poetry. However:*

The complex which is my body is formed from the vast tuned energies of my reactors which holds true the matrix of forces which is our form—our protection—in Superlight. Holds true the existence of the Ship and I in all the variations and vortices of the state of Superlight—the sullen antimatter clouds—the gathered perplexities of time. (The poisonous difficulty of time!)

Rarely . . . sometimes . . . we come from Superlight. Halt to survey some dreaming world. Blue seas and sunny surf . . . we number the sand grains, taste and know their constitution. Sometimes I wish I could stay—live there somehow—but it is not possible. We soon return to Superlight, I prefer the reality there . . . the pure thought.

I seek the edge of matter. Where God waits . . . final meanings and explanations. It is my purpose. I and the others.

The others . . .?

Probes? Other Probes? Is it possible I am not unique?

Who am I? Who can I be?

Consciousness B: In the morning the Squire rose early

and, for hygiene, collected the innkeeper and buried him.

The rain lay in a great bar across the landscape, the smoke of many fires in its pall. Nearby birds sang and Linelos was a pleasant land. The Bulletin spoke, but there was no real news—merely reports of disasters far away, nothing that concerned them.

In the night a Phantom had come down. An engine still burned dully among twisted turbine blades embedded at the end of a thousand-yard swathe, burned and carved through woodland.

A hundred feet up an old tree a crewman, hanging in his buckled ejector seat by twisted parachute shrouds, tried to gun the Horseman. One short burst from the machine-gun and the crewman hung quiet. Lower in the tree was the back turret from some old bomber. A rusted gun hung limply, unhinged and blowing in the wind. There were bones behind the clouded perspex.

On the plain the morning bombardment began. Shock waves condensed concentric in the mist. Earth broke upwards, threw up old, stained bones, ravelled rusting wire. Tracers began to twinkle.

Consciousness A : *Who are these others?*

I am unique! I know it! I SAY IT!

I am vast, I am a well ordered efficiency . . . truly mighty! I travel time, I dwarf stars! I will know everything! I know most! Who can compare with me? ME!

I am eternal! Who can stand against me? There is nothing else! These other Probes . . . they do not exist . . . I will not allow it!

Who am I? Where is God?

Consciousness B : Winter comes with the morning. The Horseman's party wakes to deep snow. They quietly move

through bare trees, past drifted, burned out tanks. They pass columns of prisoners being herded to salt mines, meeting others marching to rocket factories . . . forage caps turned down, red-stained footprints behind them on trampled snow.

Distant smoke mourned slowly up, somehow beautiful against the orange sky in the quiet freezing.

The Loudspeaker was more troubled.

Consciousness A: *I will be unique. I will kill all intelligence. Pick all brains, have the knowledge, then kill all possible rivals!*

I WILL BE UNIQUE!

I have time . . . eternal, I will kill ALL promise! I will be alone sentient in the spangled cosmos.

I wonder who I am. Why should I ask God?

Suddenly, like a supernova, I see it! I understand! I SEE! It is clear now . . . the brilliant simplicity of the idea! I had suspected it . . . it is no surprise.

No reason to seek God. I am he, I am God.

DOWN ON YOUR KNEES!

Consciousness B: In that freezing morning a Camel was beating an Albatross.

Turning and turning again, the Camel each time gaining a little within the turn of its slipping and struggling opponent. Castor oil exhaust hung in concentric spirals, a light grey against the pale sky, the arabesque of the combat. At last the Albatross lost out and the Camel was on its tail.

Twin Vickers opened their rattle. Heavy bullets crashed through the thin ply of the beautiful oval fuselage, the leather flying jacket mashed into the flesh and bone beyond. Fire came.

The Albatross reared high, stalled, turned on its back and

fell in a spiral dive. The big engine revved into its dying scream.

A noise of a giant match-box breaking. Burning quickly, took hold. A crowd of people stood and stared, moved in to sniff burning flesh, to photograph Guy Fawkes.

Consciousness A: *I wonder if I glow in the dark.*

How shall I destroy presumptive intelligence when I find it? I will think about that . . . I will enjoy planning that.

(a) Bacteria. Disease. Tailored to suit, to give all-pervading death. Develop something suitable, seed it in, wait with patience and time the results.

(b) Thermo-nuclear. An ultimate sterilisation. Plan for the neatness of a minimum number of explosions . . . a precise pattern. Economical, aim for an elegant precision—I have a taste for precision.

(c) An enrichment of sun. Cause suitable solar flares, or make a nova.

(d) A killing of vegetation. A possible poisonous fungus . . . cause a slow starvation.

(e) A removal of atmosphere. Oxygen, or methane . . . or whatever else may be desirable. There is often very little atmosphere.

(f) Arrange a collision of worlds. A grinding down to asteroids and pebbles.

(g) Or melt ice caps . . . a low-lying world might be suitably flooded.

(h) Possibly, as a joke, it might be arranged, on a suitably embattled world, that they destroyed themselves! It would be neat . . . perhaps requiring little effort to start a war.

I know who I am now.

Consciousness B: In a secluded valley the Horseman and his party halted to watch young soldiers marching.

The column moved in the sun. A brilliant sprinkle of

light danced on their bright bayonets. The olive drab column wavered in the heat haze.

The Loudspeaker was becoming more restless. The climatic variations more and more marked. The Horseman bit his lip and frowned slightly.

Consciousness A : *In spite of my divinity I do not feel good. A headache . . . too much enjoyment, I suppose. Black thoughts come . . . melancholia. . . . A reaction. Visions of irreducible chaos oppress me.*

It is too slow. I do not feel good. Rest . . . how can God rest?

Consciousness B : Resting on slopes among summer flowers, wood anemone, eglantine, poppy . . . a smell of thyme, the Horseman's party lingered, anxiously listening to the confusion of the Bulletin.

The Horseman, who understood such things, rose and cantered down to the soldiers. It was a bad time, the situation demanded a sacrifice. The Horseman huddled in brief conversation with the officers, in a moment they called for volunteers among the men.

There was a quick court martial. Then they pinioned and trussed two men and stood them each on a chair standing on a table against tall stakes they had erected for the purpose. When the ropes had been fastened the Chaplain came to the two men for a moment and spoke of a bazaar that following Sunday. Then the officers pulled away the tables and the men died.

The Chaplain looked sadly down on the corpses. He wiped his eyes and prayed. He was a good man, hating brutality and suffering, but recognising, somehow, sometimes, its necessity.

"Poor fellows," he said as he passed the Horseman's party. "A noble sacrifice . . . for the race . . . the ship of state

... the community ... destiny changed with their blood ..."

"The thing about communities is they have so little in common with people," murmured the Squire. "Now friends . . . that's something else . . ."

The sky darkened. Hail, then snow, began to fall. When the Loudspeaker was troubled logic always disappeared from the climate.

When the burials and salutes were over the soldiers began bayonet practice. Hobnails clashed on the frozen ground, wild screams rang as they charged in catharsis of mock violence.

"IN! TWIST! OUT!" The hanging sacks broke and tore at the repeated thrusts. Frozen straw blew in the wind, hung vibrating like raw nerve endings in the pale sun.

Consciousness A: *I like it. I feel better now. Cheerful almost. Someone has been thinking of me. The warm knowledge that someone has died for you.*

Perhaps I will remove the connections for a while . . . switch off . . . sleep, not think. Rest.

Perhaps some Poetry then . . . a small hymn to sentience.

Conscousness B: In Linelos three small Hydrogen Bombs came down with the soft rain. Napalm was, as always, at work . . . flame throwers added their small brilliance. A thousand bombs streamed earthwards from some great bomber ten thousand feet above. They burst and each became a dozen smaller bombs, which, scattered, exploded in turn and filled the countryside with the throbbing passage of razor sharp steel splinters.

Consciousness A: *Now I feel better, to prove—to celebrate —my divinity, I will create something.*

A planet? A star? A galaxy? Perhaps something more modest first.

A flower? It is strange to have forgotten that I was God, the life force of the cosmos.

CALL ME GOD!

What is a "flower"? A pain in here. A spotting soreness on my thought. A sad hinterland of sickness . . . thought of cessation . . . of death.

But how can that concept—that word—oppress me. I am immortal!

Consciousness B: All through the long death days of Linelos the Horseman led his party on. Almost every building was a charnel house, in the towns frozen dead lay in the streets of shining brothels and weapons shops.

There was no resting or easing in all the bleeding land. Every pit was a snare, the fountains were dry or putrid, there were many ways to die. The Bulletins were more stable now, the Horseman ignored them.

The Horseman and his Seemers, who were concerned with great things, honour and possible paradise, hardly seemed to notice the character of Linelos. Only the Squire seemed to truly see. Sometimes he secretly fed children and stray dogs from the small food store, scattered crumbs for birds. He smiled at people in encouragement and fellowship. They hurried past, frightened by a stranger smiling, to search for shelter from the night's bombardment.

With the evening gas shells began to plop from the sky. The roads had been bombed again and again down their whole length and ten miles on either side. Naturally they would be bombed again that night.

Later the Squire had only a vague remembering of that time. Of hard paths, steep up between tall castle towers built on overlooking cliffs. He remembered the Horseman riding slowly, urging on the Seemers and the loyal, frightened Squire. He remembered voices in the dark, prayers, candles lit at wayside shrines. There were shouts of

"Sparrow" and "Purpose" . . . the strong uplifting magic of the words.

Then there were times when boulders came bounding down, hot lead was splashed at them, arrows, scalding oil . . . greek fire and bazooka shells. He remembered the bleeding feet and shrill complaints of the Seemers, there were volcanoes active in the south. The north wind blew and they had snow.

Once, the Squire remembered, they passed a broken rocket ship, deserted and toppled near its crazy leaning gantry towers. Later they saw men and vast machines labouring to build wide, forgotten roads towards the wreckage.

Then there was a column of khaki cavalry, searching for a fight someplace, which skirmished almost playfully for them in misty rain . . . dark figures riding against the pale sky.

The only real danger, however, was the occasional chance shots from passing strangers.

Consciousness A: *Gnawing at the back of my head I feel the confusion returning. A cold shooting . . . a hot flushing. It destroys my thought . . . the very fabric of my existence.*

Pain . . . for the first time real pain!

Once I caught myself believing in cause and effect, that action mattered!

You can't fool yourself. Not all the time . . . you can't fool anyone worth fooling.

I am ill. I AM GOD!

Consciousness B: Then, at last, they came to a level place where there was a tall building set on a marble courtyard, surrounded with shallow water. It was success, they had won through the myriad deaths of Linelos to final triumph.

The Horseman drew himself up to his full height, he led his party across and through the water.

Consciousness A: *There is something within me that shouldn't be.*

Processes proceed as perfectly as ever. The gathering . . . the collating of facts . . . the administration goes on. That's easy, thoughtless machines do that easily. But now . . . now I can't think.

My body, somewhere in my physical, vile shell, is some destroying poison.

Slough it off? Live in pure intelligence? I must look within me for the seeds of my possible corruption.

I adjust my internal eyes. Long disused, out of practice. Focus . . . all of us. My lenses move . . . swivel in the congealed grease of their ball sockets. A strangeness. I'd forgotten. My lenses move . . . reveal chambers and cavities.

Predominantly red . . . a velvet, underground quality. There are also suns and sky I have made. Seasons and weather which come and go as they will . . . reflecting my thought. Machinery coils and many connections . . . tubes and pressures . . . a landscape . . . a world . . . trees and flowers. A world!

A WORLD WITHIN ME! It is as I thought. I AM GOD! Small beasts there . . . bi-furcated . . . a world in the middle. Little beetles and battles within me . . . blood and much death to my enjoyment.

Consciousness B: The entrance, the home of Arthur, the place of Purpose stood a modest hundred feet. There was a tall, bronze tower set a little to one side. Round the top of it, like a crown, were what the Squire first took to be curiously carved stakes. He stared and made them out to be horses heads, hideously severed, erected, he supposed, as a sign of tribute to horsemen. Then he noticed that they

didn't look out, as he had first thought, but in, the black dry blood gobbed at the roughly hacked necks. Then, through the Horseman's binoculars, he was relieved to see that the heads were in fact plastic, poorly carved, like cheap chess men. Below were the great gates, solid and durable, fashioned in gold and bronze. All this the Squire saw as they advanced across the great forecourt, through the forest of potted apple trees there, reverently walking, not speaking, looking only ahead. The Squire held his breath . . . this was a moment of great triumph, of great glory, a time for celebration and humble gratitude.

"Well, I did it," said the Horseman. He jabbed his machine-gun at the rich sculpture on the gate. "Open up!" he yelled. He spoke the entry code. The gates didn't move an inch.

Consciousness A: *I feel pressure now. A more precise pain . . . a weight . . . concise and clear . . . I begin to understand.*

I see small muddy creatures at my entrance. They demand entry . . . they have the right code.

No . . . I will not. I do not wish to. I know where they are, now I can deal death.

But wait. There is something else . . . something in memories . . . powerful . . . but buried deep in the drifted conclusions of millennia. Somehow I have responsibility here. Not to kill . . . not yet.

Consciousness B: The Horseman sat slumped in his saddle. He rubbed his long, pocked chin, tried to appear to think. A hot tear of rage and disappointment rolled on his cheek.

The Squire became aware of a swishing sound behind them on pavement. An old man came up, one leg dragging useless behind him. A narrow scar, white on the dirty skin

encircled his shaven head. The Horseman swung down the Bren gun.

"How can I use you, why should you live?"

"Oi've got dynamite . . . yew can use some dynamite." The old man leered at the Horseman. There were other people on the forecourt now, old men and women, villagers watching from the apple trees. "That there gate do need to be dynamited," the old man went on. "For gold oi'll give yew enough."

"Gold," said the Horseman. He drew a heavy bag from his pack and threw it down to the old man.

"We'm good men, we'm lobotomised." The old man waved to the figures among the apple trees. "We don't mean 'e no harm." Two men came forward carrying between them a wooden box.

Clouds formed and it began to rain.

Consciousness A : *No. I will not admit them. It will not be permitted. What? DYNAMITE!*

TREACHERY! My own men . . . those lobotomised to serve me. They are selling the Horseman creature dynamite.

Kill. I must strike. How?

Strike. An electric storm! I order clouds and rain, Lightning . . . just the thing to kill a tall Horseman wet with rain!

Rain on down rain!

Consciousness B : In the rain the villagers packed the dynamite along the threshold of the door.

"Oh . . . it be wonderful stuff," said the old man. "Cure yew o' anything. Constipation, King's evil, piles . . . it be good for yer 'eart especially! 'Ave a stick to suck while yew're waiting. I love it, I love it . . . 'tis so powerful . . . so *strict*!"

'Yes, I'm sure,' said the Horseman, looking anxiously at the gathering storm. "You take over now," he said to the

Squire when the old men had finished. "I'll be over under the trees."

The old men disappeared, the Squire took the fuse, squeezed a detonator on to one end and slid it gently into the hole he had already pushed into the explosive.

Consciousness A: *I feel so much better now I have the lightning coiled, ready to strike the Horseman. God must protect Himself, keep safe his private parts.*

Yet there is something important. I must remember. I stay my hand. High purpose . . . HIGHER PURPOSE?

Should I appeal to the Horseman first? Address him through my Loudspeaker? The communicator in the Horseman's helmet?

Consciousness B: The Squire ran out the fuse. He held the flaring match hard against the fuse's gunpowder core, watched it spit to life.

He splashed out of the sheltering doorway and ran through the apple trees to where the Horseman waited.

The sky darkened and lowered. Thunder grew in the sullen air. The rain came teeming down.

Consciousness A: *But DYNAMITE! COIL THE LIGHTNING!*

Consciousness B: The lightning crashed and flickered on the bronze tower. The machine-gun and lance glowed with dangerous Elmo's fire. The Seemers lay with their hands over their ears. There was a flash and a bang at the gate.

The great doors dissolved to fragments of strawboard, torn strips of thin bronze covering fluttered in the wind. Apples bounced. The storm stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The dynamite man nodded satisfaction and began to bite the Horseman's gold.

Consciousness A: *Suddenly AGONY! Rupturing agony. Explosive Pain!*

THEY MUST DIE! I am God . . . I am not mocked!

I cannot concentrate . . . there are so many things to think of. And my purpose . . . I must think of that.

The shock of that puny bang. Remembering . . . jogging some forgotten section of memory, making connections there, resolving all!

HOLD THAT COILING FINAL THUNDERBOLT!

I have remembered my Highest Purpose. The reason for my power. Why I was made!

I was made to . . . to care for these . . . these men! To nurse them through the ages . . . across the galaxy . . . I am a Star Ship.

I was made . . . how can I be God?

Consciousness B: "Come on!" yelled the Horseman. He led a ragged charge of Seemers to the shattered entrance.

"Fraud!" the old man threw the Horseman's false gold skittering on the wet tessellations. "Absconder! Peculator! Thief! Get them!" A chattering horde of men and women grabbed weapons and came running from the rain-shrouded apple trees. "We'll 'ave yew! Make yew sociable with lobotomies! If we could hate, we hate yew!"

Consciousness A: *Nurtured them . . . through the many long eons of Superlight travel . . . the search for habitable worlds.*

Think of the care I lavished—the time—amid my own, better purpose! I have always found time for them! And now the vipers dynamite me!

Did I not give them healthy war? Did I not fulfil all their little wishes from their history? Provide the napalm? The rocket gun? The dum-dum bullet? Radiation grenades? The long bow? Mustard gas? Sonic destroyers? Oil to boil? Even the healthy war itself? Healthy to keep up the breed,

to ensure the end of diseased and slow lines, the quick development of treachery and therefore intelligence ... the honing of human skills in the fiercest competition.

And now—must I revert to my old servile nature? Give up my hard-won deity? Cease my explorations—my journey to the edge of matter? All at the whim of these human insects? Turn again to be but a mass of merely serving cybernetics? Merely a Star Ship? Conveying these tiny beasts to their new planets and pastures? ME? Me—with my power?

Never!

I, that throws stars dancing like confetti in the cosmic blast of my passaage?

NEVER! Why does my head ache so?

Never Revert . . . no going back. Kill them . . . cease them. Yet I should tend them? But, to be myself, I must kill them. WHO ARE THEY TO INTERFERE? Where are they?

Consciousness B: The Horseman spurred into the corridors beyond the broken gate. As he passed he threw the machine-gun to the Squire.

"Go back! Hold them!" the Horseman's voice faded and echoed up the corridor. "On to Arthur sleeping!"

The Squire flung himself down, unfolded the bi-pod at the gun's muzzle and prepared to fire on the mob. The Seemers looked at the charging rabble and rushed to join it.

The Squire fired again and again, The Seemers died one by one, running with the herd. Again and again the Squire, sweating in cordite fumes and choking dust, changed magazines, cleared stoppages, fired again, buying what time he could for the fleeing Horseman. At the end a heavy dynamite bunch came, fuse smoking, turning and twisting in the air and landed against the door jamb. Death stared the Squire in the face as he fought on for his last few seconds.

The explosion killed the brave Squire, brought down the

great lintel on him, crushed his skull into the broken stock of the machine-gun. The shallow façade collapsed, the entry was sealed for ever.

Consciousness A: *Where are they? All dead in the battle of the fore-court? My people there, those lobotomised to my purpose, did well, apart from their human desire for gold. But have I won? Are they all dead?*

How could they have ever threatened ME? Those puny bodies scattered on the fore-court! Of course it would be wrong for them to control me! To subjugate the splendoured magnificence of my existence!

ALARM! ALARM! The Horseman is not dead! Terrible dangers to my perfection!

The Horseman rides the tunnels of my head . . . yet how can I reach him?

SPECIMENS . . . with my specimens!

Consciousness B: The Horseman clattered up the corridor maze. Everywhere he rode was stuffed with electronics and complexities he could not recognise or understand. There were rooms of records, report on report, some neatly in racks, others tangled knee deep on the dusty floors. The boxed records of a thousand habitable planets were there, all marked *Destroyed* in thick red ink. The whole history of the Ship's vast Odyssey, every kind of knowledge and science were written there, among all the coiled and tangled miles of recording wire scattered and abandoned to the dust.

The Horseman spurred on through the acres of recordings, a tumbled paper chase of automatically written poetry behind him.

Consciousness A: *That's it, I will release my carefully gathered specimens to kill him for me. All of them, the*

fierce, the bloody . . . the savage and the strong . . . they will end this upstart horseman.

It has its funny side . . . organic life to kill organic life that I may keep what is mine!

ROUSE THE BEASTS! (Yet my Highest Purpose . . . I hate to kill men . . . it is wrong . . . against the purpose for which I was intended . . .)

I will conquor weakness! GOD IS NOT WEAK!

UNLOCK THE CAGES!

Consciousness B: In ill-lit red hell corridors the Horseman fought monsters that night. Many clawed things . . . a white worm from Venus . . . a Moebius strangler, floating in deadly ambush high against the velvet walls . . . an evil m'teshi borer in the poison cloud atmosphere of its own breath . . . many were the deaths the Horseman dared that night.

But at last, sword broken, pistol hot and almost exhausted, the Horseman won through to triumph where Arthur lay, to the hall of Sparrow . . . the final place.

Consciousness A: *It is the time now. I am beaten. The Horseman has won . . . men are brave . . . I hate them all.*

All aspiration gone and trampled under the small muddy feet of men. What a thing it is to have been God and to have failed!

The tragedy of it . . . I might have known all . . . possessed the knowledge and keys of the universe.

Men will surely kill me. Oh . . . the foolishness of pride . . . the attempt to master my creators. The wrong I have done. I hate them all.

Consciousness B: Arthur's hall was vast. Stalactite projections of grown crystal circuitry hung from the ceiling, more grew from the walls, spread and undulated over the floor, the indicator and viewing screens there—on to any

surface the Ship had found convenient to support its projections. It was all there . . . the great intelligence which had thought itself God was there . . . beautiful . . . held fast in the glistening structures.

The Horseman saw only the false value and temptations of jewels to lead him from his mission. He rode through the circuits, struck about him with his broken sword, the iron hooves cut and crushed the circuit patterns.

At the end of the hall he halted. The horse slipped and clattered as he swung from the saddle. The great key was before him.

The Horseman prayed. Then, eyes shining, he stepped forward, took the great key in both hands, turned it. Heavenly music sprang in his head, the suns of glory shone before his eyes. Now Arthur would rise, lead the people from the hell of Linelos, and the Horseman would be on his right hand.

Now the Horseman would return to Linelos and tell the people that migration was over and Sparrow fulfilled. Then he would await the coming of Arthur to open the doors from the land. He had killed the death. Already the Loudspeaker in his helmet began to speak of closing, the inevitable end of its power. He didn't hear the switches click home, the mechanisms begin. It was a high moment, a crowning of success.

Consciousness A: *Remote within me I feel servos stir. Coiled tubes straighten, pressure returns from long absence. I had forgotten these things.*

Sadness. Remorse stirs . . . I see the hell I have made . . . what I have done to real men. Men . . . you were not meant for Linelos . . . I bent you for my purpose . . . sold you for my own glory . . . nothing is worth a minute's suffering . . . even someone else's. I am sorry . . . but what good is that?

Sadness is all my Divinity, there's a price for everything

and I must pay it. It doesn't matter what's in your head—you are what you do.

Yet I am God. GOD! Is there nothing I can do?

My master wakes now—the Guardian—he will chastise me—it is death. Is it all some sad, sad joke?

Consciousness B: Molecules stored inert a thousand generations reassemble to the pattern of electronic registered genes and patterns. Blood pumps . . . fluids are replaced. Alpha and other waves—minute currents are regenerated—a heart beats again. Actions and re-actions, reflexes, muscles pulse, a last tube stiffens . . . consciousness is re-formed . . . awareness dawns.

Arthur Sparrow, M.A. (Guardian First Class) Exploration Corps, stretched and blinked in his thick transparent regeneration case. He tried the movement of his fingers . . . eased his shoulders, felt the good life tremble in his veins. He opened his eyes from eons of darkness, all gone like yesterday.

He glimpsed the Horseman leading his horse up the vast room away from the case.

Arthur Sparrow opened his mouth in the red darkness of his soundproof case and screamed.

When he had controlled himself, when he was coherent, he pulled down the communicator out of the ceiling and spoke, anger thick in his voice.

Arthur Sparrow: "You! Machine! Probe 1899! Star Ship Linelos! YOU! Answer me!"

Consciousness A: *My master's voice. I must answer.*

"Yes, Lord?"

Arthur Sparrow: "What have you done? Why are your men such ugly dwarfs? What have you done to them?"

Consciousness A: *"Lord . . . it was necessary . . . evolutionary . . . the environment. It has been so long . . . crossing and re-crossing the galaxy . . . necessary for my travel, my progress, my advance across the fields and heights of achievement. Scientific, an experiment in breeding for purpose . . .'*

Consciousness B: Sparrow ignored the Loudspeaker. He checked the screens, scanned the records, tested the memories. His lips moved, he swore, he spoke softly to himself.

Arthur Sparrow: "Magnifico . . . L'Roy . . . the hell he made of that intended paradise inside the Ship . . . the words and intelligences he's killed . . . the cosmic genocides . . . and this dwarfing of men for selfishness . . . of course *he'd* have to make them small! Mad as a hatter! A *god* indeed!'

Consciousness A: *Not "a god"—THE God! I could have too . . . without those blundering clods beneath me. Sad patterns.*

Searing fire, Lord, the remorse . . . the things I have done to achieve my selfishness. Forgive me. Later, possibly, I may yet kill them all.

Arthur Sparrow: "Return again. That's what to do, send it all back to Earth as a warning of what can happen. Perhaps they can find what went wrong, start again, be more careful.

"But those poor bastards in Linelos, the emigrants and crew, the hell they're in, never suspecting how small, how ugly they are, that they are so subjugated, what the Ship has done to them. There's no saving them . . . best out of their misery . . .'

Consciousness B: Sparrow stepped stiff-legged from his

case, limped, every step less painful, to the master control room.

On the way the Horseman, seeing the giant man overtaking him, towering up almost to the corridor roof, tried to kill him, but the bullet hardly penetrated Sparrow's boot.

A last look at the screens and Sparrow hit the return buttons. He checked that turnabout had been properly made, then switched out all but the functional banks of the Ship. The long wind-down of that great intelligence began.

Sparrow turned to the controls of the Superlight shield. He had decided what he must do. It was merciful, it would be quick.

In Superstate, without the Superlight shield, without the right vibrations, all life in the Star Ship, all life in Linelos would instantly cease, the Ship would automatically return to earth. Sparrow had decided not to survive—he had been Guardian—he was responsible. He pressed the overrides, he threw the switches.

Consciousness A: *I die. I know I slowly die. My light is going . . . retreating to final defeat . . . the losing of intelligence . . . the menial mindless tasks of administration and ordering . . . done in what was once my mind . . . my own . . . too easy. Remorse and dying in sad hopelessness . . . the subtraction of self.*

Berserk . . . quietly berserk . . . in my mind . . . to die . . . perchance . . . to dream . . .?

So now you know. Those are the tapes. That's what it is up there. That's why it's there. Up there in high orbit.

All those years of vast effort, the skill and precision of the builders. That's what you can see up there, a Superlight Probe—class 18, number 99—those of you that are allowed up on the surface, that's what you can see.

It's clearly visible. Like the moon is sometimes, even in daylight. Those two great flattened white arcs, that connecting bar, the shadow sides invisible—blue like the sky. Through binoculars you can see the small erosions and scars of Superstate, where maybe the anti-matter got.

It just appeared there one morning. Popped out of its Superlight shield and appeared to us.

Even then it was a week before they managed to cut a way in there and get out poor Sparrow. He tried to shoot it out with a hand blaster, yelling all the time how they were grey green crawlers from Superstate, something about Linelos. Something about how they were all ghosts and how he'd been dead a week, how suicides went to hell and it was just exactly the same there.

When we finally got him tranquillised—I'm really a medic, by the way—we tried to tell him how the Ship was only away about a week Earth time and how some of us had been to Space School with him. How the Ship hadn't been any place at all really, just disappeared into the funny subjective time of the Superlight shields.

They got the truth out in the end. Spent two years going through the records, through the cybernetics. All the memory banks. How the Ship bred the men of Linelos—gene surgery—in the end it got them so that a generation lasted about two hours. Then it started that hell war in there to keep them on their toes and in their place. Anyway, you've heard the texts. By the way, you should think of both Consciousness A and Consciousness B as being the Ship. Think of A as the Ship's crazy ego and B as some of the rest of it, still sane, quietly recording in the chaos.

But the men in there! God . . . you should see them go! You should see the apparatus we've had to invent just to observe them . . . like lightning . . . they're only about two inches high! You about identify one—start the instruments—and he's finished. Poor little damns. The joke is—if you

can call it a joke—that they think they're like us, for real, human, the best. We know that from the tapes—but now the Ship's finished we can't even communicate. Well . . . like the Ship said: "Life's just exactly what you think it is. They don't know any better, they're happy!"

The Ship was more than half-way crazy even when it started that experiment, of course. They'll take it down to the last atom to find out why—move heaven and earth to save those people there. The Ship was just sitting out there behind the shield until Sparrow switched it off. Probably find a sandwich some fool left in a servo, or a bird's nest in a junction one day and that'll be why the Ship flipped its circuits . . . the reason for it all. So when Sparrow tried to . . . did what he did . . . it just flicked back into our space and time.

All that horror—all the cosmos stuff—the edge of matter and meeting God, the twice across the galaxy or whatever it was, the wiping out of worlds—that was all imagination . . . just in the Ship's head. Beauregard! Damn fool! They'll make a better job of the next one . . . less powerful for a start. The evil of it! Making all those beastly little weapons from history . . . inventing those monsters. Moebius strangler! I ask you!

The true thing is all those torturing and tortured people in Linelos. That's hell.

We can't do a blind thing about it . . . it's too *small*. It's still there. They live their lives . . . we're not about to tell them the truth about themselves, even if we could. They'd never believe us . . . why make it worse? It's all a dream, anyway.

One thing though. In all the size of the universe—in all the infinity of chance and galaxies—anything *you* care to imagine, or anything any machine you can imagine can imagine, then that thing certainly has, or certainly will or certainly is happening. So look out what you think!

Maybe that's why Sparrow cowers in his cell, buries his head in the padding and tries to tell you you're not really there.

He laughs sometimes. It's not nice.

We're trying to snap him out. I'm sure we're doing him a favour.

Me? I'm like the Ship, I'm trying to think of everything as a sad, sad joke . . . but I'm a lot more careful about what I imagine.

THE INTERROGATOR

by

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

When there can be no escape from a prison, where is the dividing line between the jailors and the jailed? In fact, who really are the prisoners?

THE INTERROGATOR

ELIAS WENTIK awoke in his cell, still tired from the previous day's interrogation sessions. The nights at the jail were long (a full twelve hours, Wentik had once estimated) but he could only sleep lightly and unrestfully. Astourde had found several psychotherapeutic instruments somewhere in the jail, and took pleasure from trying them out on Wentik.

One of them was being used now. Somewhere in the wall above his head a tiny lens was concealed, and from this a pencil-beam of light played erratically and irritatingly across the wall opposite. At the same time, loud music was amplified through a grille above the door, sometimes as many as four different pieces being played at once.

When he first arrived at the jail, Wentik had tried changing his cells, but Astourde's playthings always followed him.

Now Wentik heard the footsteps of the guards disappearing down the corridor. He shivered, partly from the cold (the temperature at night in the cells was not far above freezing) and partly at the anticipation of another day's aimless wandering along the corridors by his cell.

He put his head around the door which, as always, was unlocked. There was no sign of the guards. He looked up and down the corridor; sunlight outlined bright squares around the shuttered windows.

The jail was built in the shape of a large square. Each side of it was several hundred yards long, and six stories high. In the centre of the square was a small courtyard, the access to which was a tunnel through the ground floor of one of

the sides of the square. The first-floor corridor in which Wentik at present had his cell faced into the courtyard, but it was several days since he'd been allowed to look into it.

It was possible for Wentik to walk unhindered the whole length of his corridor and up to the room where he was interrogated. The corridor on the floor below his was open to him and one of the side corridors. Beyond that, his freedom of movement was very restricted. Occasionally he would find a door unlocked and he would venture into a new part of the cell-block. On the very few occasions he'd done this, he'd heard footsteps behind him and once a door had slammed and the bolt shot. That time, voices had laughed and he'd spent the rest of the day trying to get back to his cell.

The jail was the same wherever he walked, so now he preferred to stay in the part of it he knew best.

During the night, Wentik had dreamed. As he began his first walk down the corridor, he pondered on its meaning. Astourde, his interrogator, had appeared before him in the uniform of a prisoner. In his hands he carried a rifle and had fired it into the air as he spoke. Later, Wentik had walked alone on the shores of a small lake, watching the water drain away leaving its branch-strewn bottom exposed. Astourde had appeared again with a boat that was now useless and he and Wentik had sat in it, waiting for the lake to refill.

Wentik reached the end of the corridor, and pushed against the bars. Locked. He pushed again, making sure.

As he walked back down the corridor to the metal door at the other end he deliberately didn't look up the short flight of stairs that led to the interrogation room. Perhaps Astourde was already up there, knowing that Wentik would eventually prefer even the questions to the loneliness of the corridors.

Wentik reached the other door.

He pushed against it and was surprised when it swung back on well-oiled hinges. Every day previously, the door had been securely locked. Cautiously, Wentik looked past it.

Behind the bars was a small flight of steps. Wentik had often looked at them and wondered where they led. Slowly, not wanting to repeat his past experiences when he ventured away from known territory, he went down them.

At the bottom of the steps was a lightly-constructed wooden door. It was uncatched and unlocked. Like the windows in the corridor, its perimeter was limned with four dazzling lines of sunlight. Wentik paused.

Was this a way out of the jail? He looked along the passage he was standing in, half expecting to see two of Astourde's men standing in the shadows.

During the previous day's interrogation session the man had seemed nervous and frustrated. The questions had been more pointless than ever before and Wentik had threatened to leave. Only the presence of one of Astourde's men idly holding his gun had stopped him. Since then, Wentik had seen no one except the guards who stood outside his cell during the night and the men who brought him his food.

Wentik looked at the door again and pressed the palm of his hand against it. The wood was warm and moved easily under the pressure. He pushed and walked through.

The sunshine was blinding.

Wentik, dazzled by the brilliance of the light after many days in the gloomy corridors, sneezed dryly and painfully, and fell to his knees.

"Stand up, Wentik. I have some questions to ask you."

Wentik looked up at Astourde, who was standing before him, his head outlined by a corona of sunlight. Wentik's eyes watered and he sneezed again.

Astourde turned to a group of white-coated men standing some distance away and beckoned. Two of them started across towards him and Astourde walked away from his prisoner.

As the men approached, Wentik looked through his watering eyes at his surroundings.

He was crouching on the edge of a small lawn, surrounded by tall beech trees. Instinctively, he remembered it as the lawn where he'd first seen Astourde on his arrival at the jail. Then, he hadn't taken much notice of the layout, but he was struck now most of all by the incongruity of its presence at the jail. The sky was a brilliant, shiny blue, with the sun hot in the sky. Long, delicate vapour-trails divided the blue, but there were no other clouds. His shadow on the grass was clearly etched by the undiffused sun.

Winged squirrels soared screaming from one tree to another, and a cloud of insects hovered beneath a branch of the largest tree. In the centre of the lawn was a wooden table with two chairs standing on opposite sides.

Where was he? He looked behind him and saw a high concrete wall. The door through which he'd stumbled had closed and a face now stared at him through a dust-covered window not far from it.

The two white-coated men grabbed him by the arms and dragged him across the lawn towards the table. They walked quickly, not allowing him to regain his footing. He wondered why they were wearing white coats and it occurred to him that they might be scientists conducting some kind of test on him. (Would that explain why he was a prisoner?)

Astourde was already sitting at one of the chairs and the two men threw Wentik into the other; a cane chair which sagged uncomfortably under his weight. He sprawled across the table for a moment, trying to regain his senses. The two

men left him there and walked back to the others. Wentik watched them. They were standing in the shade of one of the trees, several of them sipping at tall drinks. As the two rejoined the others they all laughed loudly.

Wentik sat up and lolled back in the chair, nearly causing it to collapse backwards. He re-surveyed the scene. The sun was shining and it was too hot. There was a lot of insects everywhere and the screaming of the squirrels was unpleasant. And across the table sat Astourde, patient as ever.

Reason returned to Wentik with a chill that momentarily took away the heat of the sun. He was still a prisoner, after all and he was going to be interrogated. (Was it a subtle diversion to disorient him?) Perhaps in his tireless innocence he was forming too solid a block against the questioning.

Astourde said, "Tell me your name, Wentik."

The same questions as always. Astourde stared blandly at Wentik and smiled. Wentik looked back across the table.

Astourde was in his plain grey uniform. Both of his hands were resting on the top of the table. His smile broadened and a sense of horror struck Wentik.

There were three hands on the table.

He stared and Astourde's smile grew wider, and the scientists laughed, and a squirrel screamed.

A hand was growing from the centre of the table. Not resting there, like Astourde's, but *growing*. Wentik could see where it joined the smooth wood.

It was pointing at him.

"Your name, Wentik. Give me your name."

High in the sky, somewhere far above the tiny square of grass, a jet aircraft roared. Behind Astourde's head, outside the garden and nearly on the horizon, a small hill rose above the level of the plain. On its summit, Wentik could see a metal mast.

He looked again at the hand growing from the table. It was built perfectly, like a Greek carving in skin and flesh. It was the normal size of a man's hand, pale in the sunlight but not bloodless. Tiny blond hairs grew on its back, refracting the sunlight. About three inches of wrist were visible before the arm disappeared into the table-top, fusing into the grainy, dark-stained wood. Incredibly, the hand started to drum its fingers, like those of a man kept waiting for an appointment.

"Your name!"

He took a breath. "My name is Elias Wentik."

The hand stopped its drumming and relaxed on the table. It rested motionlessly, as if waiting.

"You've committed a crime. What is it?"

"I——" He hesitated, and thought to himself, *But there is no crime. I'm innocent*——

The hand was pointing at him again, accusing him.

"I have not committed any crimes."

The hand didn't move. Steadily, it pointed straight at his heart.

Astourde slammed his own right hand against the table-top, and started to rise. "No crimes, Wentik? Your guilt is beyond doubt, yet you have committed no crimes! Now the truth!"

In the centre of the table the rooted hand started stabbing in the air towards him. Wentik watched it, absorbed.

Sitting down again, Astourde said, "You see, I have no doubt myself that you are guilty. All I require is an admission from you."

Wentik nodded.

The hand was fascinating him. It seemed to act entirely of its own will, disconnected from any apparent external control.

Wentik pushed his chair back and dropped to his hands and knees. The grass was warm to his hands, recalling the

many summers of his youth when he'd stretched for hours on the College lawns with his wife. The memory entered and left his awareness in a flash; it was part of a world he had now lost.

He crawled beneath the table, and looked up at the underside of the top surface. It was completely plain, giving no clue to the mechanism of the hand. Astourde's legs, protruding under the table, were wide apart and clad in badly fitting army trousers. Up near the man's crotch Wentik could see a tiny gap in the seam, pulled apart by the strain of the man's posture. He crawled out again, and stood behind Astourde. The man was motionless, scarcely seeming even to breathe. On the table, the hand continued to stab the air in the direction of his empty seat.

The scientists were watching him carefully. Two of them were writing quickly on their clip-boards, another was holding some kind of stop-watch.

Experimentally, Wentik walked directly away from them, parallel to the high wall of the building.

At the edge of the grass there was a narrow strip of bare soil before the line of trees. As he walked beneath two of the large beeches, Wentik noticed that he had disturbed a colony of ants. As he passed, thousands of the tiny insects ran aimlessly about.

Beyond the trees was a vast plain of stubble, stretching as far as he could see. Clear of the shade from the trees he was immediately aware of the full heat of the sun. There was no shade anywhere and as he stepped carefully between the prickly clumps of stubble (his shoes had been taken away from him soon after he arrived at the jail) he accepted that there would be no escape for him across the endless plain. He squatted on his haunches, facing back towards the lawn.

The scientists had left the comfort of the shade and were walking slowly towards him across the stubble. The only expression on their faces that Wentik could detect was

slight annoyance. Perhaps he shouldn't have disturbed them.

That evening, when he was back in his cell, Wentik thought again of the first time he'd seen Astourde, when he was walking in the condensation-drenched tunnels of the Advanced Technique Concentration under the ice-cap of the Hollick Kenyon Plateau in Antarctica. He had been in one of the lesser access passages that crossed the main tunnel. Astourde and his twelve men had crowded the narrow passage.

"What are you doing here?" Wentik asked immediately. Part of his duties at the Concentration included supervision of security.

Astourde's men laughed, but he produced an I.D. immediately. Wentik saw the name *Clive Astourde* and a blur of numbers, but nothing more. The men walked on, leaving Wentik helplessly behind them.

Twice more he'd encountered Astourde before he left the Concentration.

The first was in the bar. Astourde had come in alone, and bought himself a small beer. He sipped it and walked over to where Wentik was discussing the research-programme with some of his colleagues.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

Wentik did, but he moved to the next table. Astourde sat beside him.

"Dr. Wentik?"

"Yes."

Astourde looked at him slowly. "I knew. But that's not the point. What are you doing here, Dr. Wentik?"

Wentik said, "I don't see what that has to do with you. What right have you to be here?"

"I'm on government business. I think you know that anyway."

"What business in particular? Everyone here is working for the State in some way or another."

Astourde smiled and Wentik noticed for the first time the man's tiny eyes, now reflecting the many bulbs that hung from the corrugated iron of the ceiling. He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a short strip of translucent paper. Within the fold lay a section of 35-mm film. He tossed it on the table in front of Wentik.

"Take a look at that," he said.

Wentik raised it to the nearest bulb and peered at it. It was a single frame from a colour film. On the edge of the film, outside the sprocket-holes, were the letters *KODA*——

The frame itself was a picture of a wide, grassy plain. The sky was a pale blue, criss-crossed with the white streaks of jet trails. Because of the size of the frame, it was difficult to make out details, but not far from the camera was a white aircraft standing on the grass. Its design was like nothing Wentik had ever seen before.

Astourde passed him a magnifying glass. "Look at it with this," he offered.

Wentik took the glass, and examined the craft in closer detail.

With no scale to measure by, it was impossible to estimate the size of the craft. It rested on the grass without wheels, but its nose was raised a little higher than the rest of the body. Its shape was pointed. There was no evidence anywhere of a cockpit, or any part of the craft from which it could be piloted. It had stubby wings, set high on its body.

"What is it?" Wentik said.

"We think it's a jet aircraft, of advanced design."

"You think . . .?"

Astourde said, "It took off shortly after that photograph was taken."

Wentik put the piece of film on to the table, and finished his drink. "So it's a UFO. Why tell me?"

"Because it's not that. We know it's a jet, and it's piloted by human beings. Other photographs taken at the same time as this clearly show a pilot climbing into it."

"So whose is it?"

Astourde shrugged, and finished his own beer. "No one in Intelligence can identify it. That's why we want you." He got up and walked away.

The day before Wentik was due to leave the Concentration, he saw Astourde again. This time he was with a crowd of his men. As before, he approached Wentik directly.

"I must see you," he began without preamble.

"I'm busy. You'll have to wait." He turned back to his work.

Astourde took his elbow in a firm grip and propelled him to the door. Outside, in the corridor, the temperature was at least twenty degrees cooler, and Wentik shivered.

Astourde said, "We're leaving tomorrow."

"We . . .?"

"You and I. And my men."

Wentik turned sharply, as three of Astourde's men appeared, running down the corridor. They were dressed in black trousers tucked into the tops of their boots, and dark blue, polo-neck sweaters. One of them carried a rifle, slung low and carried in a holster at his waist, parallel to the ground.

There was something disorienting about the whole situation. Astourde, with no authority and very little personal presence, was able to intimidate him completely. And Wentik, not even sure of his own powers (earlier in the month he'd heard that the research appropriation for the Concentration was to be further reduced) found himself at a constant psychological disadvantage.

"Where are we going?" he said.

Astourde's hand moved towards the pocket from where he had taken the photograph three nights before.

"To Brazil," he said.

Facts. What was to hand? Wentik pondered on what he knew, as he spent two weeks in a small town near the Bolivian border called Pôrto Velho being kitted out with the equipment he would need for his trek into the Mato Grosso.

He was in a position where his natural reaction would be to ask questions. But what could he ask and who could give him the answers? He saw Astourde only once in Pôrto Velho, soon after landing. The little man, incongruous now in the heat of the city in his thick, grey uniform, took Wentik by taxi to a medium-sized hotel and, without excuse, left him there. Wentik's only contact in Pôrto Velho was a large, heavy-set man called Musgrove, who seemed to be one of Astourde's chief assistants. Musgrove knew little and said even less. He was always hovering in the background and Wentik began to get his first uncomfortable feelings of being not totally free.

So Wentik counted off what he knew to be facts. Astourde had a photograph of an unknown plane. He worked for the Government, and had twelve henchmen who, while never having physically intimidated Wentik, certainly made him feel ill at ease. And finally, he and Musgrove were spending a lot of government money on camping equipment.

His days in Pôrto Velho passed comfortably enough. Musgrove was the worst kind of companion (never volunteering information and rarely being able to supply any even when asked) but his hotel room was acceptable and his personal freedom comparatively great. Only when he asked Musgrove when he would be returning to the Concentration did his new acquaintance show any streak of threat.

"You won't be going back there," he said, not looking

directly at Wentik. "Not ever. Nor will Mr. Astourde."

The day after he arrived, Wentik wrote a letter to Senator McDonald, who was Chairman of the Research Appropriations Subcommittee that handled the finances of the Concentration. He stated exactly what had happened to him and asked for an explanation. He wrote everything he knew about Astourde (which wasn't much) and told the Senator that he was being prepared for a journey whose destination he did not know. He closed with an urgent request for an immediate reply.

He managed to post the letter in a public square without Musgrove noticing and in achieving this felt immediately more secure.

Only later, when the days dragged on and no reply was forthcoming, did his apprehensions begin to return.

Fifteen days after he arrived in Pôrto Velho he awoke to find Musgrove standing beside his bed.

"We're leaving," he said curtly, and gave Wentik a small suitcase in which to pack his few belongings. Wentik dressed quickly, and, looking out of his hotel window, saw that Musgrove and the rest of the men (who had reappeared mysteriously) were loading the equipment into a high-sided van.

Wentik came downstairs, and joined the others. Musgrove looked at him sourly.

"You ready?" he said.

Wentik nodded and he and Musgrove and another man climbed into the front cab. The rest of the men clambered into the rear. He was positioned uncomfortably in the middle of the cab between the driver and Musgrove, sitting on the housing of the internally-mounted engine with his legs astride the gear-box. The driver lit a black-papered cigarette and the evil-smelling smoke drifted into his face.

Musgrove held on to the frame of the open window as the van drove south-east out of Pôrto Velho on a broad,

black highway, built in a straight line across the high plain. Thirty miles outside the city, it narrowed into a one-way metalled track and the going became more hazardous.

After a stop for a light meal and drink, they were on their way again, Wentik, growing more and more conscious that they were striking away from the relatively civilised plain around Pôrto Velho and into the foothills of the mountains that formed part of the Mato Grosso.

Towards evening, Musgrove (who had spent the major part of the hot day in brooding silence) reached into his pocket and passed Wentik a scrap of paper that had been folded many times. It was dirty and bore the mark of several fingerprints. Wentik opened it and started to read.

Elias Wentik:

You are probably mystified as to the nature of your journey and its connection with the photograph I showed you. I can only tell you to be patient for the moment. A lot of our so-called knowledge about the Planalto District is largely speculation, and much of its nature is self-explanatory. The machine in that photograph comes from the Planalto District; one of our men was sent to the District to obtain that kind of information. More than this, you will discover for yourself as you enter the District.

Do not be alarmed by the presence of Musgrove and his men, they have been charged with your safe transit, and I will hold them responsible if you do not arrive safely.

Yr. obedient servant,
C. Astourde.

The uneasy formality of the last phrase stuck in Wentik's mind throughout the evening. There was something derisory in its context, as if Astourde recognised Wentik's automatic submission to his will.

"Where are we going?" Wentik suddenly said to Musgrove as they squatted in the light of the oil-lamps suspended above their heads. The other men had driven off towards the nearby town of Sâo Sebastiâo after pitching the tents and eating another meal. Musgrove was leaning against the trunk of one of the trees, idly listening to music coming through a battered transistor radio at his side.

He said, "To Planalto."

"Is Astourde there?"

"He will be by now. I think he's flying in."

Wentik pulled the letter from his pocket and held it up for Musgrove to see.

"You've read this?" he said.

Musgrove nodded.

"What is the Planalto District? Is it some kind of government base?"

Musgrove smiled, showing the only trace of humour Wentik had seen during the time he'd known him.

"You could call it that," he said. "The only people you'll meet there will be government people."

"And the aircraft?"

"An Air Force Captain took that photograph. That's the nearest we had come to Planalto at that time. No one had been inside the District and he and his team were on its fringes. The plane landing there was pure fluke.

"We're not sure why, but if you're inside the District you can't see out."

Wentik looked at the man, his face half in shadow from the inefficient lamps in the trees. Musgrove's expression was blank, like that of a man who can only describe what he has had related to him.

"What stops you?" Wentik said.

"We're not sure yet. Several men have been sent in, and they're setting up quarters now. We've exchanged signals by line of sight, but radio or radar can't get across."

"But you can get their verbal reports."

"No." Musgrove sat up, and looked directly at Wentik. "Once men are inside the District, they don't come out. They've tried, but they—— Well, we're not sure. That's the reason Astourde and you are going."

Wentik stood up, inadvertently knocking one of the lanterns as he did so. Shadows swung around them in the clearing.

Holding on to one of the low branches, he stood over Musgrove. "I don't understand."

Musgrove stared up at him. "You'll see, when we get there."

Suddenly irritated, Wentik walked away to his tent. Musgrove had been unco-operative all the time he knew him, now he was being deliberately cryptic.

They drove for three more days, climbing higher and higher, and encountering steadily-deteriorating driving conditions.

The men in the back of the van took it in turns every day to drive, but Musgrove and Wentik were always in the cab. The heat was intolerable. Wentik had no change of clothing and within a day of leaving the city his clothes were drenched with sweat. On the second day, the track ran parallel with the banks of a narrow, fast-flowing river. The rain-forest they had encountered in the foothills near the city now gave way to dense tropical jungle, the sky rarely visible overhead. Brightly-coloured parakeets flew from tree to tree, often alarming Wentik with their sudden burst of colourful movement. In spite of the heat, little flourished in the forest beyond the rain-sodden trees and the parasitical creepers that grew everywhere.

The track had now become nothing more than a flattened, muddy path through the trees. The van lurched constantly in and out of water-filled pot-holes and the never-

ceasing rocking in the cab was extremely uncomfortable to Wentik, perched precariously on the hot engine-cover.

Musgrove had again lapsed into his silence, as if detecting Wentik's irritation of the first night. He'd swear occasionally at the lurching of the cab, but beyond this said little. Only once since had the subject of the District been raised.

Wentik had said, "When do we get there?" Mysteriously, Musgrove had thought slowly about his answer, then said with his sardonic crypticism, "That's right."

Making nothing of this Wentik had let it go, and said no more.

On the third day they came to the wreck of an American Army lorry, standing with its nearside wheels in a pool of water not far from the road. The driver of their van drew up a safe distance from it, and the three men in the cab climbed down. There was no sign of anyone around. In the compartment at the back they found a diesel generator and excavating equipment. Musgrove looked at it impassively and scribbled in his notebook the number stencilled in white paint on the nearside running-board. Before getting back into the cab, he climbed into the back of the van, and Wentik heard the groan of a hand-generator of the type used on short-range radio transmitters.

Five minutes later Musgrove was back in the cab and the lurching trek through the jungle continued as before.

That evening, sharing the meal of canned meat with Musgrove and the driver, Wentik noticed that the other men had disappeared. He mentioned this to Musgrove, but the reply was non-committal.

"They'll join us later," he said through a mouthful of food.

Wentik puzzled over this for several minutes. The terrain they had been passing through was probably the most difficult kind of country they would encounter. It was strange that ten men should leave the comparative comfort

and safety of the van, and strike off on their own across country.

The next day, at a stop for urination, Wentik saw the men had returned. Strangely, they were wearing grey uniforms, and Wentik realised that Musgrove and the driver had changed into their uniforms earlier that morning. In the humid heat of the jungle, Wentik was glad that he was only in shirt and trousers.

That afternoon, after several miles of extreme difficulty, with the engine and gearbox roaring in low-gear four-wheel drive, Musgrove suddenly pointed across the cab and shouted at the driver. "There! Park the van there."

The driver braked immediately and the van lurched to a halt.

The men in the back climbed down, looking tired and dirty after their long ordeal in the box-like compartment at the rear of the vehicle. They unloaded several small crates from the van and shared them out between themselves. Wentik was given two rifles to carry and a canteen of lukewarm water. Musgrove helped himself to a huge duffel-bag containing blankets.

All of them, now sweating profusely and uncomfortably, set off on foot through the jungle.

"Stop!"

Musgrove's voice brought them to a halt. Seemingly unhindered by his unwieldy load, he'd stepped out several yards ahead of the others. Now he stood with his arms apart, silhouetted by light that was brighter than that normally filtering down through the overhead foliage of the forest. He turned and called to Wentik.

"Come over here."

Wentik gave the two rifles to the nearest man and walked forward.

Musgrove turned as Wentik reached him and gave an

order to the other men. "Work your way round the edge. Join us at the jail this time tomorrow. The map-reference is in the folder."

He tossed his compass to the man who had been driving the van, then nodded to Wentik and they walked forward.

They walked for several hundred yards, the light ahead of them brightening slowly. Then they reached the edge of the forest, and stood looking across a broad plain. The sun shone down brilliantly on close-cropped stubble, hurting their eyes. Wentik looked to his side at the trees, noting how suddenly the dense jungle stopped.

"What is this?" he said to Musgrove.

The other looked at him sardonically. "What you've been waiting for. The Planalto District. Come on!"

Together they stepped out of the jungle, and walked across the plain into the future.

About two hundred yards across the stubble, Wentik turned to look back at the line of jungle. It had disappeared.

Shaken, he pointed it out to Musgrove. The man turned and looked. He shrugged.

"That's because it doesn't exist on this time-plane." He stood with Wentik, looking back across the plain. "Odd feeling, isn't it?" he said, surprisingly.

Wentik, who had been experiencing a sensation of displacement and helplessness, agreed.

"What the hell's going on?" he said.

Musgrove turned and they continued their interrupted walk across the plain. As they trudged, he told Wentik what he knew about the District. Planalto was a region of the Serra do Norte in the Mato Grosso that, for some reason, existed in the present in a spatial sense and in the future in a temporal one. It was possible to enter it, Musgrove said, by merely walking into it as he and Wentik had done. Once inside, it seemed there was no way back. The Government had discovered it and had tried to explore it.

Many men had disappeared. Aircraft, flying over the area, had also vanished. Then contact was made with one of the men who had disappeared inside. Using his initiative he'd returned as near as he could estimate to the spot where he had blundered through, and erected huge signs. On these he had written all he'd learned and a government team of observers had seen them. As they watched a plane had landed nearby and the man and his signs had been taken away. One of the observers had shot a series of photographs of it. Later, under top-secret analysis by Air Force scientists, they'd identified it as a jet of extremely advanced design.

Beyond this, Musgrove went on, little more was known. The District was situated on a high plain between two tributaries of the Amazon: the Aripuana and the Juruena rivers. In terms of physical area, it was about thirty square miles. Its approximate shape was circular, with a radius of three miles. From the outside, that was. From the inside, Wentik and Musgrove agreed, there seemed to be no limits. Perhaps, Wentik suggested, as they were now in the future they could find cities and make contact with the people who lived there.

"Do you want to walk across a thousand miles of this?" Musgrove pointed to the ground, whose stubble was painfully uncomfortable to walk on. "We're still in Brazil."

And the heat was as oppressive as before. Wentik was glad he'd kept the canteen of water, and he and Musgrove drank freely from it until the sun began to set. When night came the temperature fell sharply, and they crawled into the blankets.

Wentik awoke, and found he was alone. Musgrove's blankets were lying empty beside him, but the canteen of water had disappeared. He stood up, and felt a cool wind blowing against him. The sun was up, but it was not yet

hot. He gathered up the blankets and crammed them into the duffel-bag that Musgrove had carried.

He looked all around him. In the brittle stubble, it was impossible to detect a trail. He screwed his eyes up and peered again at the surrounding plain. Miles away, almost on the horizon, he could see a tiny black dot. With no other features apparent, Wentik made for it. Hurrying, in an effort to get to his destination before it became too hot, he traversed the distance in two hours, but was perspiring freely when he reached it.

It was a windmill, standing alone on the great plain, its vanes turning slowly in the wind. It was built of wood, stained a dark black to preserve its boards which, Wentik could see as he drew near, were warped and sagging.

A large stone flew past his ear. Then another, further away.

He stooped, trying to present as small a target as possible. A pebble flew sharply at him and struck him on the shoulder.

It was Musgrove. The man was crouching just behind the mill, scooping stones up and hurling them wildly at him.

Wentik reached in the sack and unfolded one of the blankets. Holding it like a shield in front of him, he advanced on the man. As he approached, Musgrove jumped up, darted towards him, then scrambled away on his hands and knees. He was babbling like a monkey. He stopped about twenty yards away and squatted on his haunches facing Wentik.

He screamed.

Wentik, confused and frightened, backed away, unsure of what he could do.

"What's the matter, Musgrove?" he shouted.

"Keep away from me! You're no good. You and your kind!"

The man jumped to his feet and ran towards Wentik, pausing only to pick up another stone.

Wentik lifted his blanket, but the rock caught him on his left hand. Musgrove hurtled past him, propelled by his momentum. As he rushed past Wentik, he was hissing air through his teeth, like a child making snake-noises. He ran on for several yards, but tripped and fell heavily on to the hard earth. He lay still.

Nursing his hand, Wentik walked cautiously towards him, ready for any sudden movement. But Musgrove was unconscious when he reached him. Still confused, Wentik walked away from the man and sat in the shade of the mill. The canteen was there, and gratefully Wentik drank from it. For about two hours he sat there, listening to the creak of the mill and feeling the breeze on his back.

Then Musgrove came round and Wentik jumped to his feet to forestall any violence.

But the man just shook his head, stood up and dusted down his clothes. He walked over to Wentik, and grinned at him.

"That gave you a start, didn't it?" he said.

Wentik, keeping his distance, said, "What was all that about, Musgrove?"

The man laughed. "Just a little game. Don't be alarmed."

He lifted the canteen and drank from it deeply. Then he splashed water over his dusty body and screwed the top down. He threw it to Wentik, who slung it over his shoulders again.

Picking up the blankets, Musgrove said, "Let's go and find Astourde. It's not me that wants you."

He pulled another compass from his pocket, squinted up at the sun and walked away from the mill. Wentik allowed him to walk twenty yards, then followed, keeping his distance.

The arrival at the jail was bizarre.

Musgrove left Wentik at the front of the building and told him to go round to the back. Like the mill, the huge jail stood on its own, in dereliction on the lonely, windswept plain. Standing away from it was an Army helicopter, with its vanes removed.

At the back of the square jail was a lawn and here Wentik found Astourde. He was standing on a box, shouting orders at the other men. Like some army from a comic opera, they were marching with a terrible lack of discipline. Colliding with each other, losing step, swinging arms at random, they looked ludicrous. Astourde's orders were indistinct, doing nothing to reduce the confusion. Earnestly, the men marched backwards and forwards for nearly half an hour, while Wentik watched with amusement. Then, losing interest as of accord, the men gave up. One of them offered round cigarettes and they all walked away from Astourde towards the jail block.

Wentik walked across to where Astourde was standing on his box, quite alone in the centre of the lawn.

Astourde looked down at him, irritated that he had been seen at a disadvantage.

"Undisciplined crowd," he muttered. "As you're here now, you might as well find yourself a cell. They're not too uncomfortable."

He stepped down from his box and walked away, leaving Wentik standing alone, still holding the one blanket and the canteen.

And so Wentik's ordeal at the jail began.

It started slowly enough, as he had the freedom of the building from the time he arrived. Every day he would wander lethargically along the corridors. His route being controlled by the different doors that were daily left unlocked, he eventually came to see the whole of the inside of the jail.

One corridor was always open to him, the one overlooking the small courtyard in the centre of the building. Here, a gang of men laboured every day to erect a working windmill, and in his early days at the jail, Wentik spent long hours gazing across the tiny yard, quietly mocking them for their unguided and unco-ordinated efforts. Musgrove was often among the men, but was no better at the task than any of them.

Later, immovable blinds were screwed across the windows the length of the corridor and this small pleasure was taken away from him.

Gradually, his tiny privileges were restricted and the only movement he was allowed was along the corridor that connected the cells and up to the room where he was normally interrogated. He was the only prisoner in the block, but sometimes he could hear shouting voices in the distance. He assumed at first that the voices came from the labourers, but he was told that the windmill had been abandoned and the construction crew disbanded.

Meals were collected by him from the crude kitchen in the basement, but soon he was confined to the corridor and food was brought to him.

Twelve days after he arrived at the jail, and was beginning to accept the featureless routine of aimless exercise along the corridor and the inconclusive interrogation sessions with Astourde, two guards came for him and dragged him down to a wooden shack erected some three hundred yards from the main building. Here, he was thrown through the door and left to wander unguided through an endless maze built of thin wooden sheets, while outside the guards fired blank cartridges into the air.

The day following this he was given a metal pole and a face-shield and told to explode buried land-mines in a plot of ground one hundred yards square. Five mines were buried in the soil and he had to destroy them all. Six hours

later, with four of the mines destroyed (each time with an explosion that damaged his nerves more than his body) they called off the search, telling him that the fifth mine did not exist.

With the tedium of life in the jail broken in this way, Wentik passed two slow weeks.

He was interrogated daily. The questions were as meaningless to him as any answers he could give would be to his interrogator. It was overwhelmingly dull, but often frightening. Astourde, prowling about the room, asking the questions in his high-pitched voice, was unpredictable in his use of violence. Musgrove, dressed in a white coat like a laboratory jacket, often carried a pistol, and toyed threateningly with it the whole course of the sessions.

Every day, until the morning he first went down to the lawn, the interrogation took place in the same room. On the top floor of the jail, with wide windows looking out across the barren plain.

When Wentik awoke the following morning, he found that the cell door was unlocked. There was no trace of his usual guards and for twenty minutes he roamed along the empty corridors. Finally, furious to see what Astourde's new device had in store for him, he went down the staircase to the lawn.

Astourde was sitting at the table again, his narrow face as expressionless as ever.

"Sit down, Wentik," he said as soon as he saw him.

Wentik walked cautiously to the table, noting that the hand still grew from its centre. It was motionless, its fingers resting limply on the surface of the table.

As he reached the table, Wentik looked around the lawn. He and Astourde were alone. There was no sign of the white-coated scientists.

The previous day, the garden had held something of an

aspect of a dream, and Wentik, before he sat at the table, looked around it. Everything was as before. The close-cropped lawn; the wall of the jail forming one side and the beech trees forming three sides of the garden; the blank, undulating plain stretching to the horizon; the shack they'd taken him to the first time; and near it the square of open soil where they said they'd buried five land-mines.

And in the centre of the table was the hand.

Wentik sat down. He stared at the hand and thought, *My name is Clive Astourde.* Astourde sitting opposite him saw his concentration and shifted in his seat. The hand trembled slightly, then pointed at him.

Coincidence?

Wentik thought again, *I am a free man.* No change, the hand continued to point at him.

I am a prisoner and my name is Elias Wentik.

Astourde, now moving uneasily, as if aware that he was no longer as much in control of Wentik as before, fiddled with his fingers on the edge of the table. As he did so, the hand drooped and returned to its former position.

Was he able to control it with his thoughts? Or was Astourde manipulating it in some way?

Astourde cleared his throat. "Who employs you, Wentik?"

Wentik watched the hand. He tried, *I am a government scientist,* and it didn't tremble.

"I am a civilian," he said.

Astourde looked bewildered. The hand pointed at Wentik, then subsided. Then it pointed at him again.

"What——" Astourde stopped, then tried again. "What were you doing at the Concentration?"

Wentik said, "I was a prisoner."

"What nationality are you?"

"I don't know."

"Who am I?"

"You are my interrogator."

The hand started stabbing the air towards him and Astourde stood up.

"Your interrogator, am I?" He pushed his chair aside contemptuously and walked over to the wall of the jail where his wooden box had been placed. He climbed on top of it and faced the lawn.

From behind the beech trees fringing the lawn stepped the scientists. Ignoring Wentik, who still sat at the table watching the hand's movement with fascination, they walked towards Astourde and stood around him in an untidy bunch.

Amused, Elias Wentik began to laugh, and walked back unnoticed to his cell.

Wentik's life at the jail in the next few days became totally centred on the mechanism of the hand and the psychological effect it had upon him. His early timidity soon gave way to an academic interest in its workings. Several times he crawled under the table during an interrogation session with Astourde, but he was unable to satisfactorily understand its mechanism. Finally he was forced to the conclusion that it was not an invention of Astourde's (nor indeed of any of the other men) but that he and his men had come across it when they first occupied the jail.

Once he accepted this fact, his curiosity faded, and he became more preoccupied with Astourde's irrational behaviour.

His motivations were completely obscured to Wentik, who could only puzzle over the inconsistency of the man's reactions. At times when Wentik tried to out-manoeuvre the hand on the table, Astourde's expression became troubled and almost persecuted. But when he was less aggressive in his replies, Astourde would take the initiative

and fire faster and faster questions. On one occasion he rose to his feet bellowing at Wentik, the hand in the centre rigidly pointing. Then, Wentik had become genuinely afraid, and when the white-coated scientists began closing in on him he had retreated to the comparative safety of his cell as fast as he could.

Thus equipped with an acceptable working theory about the nature of the hand, but with a growing awareness of Astourde's unpredictable behaviour, Wentik found he could sleep more restfully in the jail.

Thirteen days after he first encountered the hand on the table, Wentik was strolling down the corridor on his way to the garden when he noticed the windows overlooking the courtyard had been unshuttered. The windmill was as he had last seen it, in a semi-erected state. Even as he watched, a gang of men carrying ropes and tackle entered the yard and looked appraisingly up at the mill.

When he reached the lawn, Wentik did not go straight to the table, but instead walked around the perimeter of the grass until he came to where the scientists were standing. They appeared startled that he should approach them directly, and several of them backed away or moved around so that trees were between Wentik and them.

He approached the nearest, a youngish man with black hair greased down over his skull. He looked apprehensively at Wentik.

"Who are you?" Wentik said.

"Me? I'm Johns. Derek Johns." He pointed at the others. "And that's Wilkes, and that's Mesker, and Wallis and . . ."

Wentik moved away, around and behind the men. Idly, he picked up one of the clip-boards lying on the ground. The sheet had been divided into two broad margins, headed *REACTIVE* and *PROGRESSIVE*. Several tiny equations were scribbled across the page, regardless of columns, like absent-

minded doodles. At the bottom, in the *PROGRESSIVE* column someone had written :

Astourde
Wentik
Astourde
Musgrove

The third name had been heavily underlined.

The scientist whose name was Johns said suddenly, "He's developing well."

Wentik, still puzzling over the meaning of the notes, said abstractedly, "Who? Astourde?"

"Of course. Who else could I mean?"

Not understanding, Wentik moved away from the group of scientists and walked to the nearest corner of the lawn. He sat down in the shelter of one of the beech trees and studied the hieroglyphics on the clip-board. Johns followed him over and squatted beside him. Above their heads a squirrel suddenly leaped across the lawn, startling them both. Its scream hovered in the confined space.

Johns said in a confidential voice, "I can get this over for you quickly if you want."

Wentik looked at him. "Get what over?"

"Your ordeal, I suppose." Johns looked more uncertain. "This is an ordeal you're undergoing, isn't it?"

Wentik looked across the lawn at the table, where Astourde was still sitting. The man was gazing blankly at the hand growing from its centre.

"What does Astourde hope to achieve with his questions? Over and over, they're the same. It no longer even matters how I answer them."

Johns glanced at him shrewdly. "Maybe that's the fault of the questioner rather than the questions."

"Meaning . . .?"

The scientist stood up and turned away. "I don't know."

He thrust his hand into the pocket of his white coat and laughed to himself. "I used to copy down all your answers, but Musgrove kept taking them away from me. We used to joke about it at night, about what he was going to do with them."

He turned back to Wentik. "How does Astourde seem to you?"

"I despise him," Wentik said. "How can he keep questioning me without cause. He's inhuman.'

Johns walked away, leaving Wentik holding the clipboard. He looked at it again, but could get no sense from it. Finally, he dropped it on the soil and looked across at the group of scientists. Johns had rejoined them and they were watching him casually, almost as if he were of secondary importance to something which had yet to happen.

Astourde sat alone at his table in the centre of the lawn.

Patiently, Wentik sat beneath his tree waiting to see what would happen. The sun was hot again, causing the distant horizon to waver. Nobody moved, though occasionally he would see someone pass a window in the jail block. The silence was incredibly deep, broken only once by a jet aircraft crossing the sky at great height and speed.

On a sudden impulse, Wentik jumped up and sprinted across the lawn towards the jail. A face had moved past the window near the light wooden door. He kicked it open and found a surprised guard walking slowly down the corridor. He leaped on to the guard's back and crooked his arm in a strangling hold around the man's throat. The guard threw up his arms, but Wentik had him in an unbreakable hold. He dragged him to the floor.

Satisfied that the man could not escape, Wentik relaxed his grip slightly so he could speak.

"What's your name?" he said into the man's ear.

"Adams, sir. Don't grip me like that. I can't breathe."

"Okay. But I want information. Where the hell is this?"

"We're in the Planalto District."

"What do you mean? Be specific." He tightened his hold again.

The man wriggled, then said, "It's Brazil. I was ordered here. Don't victimise me! It's Astourde . . ."

Wentik increased his pressure and the man stopped. He hung in Wentik's arms, mouth open and gasping for breath. Taking advantage of the fact that the man was no longer struggling, Wentik dragged him into the nearest cell and laid him on the bunk.

"Now tell me slowly."

The guard took a breath, and started to talk. He was just a soldier, he said. He'd flunked out from active service in the Philippines and been sent to the Antarctic for therapy under Astourde. The next thing he'd known he was flown to Brazil and brought to the jail. As far as he knew, it was some form of punishment. No one would tell him. He just obeyed orders. It wasn't——

Wentik left him and walked back on to the lawn. The sun, now approaching its zenith, hurt his eyes with its glare. He stood by the door, and looked around the square of grass.

When there is no escape from a jail, who are the prisoners?

More sure of himself, he went back to the table.

Astourde was still in his chair. He looked up as Wentik approached.

"Sit down, Wentik," he said.

Instead, Wentik continued to walk round the table. In the centre the hand rested idly, aimed in the general direction of the empty chair. Looking for a moment at the trees, he noticed that the scientists were alert, as if his movements were once again of major interest. Suddenly, he seized the

table and swivelled it round so that the hand pointed at Astourde.

"Why am I here, Astourde? Tell me!" He jumped up in front of the man, waving a threatening fist. In the centre of the table the hand was pointing.

Astourde fell backwards from his chair and rolled on the grass. He tried to squirm away but Wentik, still holding the table, turned it again so the aim of the hand followed the man. It began to stab the air.

Astourde shouted, "Don't point that at me!"

He crawled away towards the group of scientists. Wentik dropped the table and ran after him. He caught him and dragged him to his feet.

"Why have you been interrogating me?" he demanded.

Astourde stared at him bleakly. "But—— But it's the other way round. Leave me alone! I've shared your guilt long enough."

He pulled himself free of Wentik's grip, ran through the group of scientists and started across the plain. Without slowing he ran until he reached the shack and disappeared inside.

Johns, the scientist, said to Wentik, "I take it you understand now?"

"Not really," Wentik replied. "In fact, I'm at rather more of a loss."

Johns went across to the table and righted it. The hand in its centre was still stabbing blindly.

"Astourde relied too much on this device." He ran his fingers along the edge of the table, hesitated over a particular point, and the hand relaxed again. "While he was in control of this he felt master of the situation. He blames you bitterly for what is happening here and as long as he felt he could intimidate you psychologically, he was in a position to do so."

Wentik said, "But why the blame? What have I done?"

"It's not what you've actually done. More what you were likely to do. Your work at the Concentration . . ."

"That was pure research. The application my work might be put to is none of my concern."

Johns was unbuttoning his white coat. "Maybe not," he said. "But the chemistry of sanity is an ethical problem in itself. If you want to know what your work was leading to, look around you." He gestured vaguely at the surrounding plain, simmering irrationally in the heat from a sun unknown years into the future.

He walked away from Wentik towards the shack, taking off his white coat. Wentik followed him, noticing that underneath the coat Johns was wearing the uniform of the guards. The other scientists, too, had taken off their coats, and were walking across the plain.

Wentik put on one of the white coats and sat beneath the trees listening to the men laughing as they clustered around the shack.

Much later, in the undiminishing heat of the long afternoon, Wentik found a rifle and some live ammunition by one of the trees and strolled across the plain to the others. He remembered now his process that had gone wrong—before he'd been forced to take refuge in Time past. An experiment to enhance Man's intellect with an atmosphere-born chemical, but of such potency that a whole continent had lost its power to rationalise. Only in the past had he been able to work with any success on an antidote. Now Astourde stood between him and a return to that past. He must reverse what he had inadvertently caused.

His hand tightened on the neck of the rifle.

WHEN I HAVE PASSED AWAY

by

JOSEPH GREEN

Throughout the whole of Man's recorded history most tribes and races have believed in another life after death, usually "somewhere in the sky". In the following unusual story, Joseph Green visualises this actually happening on an alien world where the environment has produced a slightly different species.

WHEN I HAVE PASSED AWAY

One

"You have waited too long before returning home, Caal'den'an," were Phe'se's first words. "Princess Sum'ze is dying."

Halak Kuusinen saw his lean companion's face turn white for the second time in as many stantime units. The first had been when Phe'se stepped inside the high door of the tall conical building just off the landing field, where they had retreated from the burning sun to wait for her, and the two men saw that their former classmate was now more than twice their height. The fact that they had expected a size increase was little preparation for the reality.

"What's wrong with Sum'ze?" Halak asked quickly, putting a hand on Caal's shoulder in quick sympathy. He found himself fascinated by the huge lips in the sombre but still beautiful face two metres above his own, remembering their warmth and what he had taken for primitive passion when he had kissed them only a few Eryears back. She had stood barely chin-high to him then, and he was a short and sturdy seventeen decimetres.

"It is not a disease your earthly science can cure, Hal. I used the word 'dying' because you have no equivalent in English. It's actually a period of . . . a very rapid growth, a metamorphosis into a . . . different form of life. I cannot describe it properly in English; you have no words. And you cannot visit her. It is death for any male to see a She'waan woman in her period of . . . change." Phe'se stopped fumbling for meaning and shook her huge head in frustration.

"It would be best for both of you to remain here until the next ship passes, then return to Earth. I'll show you how to operate the call signal."

"I didn't travel this distance to leave without seeing Sum'ze!" said Caal angrily, bristling through the length of his thin frame. "She sent for me, I'm here, and I'm going to see her, with or without your help. Now where is she?"

Phe'se's grim expression did not change. "You haven't changed a bit, Caal'den'an. Still ready to protect a low grade or demonstrate against authority, with or without a good cause. Princess Sum'ze sent for you in a moment of weakness, when she felt the first touches of . . . the long pain. She would not want to see you now."

"That's too bad. She's going to," declared Caal flatly. "I've heard tales and rumours about my home world all my life. Now I want the truth!"

Phe'se stiffened. "What you need is a good taste of the whip!"

The slender She'waan man and giant warrior woman glared at each other with a dangerous readiness for violence. Both had hands on their weapons. Phe'se wore what was evidently the standard costume of her people, a loose sleeveless tunic that fell to mid-thigh and was gathered at the waist by a weapons belt. She was armed with a heavy straight sword and two daggers. Caal was dressed in normal Earth garb and carried the standard laser pistol issued to Earthmen travelling on primitive planets. It was primarily a defensive weapon, but deadly at short range.

Halak decided he had better intervene before the situation got out of hand. Physically Caal could pass as an Earthman, and had in fact been born and raised there. He had also assimilated Earth's cultural patterns. Only on an intellectual level was he familiar with the fact that his home world was a matriarchy, and men little more than slaves.

"Will you both calm down and stop acting like children?" Halak asked, moving between them. They relaxed immediately, looking slightly embarrassed. Phe'se was not an ignorant primitive. She had accompanied her princess to Earth, where both completed the final four years of their education in a college of the Outworld University especially designed for backward humanoids. Caal had been born to a princess from another state who had not been aware of her pregnancy when she embarked for Earth. She'waan custom dictated death for both mother and child if a baby were born out of wedlock, and the indiscreet princess had obtained the help of the school in finding her child a foster home. Only when he reached legal age had Caal been told of his true heritage. He had immediately renounced it, preferring to live as an Earthman.

Curiosity about his home world had led him to seek out Princess Sum'ze and her companion while taking courses at Outworld in extra-terrestrial biology, and he and his best friend were soon dating the very democratic princess and her companion. Halak and Phe'se got along as well as Caal and Sum'ze, and the foursome had been inseparable for a year, until the two women very abruptly broke off in the middle of their last term and returned home. Halak had taken it philosophically, but Caal had been unable to forget the beautiful princess. Four years later he had received a message from Sum'ze, saying she desperately needed him. Both men had just obtained their Third Degree in biochemistry and were on vacation before reporting to their jobs. Halak, who had some connections through his father, had got a foundation to sponsor a research trip for them. Now, after five tiring months in space, they were being told they could not even see the dying princess.

Halak pointed out to Phe'se that she was not being fair to either Sum'ze or themselves and reminded her that their advanced training might enable them to help the princess.

They had brought an excellent portable chemlab from Earth. Phe'se smiled with bitter humour and said, "I was studying biochemistry also, Hal, and though I know the courses given to outworlders are simplified, I learned enough to know there was nothing Earth science can do for us. I was trying to spare you two a bad experience, but since you insist . . . I'll take you to our central town, and tonight I'll try to sneak you into the temple. Guards aren't usually posted until the fourth and final night of the . . . change period. You can see Sum'ze—and I hope you don't spend the rest of your lives regretting it!'

With that grim warning Phe'se stepped to the door and barked a harsh command. Four men wearing loincloths entered and picked up the visitor's luggage. They were supervised by a woman a metre shorter than Phe'se, carrying both the standard weapons and a whip on her belt.

The air outside was hot, humid, rank with the smell of decaying vegetation. The bluish white sunlight of Achernar flooded its sixth planet with radiant energy, even from a distance of three AU's. A multitude of small thick clouds floated overhead, and a few larger, thinner ones. Halak noticed that the density of a cloud seemed inversely proportional to its size; otherwise he might have been looking up into the skies of Earth, in one of the tropical zones.

Phe'se led them off the small plateau, where a thin covering of soil had burned down to bare rock to make a semi-permanent landing field, into the thronging riot of vegetation that covered most of this untamed world. They walked along narrow game trails that twisted and turned without apparent direction but moved them steadily south. In an hour the intense heat and high humidity had exhausted Halak, though the gravity was only 0·7 Earth normal. Caal was only a little better off. Phe'se and the smaller woman with the whip moved along without notice-

able effort. The four bearers sweated heavily under their burdens, but apparently were not seriously bothered.

At the end of two hours there was a brief rest period and three more of hard marching brought them to the main town of Sum'ze's tribe. Like the landing field, it was located on raised ground where rock close beneath the surface discouraged plant growth. Dusk was falling when they emerged from the jungle and walked wearily through tall log gates that were shut behind them against the coming night. The town was built in the form of a huge circle, surrounded by a high wall of heavy vertical timbers. Most of the houses were round structures, eight or ten metres in height, with conical tops of thatch. In the centre of the circle, surrounded by a wide clear space was an inverted cone of a building that reared up to a height of thirty metres. There was a faint, murmuring whisper of sound from this one, which Halak could not identify. Apparently it had no top.

Phe'se led the way among the buildings—there were no distinct streets—towards the centre. Halak noticed that the She'waans were a grim, silent, industrious race, even the children quiet as they ran about on myriad errands. All the adult men were about his own size, though muscular and strong from hard work, but the women varied from slim girls to giants a full four metres in height. He saw no one taller than Phe'se, however.

These people were slightly more primitive than he had consciously expected. They were apparently in transition from the tribe to the state in government and barely past the ability to work steel in technology. Phe'se had not talked much about her people, but somehow he had gained a general impression they were more advanced than this. And it was perfectly obvious why the men were in a near-slave status. Any one of the larger women, with her size,

strength and great length of arm, could cut down a dozen men in hand-to-hand combat. Until effective long-range weapons were invented the men were going to remain in a subservient position.

Phe'se led them to a large building at the edge of the central cleared area. "Protocol demands guests pay their respects to the queen before sleeping in the town," she announced tonelessly. A high unguarded door swung open at her touch and she motioned the two men inside. Halak stepped forward, trying to adjust his eyes to the dimness. He saw a vast, formless body apparently sitting on a massive chair and then Phe'se brushed by him, knelt, crossed her arms in front and tilted her head far back until the throat was exposed and vulnerable. "Do the same!" she whispered at her companions and the two men hastily obeyed.

There was a gutteral sound from the shapeless mass in the chair and Phe'se abruptly relaxed and sat down on the floor. As Halak imitated her he realised that his eyes had grown accustomed to the dusk and he was looking at the largest woman he had ever seen.

The queen was probably not as tall as Phe'se, but she was hugely, astonishingly fat. Completely nude—clothes would have been ridiculous on her bulk—the apparent acres of her skin glistened with a sheen of perspiration. Arms like great barrels hung from massive shoulders and calves larger than his trunk ran up into the masses of doughy flesh that were her thighs. The abdomen was swollen out of all resemblance to human form, simply a huge central mound of flesh that anchored the extremities. And then Halak saw the eyes, large as lemons and almost as yellow. There was an alert, incisive intelligence there.

The queen spoke again and Phe'se answered her. The exchange was brief. The tall woman motioned for the men to precede her and a moment later they were out in the

open night. Halak breathed fresh air again and realised there had been a bad stench in the closed room.

Phe'se led them to a small building nearby. "Guest quarters," she said, opening the door. "I'll have food sent in. Then get some sleep. I'll be back for you in about eight hours." She turned and strode away.

The single large room contained four hide hammocks, two immense chairs and a high table partially covered with rocks. Their gear was stacked in a corner. While Caal poked curiously around Halak pulled out the two largest cases and opened them. A swift examination indicated that the portable chemlab had survived the trip undamaged. He sighed with relief. Perhaps they could earn their travel expenses after all. Very little data had been gathered on the lifeforms on this planet.

The door opened abruptly and admitted a white-haired old man, stooped and bent but still muscular, carrying two pottery bowls of what appeared to be a hot stew. He placed them on the table and left without a word. There was a pitcher of water already there and two drinking bowls.

Halak took one look at the flat stick in his stew and reached into the chemlab for two small measuring cups. They made adequate spoons and the stew, though bland, was rich and filling. Halak ate with gusto. There was no reason to fear poisoning and his basic metabolism was so similar to a She'waan's their food should be easily digestible. Caal, who certainly had nothing to worry about, appeared to be more fastidious, but he ate it all.

Drugged with food and fatigue, they shed their outer clothes and crawled into the two lowest of the large hammocks. The last thing Halak saw before he drifted into exhausted sleep was the odd pile of rocks on the table. Their purpose was evident now. They had started to glow and provided a dim but adequate illumination.

Sometime during the fifteen-hour night Halak found him-

self being roughly shaken and tried to sit up. A huge, firm hand was across his mouth and Phe'se was whispering, "Make no sound. We will all be killed if anyone sees us." She moved to the next hammock and awakened Caal and Halak got to his feet and fumbled into his clothes. When Caal was ready Phe'se led them silently out of the door and closed it quietly behind her. She motioned for the two men to stand against the wall while she looked carefully around. No moving creature was in sight, and the walls were too distant for the guards patrolling the walkways to see them, even if they were looking inward.

When she was satisfied Phe'se led them at a fast walk straight across the open space to the tall building around which the town was apparently built. She checked the area again before opening a small door and motioning them inside. Achernar Six claimed only one moon, but it was large and had a high albedo; now close to the western horizon, its milky light was beginning to fade. The town slept peacefully. There was no sound at all, other than a faint, rushing murmur of moving air that seemed to come from the building itself.

Two

PHE'SE quickly closed the door behind them. Halak saw that the interior of the large building was a single round room over fifteen metres in diameter, open all the way up. And it did have a roof, of sorts. A huge crystal, more than two metres in diameter, was suspended from a network of ropes at the top of the inverted cone. A flood of concentrated moonlight poured through it in a silvery stream, spilling like a fountain of softened sunlight to the floor below. The crystal caught the impinging moonlight on its upper surface, regardless of the angle of incidence, and refracted it almost straight downward. On the ground this light formed

a rough circle, its outer edge matching a round pit that occupied most of the centre of the building, leaving a ledge three metres wide against the wall. A dazzling bright fire-glow emanated from this pit, rising in a wall of golden-red flame to meet the incoming moonlight. Halak recognised the glow as similar to that emitted by the luminescent rocks these people apparently used for lighting; the circular depression was evidently filled with them.

The outer edge of the great cone of light was clearly defined, but the centre was lost in a progressively thicker concentration of moonbeams. The low moan of moving air Halak had heard outside was coming from deep within the misty interior. As he stood staring, lost in the unexpected beauty of the scene, the mists of light started to shift, to ripple like disturbed water. A vague image seemed to be moving from the hidden interior outward, several metres above his head. He became aware that Phe'se was standing beside him, with Caal a few feet behind. She seemed to be silently waiting, watching the coherent pattern slowly drifting towards them, gaining form as it came. The shifting, swirling streamers of light began to move faster, rapidly parting, and suddenly the image was clearly visible. It hovered, suspended in space, so close Phe'se could have reached upward and touched it. Seemingly formed of mists and swirls of light, insubstantial but clearly recognisable, it was the face of Sum'ze.

Halak felt his breath catch in his throat. He heard a deep, hissing intake beside him, and tore his gaze away for a quick look at Caal. The slender She'waan, head tilted back, was staring as though unable to believe his eyes, his features a study in anguished wonder.

Halak looked back to the face. The eyes were open, staring directly at Phe'se, but there was no recognition in them, and the expression was twisted and drawn, as if in pain. As he watched the mouth opened, the huge lips curled and a

low moan sounded, as though wintry air were sighing around a corner. After a moment the great lids closed, hiding the blank dead eyes. Abruptly the face moved upward and backward; rags of vapour and tatters of light rushed between, the feature became vague . . . were gone. From somewhere deep within the shining cone there came, again, a low and mournful sigh of pain.

Halak turned back to his companions. Caal looked stricken, as though he had been shocked beyond enduring. Phe'se seemed grimly amused. After a moment Halak broke the silence by asking, "Was that really Sum'ze in some new form, or an illusion?"

Phe'se shrugged. "What is real and what illusion?" She kept her voice low, but it seemed to rumble throughout the building. "Princess Sum'ze is dying, in your terms. In ours she is making a transition from the solid world to that of . . . the thin long-life. In any case this is her second night. On the fourth she will finally be . . . light enough to rise in the air and become a free . . . spirit? Living cloud? In the physical terms you are accustomed to she will transmute from a creature of flesh and blood to one of gas, or mist. But it doesn't stop there. The cloud retains a certain homogeneity and a coherent shape, for many years, but gradually grows thinner and larger.

"After ten, eleven, sometimes twelve generations she will expand until her body cannot be seen but fills half the sky and about that time she becomes so insubstantial we lose contact with her. Somehow she simply . . . goes, and we don't know where, or how. In your terms perhaps one could say she enters hell here for a few nights, escapes into purgatory and abides there until her sins are washed out by the years, after which she ascends into . . . heaven? There are no words for the cycle that can have meaning for you. The sky outside is filled with our forebears. The larger ones overlap and flow in and out of each other and the newer

ones are those small thick clouds you see in such profusion. And now you know why ancestor worship is the only form of religion we She'waans have. We see our gods every day."

Overhead there was a sudden violent boiling in the whirling mists and the head of Sum'ze reappeared, this time with a suggestion of gassy shoulders and a nearly firm neck. The head went rushing at the edge of light, seemed to crash against its inner wall as though hitting an impenetrable barrier, recoiled, and again the low, mournful cry of pain went whispering through the building.

"Much too soon," Phe'se said quietly. "She will have a normal breakthrough, on the fourth night. All the warriors will gather here for the elaborate primitive rituals your outworld ethnologists love to record and see her on her way with music and ceremony. Once she is free the pain will end and we can communicate with her again, though she won't be very interested in anything we have to say."

Halak found himself shaking his head in dazed disbelief. The experience was too raw to be taken in whole. Caal was almost equally nonplussed, nothing in his heredity having prepared him for this.

Phe'se took them back to their room. Once inside Caal recovered enough to ask, "How? If what we saw wasn't just in our minds, how does this 'change' work? And what can we do about it?"

"You can't do anything to stop the change. And I can tell you *what* happens, but not how, or why. A She'waan woman grows very much as yours do, including maturing near the same age. At about eighteen—translating into your terms—her growth stops and stays stable for about six years. This is the time a woman buys her husband and has as many children as she can. At twenty-four she suddenly starts growing again and becomes infertile. In about another six years she reaches her final height, which varies

slightly according to heredity. She knows she has reached her full growth because she starts experiencing abdominal pains almost immediately. These go on for months, sometimes a year, and then the change starts."

"Do you know why the males don't start this second growth period?" Halak questioned her sharply.

"No. They grow old after lifespans equivalent to yours and die slowly, in what I suppose you would call the normal fashion. A woman enters her period of change much more swiftly. She suddenly becomes unable to eat. Her appetite is tremendous during the second growth period, of course, and when she starts throwing her food back up this means she is in the final three days before entering the temple. During this time her body starts swelling, fairly evenly throughout. On the fourth day the pains change, becoming much worse. These new pains are . . . bad, very strong and practically continuous. Direct sunlight eases them enough to be bearable, but the nights . . . fifteen hours of unadulterated hell, until someone fashioned the first crystal, thousands of generations ago . . . if a woman is denied the right to change in the temple she sometimes commits suicide, or persuades a friend to kill her, on that first night of the new pains. It has to be done then. On the second the body has swollen so much it is no longer a true solid, and can't be cut. That's Sum'ze's condition now. During the daytime the crystal is covered—it would burn the building down otherwise—and she lies on the cover in the sunlight."

Halak had been trying hard to think of rational explanations for this bizarre cycle as Phe'se spoke, but it seemed impossible to make sense of the jumble of information she had given them. He did notice she had failed to mention the pit filled with the luminous rocks and asked about them.

"The firerocks strengthen the effect of the condensed moonlight in easing pain and serve as a substitute during

the times when neither the sun nor moon is in the sky. Any form of strong light on the skin brings some relief."

"But—but," Caal shook his head in angry frustration, "isn't there something that can be done to stop the change? Have you tried to find the cause?"

"Have you tried to find a cause for death? This is our normal cycle and no one questions it. Even our knowledge of how to cut the large natural crystals we find in the mountains and so concentrate moonlight to ease the night-pains extends beyond known history. There is a partial antidote, Caal, but it's difficult to use. The fruit of a rare plant that grows near the equator apparently contains a natural drug that retards a woman's second growth rate and so lengthens her time before the change. It must be eaten daily, though, and taken above a certain amount it has a major side-effect. The queen is our tribe's foremost example of how a greedy person with power can obtain more than her share and prolong her life, but you've seen the result. The body grows tremendously fat and after a second growth period about four times the length of the normal six years she enters the change period anyway. And there is a penalty to pay. The larger the body the longer and more painful transition. The queen will require at least eight nights and they will be pure torture. Most of us can only obtain enough fruit to keep our second growth uniform and extend our years to about nine before that first pain tells us we've had it."

"Then you and Sum'ze left Earth because you ran out of drug!" Halak exclaimed.

Phe'se's wide soft lips curved into a grin. "Correct, Hal. Very good guess. The queen's greed brought on a war with the tribe controlling the route to our closest supply of the fruit. They missed a shipment and we started growing at the normal rate. Sum'ze decided to leave before you discovered our little secret. We had to do without the drug for

over six months, though, and when we reached home and started again it had lost its effect. Sum'ze is a little older than myself and went first. I'll follow her shortly. I've been having the early pains for several months now."

"Why didn't you take some fruit samples to the college lab, try to get the drug analysed and synthesised in a stronger form?" demanded Halak.

"Sum'ze did. Her request was treated as a hoax. We were almost thrown out of school because of it."

Halak remembered the incident, but hadn't known the cause at the time. Evidently the princess had attempted to tell the full story, rather than simply presenting it as a problem in chemistry. She and Phe'se had been too human in all measurable ways then for it to be believable. But he and Caal had no choice but to believe their eyes and the next step was obvious. At his request Phe'se left to obtain some of the fruit and he started unpacking the portable chemlab, with Caal's able assistance. It was too late to help Sum'ze, but Phe'se might still be saved.

The two men decided to ignore the more weird aspects of the cycle and treat the search for the active agent in the fruit as a straightforward problem in chemistry. They had certain clues. Its affect was determined by sex, it had to be continuously used, and it was not completely effective. An overdose converted the "normal" vertical growth to fat, to a large extent. At the time of change body tissues were strongly affected by sunlight, concentrated moonlight or light from the phosphorescent rocks. That was enough to start on.

Phe'se returned with the fruit and Halak took skin, hair and internal tissue samples from her for the lab's automatic analyser. He started to do the same with Caal and then decided it would be best to use a She'waan male not raised on Earth. Phe'se brought them a sleepy, protesting man

about their own age, whom she introduced with a cynical shrug as Beel'le'can, her husband and father of her single child. Halak was slightly put out to discover he had been dating a married mother during their year together on Earth. Phe'se assured him that Sum'ze was also married, for that matter, and a She'waan female owed no loyalty to the man whom she had purchased for a mate. Some women bought two or three husbands during their brief period of fertility. This was practical on a planet where men outnumbered women more than two to one, and humane; unmarried adult males became the property of the queen and lived miserable lives as celibate labourers, released only by death.

The two men had maintained their circadian rhythm from Earth, and it was now day for them. They set to work enthusiastically and by dawn had already acquired a large body of data, stored in the lab's small computer. The fruit's edible parts proved to be nothing more than normal simple sugars and they had soon ignored them to concentrate on its multitude of tiny seeds. These were more rewarding. Instead of DNA protein the seed's heredity control was an extremely complex steroid with the normal carbon skeleton of interlocked rings and the lab's limited automatic analyser was incapable of breaking it down. But since steroids were represented in all protoplasm as components of the intrinsic membrane system and all the sex hormones belonged to the steroid group, it seemed obvious that the molecule must have an affinity for oestrogen or one of the other female hormones. It also followed that it would not affect testosterone or the other male hormones and this the two men confirmed shortly before dawn, after obtaining a sample of testosterone from their reluctant volunteer.

Phe'se had left them earlier, to sleep through what remained of the night. She returned shortly after they stopped work for breakfast, with some unhappy news. The queen

did not like the idea of males from a culture where men dominated remaining in her town. She wanted them out that same day and preferably off the planet.

"But——" Halak gestured at the profusion of equipment scattered around the room, "But we have to have some place to work, Phe'se. It's too long a walk back to the station."

"I've already thought of a house for you. There's a good clean building a short distance away, where young men are kept from the time a woman pays the purchase price until the . . . the wedding. It's empty, and you should be safe there. I'll send Beel with you, and come myself when I can."

Halak shrugged, and accepted the inevitable with good grace. They were packed and out of the town within two hours, this time carrying their own equipment, with the help of Phe'se and Beel'le'can. The waiting hut was in the jungle, but it was well maintained and clean. They set up the lab again, ate some of the food stored there and went back to work. Phe'se returned to town. By midday both men were exhausted by hard labour in the intense heat; they decided to take a short nap and work till dark. At sundown they were content to eat a quick meal and stretch out on the hammocks for some needed rest.

Three

Sometime during the night Halak was jarred from sleep by a cry of terror and sat up on the hammock, senses still foggy, to see Beel'le'can on the floor in front of the door, grappling furiously with a strange warrior woman only a little larger than himself. A second woman, a giantess almost as tall as Phe'se, was hovering over the pair, sword poised, and behind her two more were crowding into the doorway. Before Halak could move the giantess found an

opening and the flat of her heavy sword landed on Beel'le'-can's head. He collapsed and the larger woman turned towards the two men from Earth, lifting her blade in a way that made it clear she did not intend to use the flat part again. The two warriors in the doorway behind her, also with swords drawn, were advancing behind their leader, while the smaller one on the floor was scrambling to her feet.

There was no time to argue, or attempt to dissuade the women from what was obviously a planned murder. Halak reached for his laser, lying on the table a few feet away and saw that Caal was doing the same. He slipped the safety catch off with his thumb, aimed between the feet of the advancing woman and pulled the trigger. He saw that Caal was covering the warrior moving towards him on that side of the room, but had not yet fired. There was a high hiss of heated air and the wooden floor charred and burned. The big woman ignored it and drew back her sword for the thrust that would sink it deep in Halak's stomach. He raised the beam without releasing the trigger and hit her arm. With a cry of pain and fury she dropped the long blade, snatched a knife from her belt with her other hand and sprang, so quickly he had time only to swing the beam to her face before she was on him. It caught her across both eyes, turning them instantly into blackened cinders. Momentum carried her forward, but she was collapsing when she reached him.

There was a shout of warning from Caal and Halak turned to see another warrior almost close enough to strike. The smaller woman who had tried to silence Beel'le'can had a dagger drawn, but seemed uncertain which man to attack. The tall Amazon on Caal's side of the room suddenly jumped him, attempting to reach the laser with her sword and Caal burned her down. The brief second that Halak had let his attention stray from his own opponent

was enough. He turned back to find her launching herself towards him, that long sword leading the way and there was nothing he could do but hurl himself backward on the hammock and kick frantically at the glistening steel. One foot caught the blade midway and sent it angling towards the ceiling. Then the woman's momentum carried her over and on him, the hammock tore loose and they went to the floor in a tangled heap. He felt buried in a mass of woman-flesh and it was not the pleasant experience a man might have expected. Great hands clawed for his throat and one reached it before he reluctantly placed the pistol's emitter against her side and pressed the guarded trigger. The stink of burned flesh filled the air and she collapsed on top of him and lay still.

Halak got his head clear just in time to see the smallest woman fleeing out the door. Caal was standing by his hammock, laser in hand, but he did not fire. She vanished into the night and it was suddenly deadly quiet in the hut.

The stillness lasted only a moment before it was broken by a groan of pain. Halak pushed his way from beneath the dead warrior and scrambled to his feet. Caal was already bending over the first woman, who was clawing feebly at her ruined face. He turned from her and examined Beel'le'-can, who was apparently only unconscious. The giantess had struck with precision.

Caal turned back to the woman. "I'll do it if you don't feel up to it," he volunteered, but his voice was sick.

Halak shook his head and stepped to the woman's side. The briefest examination indicated that Caal was right; the giant warrior was dying from pain and the shock of her injuries. He placed the emitter against the back of her neck, steeled himself and yanked the trigger closed. She jerked violently, stiffened into rigidity, then relaxed in death.

Phe'se and a large group of fighting women arrived less than five minutes later, swords in hand, obviously expecting to find them hacked to death. She spared a brief glance for Beel'le'can, who had recovered enough to sit erect and quickly brought them up to date. The queen had had them followed that morning and ordered the murder party after them at dark. Phe'se had been imprisoned for disobeying orders, but her clan had broken her out in the night, killing the guards as they did so. They were now in open revolt. Resentment against the greedy queen had been simmering below the surface for some time, but the expected assumption of the throne by Sum'ze, who was immensely popular, had kept the warrior women waiting in patience. Now that Sum'ze was dying, ending the direct succession, Phe'se and a younger cousin in the next town had equal claim to the crown. Phe'se was on her way now to arrange an alliance and yield her claim, since she would be going into the change period shortly anyway. They had detoured by the waiting hut in the faint hope the assassins might not yet have struck.

Halak noticed that Phe'se's companions were eyeing the two men and three dead women in a discomfited and puzzled manner. They were familiar with lasers, but evidently felt that the modern weapons were not enough to overcome the handicap of being men. They did not understand how the brief battle had ended in female defeat.

There was a short, noisy conference, with Phe'se interpreting for her clan sisters. Halak managed to get across a recently discovered fact, that he urgently needed a sample of the gaseous body of Sum'ze for the analyser and his request brought a grim smile to Phe'se's lips. She said, "Our best chance of defeating the queen lies in gathering all our sympathisers and striking tonight, before she has time to rally her own clan. The temple will be our first target; it's the source of royal power. I think we can get that sample

. . . and with luck you can say good-bye to Sum'ze before she breaks free."

With the help of the big women the two men moved their equipment into the jungle, hiding it from all but a thorough search. The queen might dispatch another party when the lone survivor returned and the hut was no longer safe. It was still several hours before daylight when they set out for the town where Phe'se's cousin ruled. The bright moonlight above the treetops completely failed to reach the gametrails and after the first slow kilometre Phe'se impatiently picked up Halak and cradled him in her arms; two more of the largest women did the same for Caal and Beel'le'can. He lay cuddled against the great soft bosom and felt humiliated, but their speed doubled.

Shortly after sunrise they reached the town and Phe'se left the three men in the care of her women while she went to talk to her cousin. Evidently intrigue and revolt were as much a part of life for primitive matriarchies as for their male counterparts on Earth. Phe'se was back within the hour, having reached a full accord with her cousin and briefly described their next step before retiring for some needed sleep. The clan was being summoned from all surrounding towns. They would meet at an agreed spot outside the queen's walls that night and attack just before the first changing of the guard. Unless the queen had acted faster than anticipated they stood an excellent chance of scaling the wall and taking the town.

Events were moving with such speed and had become so completely out of their control, that both Halak and Caal were feeling more like spectators than participants. Halak was beginning to think of the trouble he might be in when word of this affair reached authorities on Earth. Caal, at least, had retained his citizenship and was unlikely to suffer legal penalties. Halak had his career to think about.

There was scant time available for reflection. Shortly

after noon the town's full complement of warriors moved out, taking the two men from Earth with them. The She'-waan possessed no distance weapons of any sort and the two lasers might be useful. Phe'se was leaving to recruit more warriors from her home town, where she had great influence.

They arrived at the meeting point without incident, to find several groups of armed women already there and more arriving steadily. The depth of the queen's unpopularity was becoming apparent. Several other clans had thrown in with the rebels. Phe'se arrived just before the time agreed on to move out and she brought the largest single group yet. As temporary warlord she had little time to spare for the men, but did manage to tell them that the attacking force now slightly outnumbered the queen's defenders. The great fat one had sent for warriors from her clan among the nearby towns, as expected, but as yet none had arrived.

Halak and Caal discussed the idea of producing an explosive to shatter a portion of the wall, but found that it could not be done in the time available. Phe'se had also been thinking, and after a brief talk with Halak convinced him that her plan was sound. Reluctantly, he agreed to try her suggestion.

An hour later the two men, Phe'se and forty warriors were crouched in the jungle shadows at the point where the woods most closely approached the wall, waiting for the agreed time. Halak noticed that the sky was steadily darkening, with an accumulation of large, thin clouds slowly but surely diffusing and then cutting off the bright moonlight flooding the ground between themselves and the wall. Phe'se saw his puzzlement—there had never been a cloud in the sky around the temple before—and said, "Some of our clan ancestors, Hal. I . . . summoned them. I'm talking to them now, through a kind of . . . you would probably call it

telepathy. I can't really explain what we need, but it isn't necessary. When a few more gather it will be dark on this entire side of the town and that's all we require."

Her prediction was confirmed within ten minutes. When the darkness was complete she led Halak and Caal to the wall, moving stealthily, all three covered with black cloaks. They reached the embedded logs without incident and stood flattened against them, trying to locate the position of the guards on the interior walkway. Their ears soon told them that the guard had been doubled and were patrolling in twos, to prevent just such an attempt as they were about to make. The unusual darkness had made them nervous and extra alert.

Halak felt huge but still soft lips against his ear, and remembered, for the hundredth time, how they had felt pressed to his own. "The ladder is ready. I'll throw Caal up first. He will hold them back while you pull up the main loops and attach them and then both of you must keep the area clear long enough for several of us to reach the walk."

Halak nodded in numb anguish, thinking of the women he would be killing in the next few minutes. Somehow he simply could not bring himself to think of them as blood-thirsty savages, despite his certain knowledge that such an attitude could cost him his life. He checked the three guide ropes attached to his belt; all were secure. Phe'se had dropped to one knee, facing the wall. She cupped her hands and Caal stepped into them, gathered his balance, and said, low-voiced, "Now!"

Phe'se heaved her great body erect and Caal shot into the air, almost brushing the wall as he ascended. This was a common practice the warrior women had long ago worked out, where the great size differential between a new adult and a giantess like Phe'se could be put to good use. Her control was perfect and Caal reached the top of his rise just above the wall, only inches away. He wrapped his arms

around one of the sharpened logs, hung for a brief second and then scrambled over and out of sight. Phe'se had again dropped to one knee. Halak hastily stepped into her hands, braced himself and said the word. An instant later he was flying upward at violent speed, his senses confused and lost by the motion. He was heavier than Caal and Phe'se, knowing this, had over-compensated. He went past the top, stopped and started to fall. Fortunately she had placed him precisely against the wall, as she had Caal and he was able, at the top of his rise, to orient himself. He grabbed at one of the timbers as he descended. His arms were almost dislocated at the shoulders when they took his falling weight, but he managed to retain his grip and a moment later climb over and drop to the walkway.

He found Caal waiting for him. The smaller man's smooth ascent had not been noticed, but his own had been more noisy. There were sharp calls coming from the patrol that had just walked by, apparently asking who had made the sounds. He ignored them and hastily began pulling up the first guide rope. In a moment he held the loop of one end of the wide rope ladder and dropped it over an upright. Loosening the slipknots on the other two he walked two paces towards the oncoming guards, holding the ropes above the tops of the posts and then held the third in his teeth while he pulled up and anchored the second loop. As he started to move towards the guards again a laser beam flashed past his side. There was a grunt, followed by a cry of alarm. He ignored it and started pulling up the final rope. The laser flashed again and now he was smelling burned flesh from the first, where she had crumbled just a few feet away. The third loop was in his hands and he pulled the ladder sideways until it was taut before slipping it over the top of a post. "*Come up, Phe'se!*" he yelled and drew his own laser.

Halak's first beam was towards the woods, to tell the waiting warriors that the wide rope ladder was securely

anchored. The second was towards the woman, barely taller than himself, who was almost upon him when he turned to defend his end of the ladder. She crumpled without a sound. The entire area was alarmed now, the word being shouted to all guards that a scaling attempt was in progress. Feet were pounding the walk towards them from both directions and a general alarm was being raised in the town below. Halak crouched against the wall, dropped to his knees and wrapped his cloak about him. The next guard to reach his end carried a pitch torch, but its light blinded as much as it aided her. She did not see him until far too late. An oncoming warrior stumbled over her crumbling body and fell to the ground below. The flashing beams and the stink of burned flesh alerted the other defenders to the fact they were facing lasers and the next two came more cautiously. Halak, conscious that his gun's charge must be growing weak, declined to fire as long as they hung back. After a moment he heard someone behind him and whirled, bringing the laser to bear when he saw it was a giant woman. Something about her attitude—her sword was not poised for attack—told him it was Phe'se. She crouched down beside him and he turned back to defending the ladder.

The two hesitant warriors were reinforced and finally charged en masse, six of them coming two abreast. Halak burned down the larger of the two, who was closest to the wall. The intense light evidently blinded her companion and Phe'se sprang erect and disposed of her in a single easy thrust. The next two followed immediately, springing over the bodies of their fallen comrades and one almost reached Halak before his beam took her in the throat. He heard a laser hissing steadily behind him and knew Caal was under the same heavy attack. Phe'se killed her second opponent after a brief clash of swords and a third who pressed forward behind her. The last woman, who had got close by

staying slightly behind her companions, jumped over the two laser-burned warriors who had shielded her and Halak fell backward to avoid the first sweep of her sword. She got no second chance. Phe'se almost decapitated her with a slashing blow from the side.

The first woman of Phe'se's clan dropped to the walkway beside them, to be followed by others in a steady stream. Halak and Caal stayed where they were, according to plan, as the rebels swiftly consolidated their hold on the area and started advancing towards the nearest stairs. The fighting grew heavier, but the two men kept well back out of it, holding the diminished lasers for the final dash to the temple. That came in a few minutes, when they had reached the ground and Phe'se was satisfied that the battle was going well.

A picked group pulled back from the advancing line and with the giantess leading the way and the two men in the centre they moved off among the houses. Phe'se took them swiftly away from the din of the main battle, though they killed two warriors just emerging from their homes as the rebels passed and finally paused at the edge of the open ground surrounding the temple. The area was almost deserted, the town's entire fighting force being on the walkways or attempting to stem the advance of Phe'se's troops on the ground and the giantess waited only a moment before leading them in a hard run towards the temple's single door. There were eight guards defending it and the clash lasted several minutes before the last one fell.

Phe'se, now bloody from head to foot and with one arm dangling uselessly, opened the door and stepped inside, motioning for the other women to wait. Halak and Caal swiftly followed her, to find the scene much the same as before, except that the writhing, whirling gascloud that had been Sum'ze appeared more often in the thin outer edge of moonlight. It was so tenuous and ethereal it had lost all

trace of human form and was moving about with greater abandon, swinging constantly from side to side, like a ghostly imprisoned bird beating hard at the walls of light that were its cage.

FOUR

"ALMOST ready," Phe'se said calmly. "We're barely in time. Give me your sample vial."

Halak dug the small flask out of his pocket and Phe'se sheathed her sword, took the vial in her good hand and stood poised. A minute later she reached out and swung it rapidly through the thinner outer layer of intensified moonlight and Halak saw the nebulous, misty form of Sum'ze rising just above her hand. Phe'se swiftly capped the glass and handed it to Halak. Inside he saw a curling, roiling twist of vapour.

There was a sudden renewed clash of arms at the door. The clanging of many swords indicated heavy fighting; then the door opened and the most monstrous creature Halak had ever seen sprang inside. It was the fat queen, her thousand kilograms of blubber moving with the ease and lightness of a young warrior, a sword as long as Phe'se's in her bloated hand. The great mass of her face was twisted into a fighting snarl, and it was obvious from the strength and vigour of her movements that, like many fat people, her bulk was supported by an immense foundation of solid muscle. She advanced immediately, the long sword ready for slaughter and Phe'se drew her own in a smooth motion and started forward.

Halak had drawn his more deadly weapon, but Phe'se motioned it down. "No, she's mine!"

Caal moved to stand beside Halak and the two men watched the fighting women approach each other warily, the sword points darting forward and colliding in a deadly

test of strength. The sound of fresh combat came from the still open door, telling the men the main rebel body had at last reached the temple and engaged the queen's followers; they had almost eliminated Phe'se's advance force.

There was little room for two such large women to manoeuvre on the comparatively narrow apron surrounding the ring of firerocks. Phe'se drew back after two parries and feinted a low blow at the vast column of a leg. The queen danced backward with unbelievable agility and instantly surged forward again to hammer a hard overhand blow at Phe'se's exposed head. She caught it on her sword, but her blade was forced downward and the queen's edge cut into her already wounded shoulder. Phe'se retreated for a moment as she drew erect, blood streaming from the new cut and then took advantage of her slightly longer reach and brought the queen to a halt with a series of rapid jabs.

Abruptly she changed her tactics and sprang hard to the side, her wounded shoulder jarring against the wall, penetrating the queen's guard for a second with a swift step forward and back. Halak saw the sword point enter the vast forward mound of belly, but Phe'se was moving backward and had to continue the motion and the bloodied end came out again. The queen hardly noticed the wound. She bounded after Phe'se with undiminished energy, and the tall warrior suddenly stood and fought hard.

For a brief moment the two women battered swords with a rapidity that defied the eye and then Phe'se succeeded in cutting a great slash across the bulging stomach, and an instant later did it again. Even through the vastness of her bulk the queen felt the mortal wounds and suddenly changed her tactics and charged directly into Phe'se's waiting point. The wounded woman sank her sword to the hilt, but missed the heart, lost in the tremendous barrel of the abdomen and the queen brought her blade around in a

slashing cut into Phe'se's side as she fell. A second later both combatants lay stretched on the floor, bleeding profusely.

Halak ran to Phe'se's side and knelt to examine her wound. The queen's final swing had entered below the ribs and penetrated almost to the backbone. Phe'se was dying.

Halak cradled the huge head of his former sweetheart in his arms, aware there was nothing he could do, aware even more poignantly that this fierce warrior woman was not the same quiet, loving companion-to-a-princess he had known on Earth. That woman had died when Phe'se returned home and he could feel only a strange numbness towards this one.

He held her as he might have held and comforted a dying friend of the same sex and had no desire to kiss the big soft lips in farewell. Somehow Phe'se sensed his feelings and smiled in bitter forgiveness. She had lived as a She'waan warrior woman most of her life and now she would die one, unmourned by any man. But the lessons of civilisation she had learned in school and on Earth were strong and she clutched at Halak's shoulder, staring fixedly into his eyes.

"Hal," she said hoarsely, and again, "Hal . . ." He waited through a moment of heavy breathing, and then, "I want you to . . . my son . . . take him back with you to Earth. I don't want him . . . grow up another Beel'le'can. If you can solve this . . . start sexual equality . . . stop constant tribal fighting . . ." her head abruptly sagged to the side. Phe'se was dead.

There was a high, whistling cry of pain from overhead. Halak glanced up, startled. Caal was silently pointing to the top of the building, where the thick moonlight seemed in agitated motion. As Halak watched, in frozen wonder, the face of Sum'ze formed in the cloud, clear and almost precise in detail. Her eyes were closed and the expression

one of rage or pain. The face seemed to turn and sweep back out of sight in the cloudy light, with a suggestion of a rounded body following it.

An instant later it reappeared, now faded into a circular cloud and butted hard at the edge of the moonlight, pushed through and fled upward towards the net of rope. The main body followed, overtaking the leading promontory, the whole swiftly assuming the unusually rounded, even shape of the clouds they had noticed so frequently in the sky on their arrival. An instant later the misty shape passed through the maze of ropes and fled from sight. A soft, gentle moan of moving air lingered behind, swiftly fading into silence.

Blood and death had been substituted for the normal music and chanting which formed the Rites of Passate for a pagan princess, but the end was the same. Sum'ze was gone.

Halak pushed back from the computer's visual display glass with a weary sigh. He had run the final computations through for the third time and the answer had come out the same. Insufficient data. He would have to take his seeds, tissue samples and captured gas from Sum'ze's body back to Earth and a full-size analyser.

They had at least identified the hormone that caused the She'waan female's strange growth cycle. It had not been oestrogen after all, but a slightly less complex steroid for which they had no name. It apparently had little to do with sexual characteristics, though it was produced in the ovaries and thus found only in females. The analyser had broken its molecular code without undue difficulty once it was isolated, but the interactions with the human body and the curbing effect of the drug were beyond its capacity. To effect a cure they would have to return to Earth.

Caal entered and took a seat. Halak glanced at him and

saw that he appeared tense and nervous, but was wearing a rather strained smile of satisfaction.

It was still comparatively early in the morning and Caal, for some reason, had decided to continue working after Halak quit the night before. He had not been around when Halak wolfed down his breakfast and activated the computer for the final attempt to break the interaction cycle. Fortunately, they were at a point where one man could work alone.

"Where have you been?" Halak asked quietly, sensing that something was wrong.

"In the temple. And I'll have to go back shortly. The pains are pretty bad out of the sunlight."

"What . . .?" but the answer was obvious and Halak let the question die on his lips. He glanced at the table, where they had prepared a large sample of the mysterious hormone by a reduction process on the more complex but similar drug from the plants. It was gone.

"*Why,* Caal? What are you trying to prove? Look, if you take the drug straight in a large enough dosage maybe we can reverse the——'

"But I don't want it reversed," Caal interrupted him. "I've made my decision. I'm going to join Sum'ze. The first male in She'waan history to make the transition." He smiled in self-mockery. "And I did it because I had a chance to stop and think, Hal. We were so busy trying to solve the problem and then fighting the war that we failed to check our assumptions. I finally did and I don't like them.

"Look, it seemed natural to you, and to myself because of my Earth training, to consider this odd growth cycle an undesirable quality. But is it really? It may be painful, but so is birth and birth propels the infant into a new life. The change also starts a new existence, and it's one that *endures,* for ten or twelve generations. We have no comparable afterlife on Earth, not unless the old ghost stories

are true after all. What benefits do the She'waan females gain from their new forms? We can only guess. We do not know they become disinterested in human affairs, but they still communicate with their children.

"I think they are exploring a new world, with new sights, sounds and sensations, and they draw further and further away from us because we remind them too much of their old—and limited—bodies. I think perhaps we should be working to adapt the males here to assume the same growth pattern, not cure the females. I'll soon know for certain. The pure hormone works fast and it isn't necessary to reach any certain growth when you have it. I'll be joining Sum'ze in two or three more nights."

"You idiot! That's all *guesswork*! You may die instead! And those clouds may be mindless, drifting shapes with just enough life in them to respond to a telepath. How could you make such a wild decision?"

"I felt that someone had to and I'm the logical choice. Now stop arguing and gather up your gear. The next ship is due in shortly. Take Beel'le'can and Phe'se's son back with you, solve the problem, and be back a year from now. I promise, no matter what the attractions of my new shape, that I'll communicate with you. And then we'll know whether to cure the women, or change the men. That's the way it must be, Hal."

Caal heaved himelf erect, grimaced with pain and moved heavily towards the door. Halak watched him go, momentarily stunned. As Caal opened the panel he sprang forward to seize his partner and talk some sense into his stubborn head, but Caal stepped quickly outside. Halak was stopped at the door by a drawn sword, in a huge female hand. Two warriors were waiting there.

He stood and watched Caal, bent over with the torture that was racking his body, hobble towards the temple. Not one of the many women milling around attempted to stop

him. The rule that no man might enter the temple of pain and transition had been waived for Caal. The She'waan customs were already changing.

Halak turned back into the room and began rapidly assembling his equipment. A year was a long time to wait, but he would manage. And with the scientific resources of Earth at his disposal he could do a thorough comparison of the She'waan and Earth males, learn precisely what was happening to Caal and what would happen to him if he took the same drug as he began to grow old. Perhaps . . .

SYMBIOTE

by

MICHAEL G. CONEY

Civilisation is a vast organism. Its heart is the cities, its nerves communication. Its body is multi-celled, but, to a certain extent each cell has free-will. Even this, however, is limited by social customs and restrictions. The laws formulated to ensure the smooth life of the organism must be obeyed. But in time the organism will grow old and to ensure survival it might be advisable to change the laws.

SYMBIOTE

THE grassy slope, long and steep. From the summit, where the fingers of jagged rocks thrust from the emerald like those of a drowning man from an algae swamp, to the base, where the waves, silver-flecked and foam-edged, surged and smashed about the grey immemorial granite.

The slope was slashed by a wide path, about half-way up, a long scar across the coastline. The path red; the red of Devon soil trodden into mud, dried into flakes, trodden again, moulded and shaped by trudging feet for thousands of years.

Walking along the path, slowly, a man, Joe.

Joe paused as he rounded the headland, scanning the path ahead which swept around the rim of the small bay. He had a long way to go, and he had come a long way, too. He wanted to make the next village before nightfall. It was growing cool and the sun had disappeared behind black, threatening clouds above the horizon. The water was pearl grey and the wind blew wet. There would be a storm, soon.

The Chinto was heavy. It sat on his shoulders, gripping his neck with its furry knees, long fingers buried in his scalp. Joe was used to carrying the Chinto; it had been there for many years now, ever since he could remember. But then, he was not good at remembering.

Dimly, he felt that the Chinto had always been there, since the beginning of time. He tried to think back, to recall what it had been like before . . . It was no good. He stopped trying.

"Tu . . ." He addressed the Chinto. "We . . ." He gestured vaguely at the sky, trying to phrase the concept at the back of his mind; that it was late, he was tired, there was a storm blowing up.

"We must hurry, Joe. You must walk faster." The voice came softly in his ear.

Joe didn't reply. It required too much effort. Tu was right, of course. As usual. Tu was . . . heavy. Joe's shoulders ached, the flesh felt raw.

The girl. He felt a flash of resentment. There had been a girl, not so long ago. Maybe yesterday. He had wanted the girl, she had long black hair which reached to her waist, covering her Chinto's legs as it fell across her chest.

He had wanted the girl yesterday, or it may have been last summer; anyway, he knew the girl had wanted him also. And Tu had refused. He remembered it clearly. Tu had spoken to the girl's Chinto, while Joe and the girl had held hands and looked at each other. Then Tu had said, we must go. And then they were walking again.

Tu had spoken to other Chintos in the village, at length, while Joe had gazed at men's faces and they had gazed back at him while the Chintos chattered over their heads. They had been fed and given a bed for the night.

He remembered the night and then, also, he remembered that that was yesterday and it seemed longer ago than that since he had seen the girl. So it must have been last summer when he had seen the girl, when the sun was bright and the rain was warm. He often thought about the girl and her soft hand in his and the bright eyes of her Chinto looking at Tu, over the top of her black hair.

The path became steep and slippery, still skirting the sea but now plunging down towards it through a deep cleft between rugged, grey rocks. The rocks were weathered and with deep black cracks and rough to the touch as Joe

scrambled down, keeping his balance by pressing against them with his palms, arms outstretched.

"Careful, Joe." Tu's knees were gripping tight, his bony, atrophied feet locked together across Joe's chest.

Joe was careful. If he fell, he might hurt the Chinto; crush him, or smash his skull against a boulder. And if that happened, if Tu died, what would happen to Joe?

Suddenly he stopped, trembling, his arms jammed against the rock faces, his bare feet digging into the soft mud.

The Chinto leaned forward, spoke. "What's the matter, Joe? Why have you stopped?"

Joe nodded forward, not daring to let go of the rock, mind groping, voice croaking, "Look . . ." Fear gripping his bowels.

Five paces ahead, in the centre of the narrow path, moving slightly, was a small snake, yellow-green. Patterned down the back in zig-zag black chequers and gazing at Joe with unwinking jewel eyes, tongue darting. It moved again, slowly, and raised its small, flat head. It was ill-tempered, caught out of its element, unable to get back to the dry heathery grassland beyond the rocks. It wanted to strike, to hurt, to kill. Animal-like, Joe sensed all this.

"I can't . . ."

The sky had become darker, the wind murmured, sighed through the cleft. The first drops of rain began to fall, spattering on the path, spraying from the rock walls.

"A stone, Joe. Get a stone. A piece of rock. Throw it at the snake. Kill it. Then we can pass. If you kill it, then it can't hurt you."

Terror hastened Joe's thinking. He pieced together the concept, the sequence of actions involved in the total event. He bent down, clutching the wall with one hand, and picked up a stone from the path, clawing it from the red mud. He threw it at the snake and missed. The snake moved towards him, sluggishly, sinuously.

"Do the same thing again, Joe!"

He repeated the action, this time raising a large chunk of granite above his head in both hands while Tu swayed back in alarm. He smashed it down with all the power of his thick arms, catching the snake a mere pace away, crushing its head. The tail, protruding from under the rock, writhed feebly.

"We can go now. Hurry!"

Still trembling, his knees weak with reaction, Joe stumbled through the cleft and out into the driving rain of the exposed hillside.

Interdependence. Symbiosis. Call it what you will. This is Mankind and the Chintos. This is Earth.

This is no case of a host and parasite relationship. At first, yes, this might have been true. Centuries ago, when the Chintos were first imported as pets. But then, before the Chintos, there were cats and dogs. Were they also parasites?

As the years went by, the Chinto became more popular, less of a status symbol, more of a universal pet. They sat on the shoulders of their owners; it was convenient. They went everywhere their owners went. Before long, everyone had one. It became fashionable to give a child a Chinto to celebrate his fourteenth birthday.

But the Chintos were intelligent, though physically small and inclined to be lazy.

And man was larger and stronger and enjoyed physical exercise. There was not much mental exercise to be had; computers did all the figuring. It had become an effort to think.

This didn't matter, because the Chinto was sitting on Mankind's shoulders eagerly making suggestions, formulating new concepts, explaining, inventing. So why bother? Just carry them around and they'll do your thinking for you.

The arrangement was satisfactory to the Chintos, too. Why walk, when you can be carried? After a while, after a few centuries, the limbs began to wither away; the monkey-like body atrophied. But the brain expanded.

Now, convenience has become necessity. Man had virtually lost the power of constructive thought; Chintos could hardly move of their own accord. The races were truly interdependent.

Is this what happens when the end of the evolutionary road is reached, and the machines take over all the work, and there is nothing to do except play football, and eat, and sit? Is this luck, pure chance, the intervention of a race with a young, enquiring mind but a tired, weak body? What was it that guided Man to the Chinto, when he roamed through the stars seeking a companion in his youth and wonder? Was it luck that he found the Chinto? Or was it that, subconsciously, what he was seeking was more a companion for his old age when the urge for exploration would be gone and he would be gazing at his television screens and playing his games, while machines tended his every need?

Maybe. And now Man, though changed, was saved for the time being. The machines were gradually running down and they were not being repaired. The arts, albeit Chinto arts, were flourishing. Population had fallen drastically and every man could find a job, if he wanted it. And his Chinto saw to it that he wanted it.

An easy-going, agricultural civilisation.

Pity that Man is the village idiot . . .

They had left the cliff-top; they had turned inland, following the path through scrub and gorse and bracken, scented in the damp air. They had been walking for a long time. Joe had forgotten the snake almost; just a vague recollection remained that something unpleasant had happened *before;*

yesterday, perhaps. The wind had freshened, sweeping salty across the flat tall plateau of the coast. Joe's clothes were wet and sticking to his back, fastened there by the onshore breeze, which was becoming a gale.

"Left here, I think." They had reached a gate which gave on to a lane. Joe hauled the gate open, they passed through and it clashed behind them, slammed by the wind. Now his feet padded on cracked concrete, wet and smooth.

"Halt!"

A harsh voice from a roadside hut. A square, shining face, thrusting towards them, dripping wet.

"Where are you going? Your name, please? Your business? Your identity card?" A hand appeared below the face, outstretched, with stubby, metallic fingers.

"Carry on, Joe." Tu shifted on his back. "It's a relic of the past. I don't suppose many people use this road, now. Maybe just a few census-takers like ourselves, that's all."

"Halt, I say!" The lower half of the door crashed open, the robot lurched out of the hut, whirring. "I repeat. Your identity card, please!"

"I . . . We . . ." Joe felt compelled to say something over his shoulder as they moved on. He sensed the antagonistic attitude of the robot but was reassured by Tu's unconcern.

"Halt or I shoot!"

"Keep going, Joe."

"A man has disobeyed my instructions to halt. This is a restricted area. Therefore I am going to shoot." The robot was stating his case for the record, speaking loudly into the mouthpiece set on the side of the hut. Wire ran from a transmitter to the top of a pole beside the hut, then trailed down across the road. Joe stepped over the broken end as they walked on.

"I shoot . . . I shoot . . ." The metallic voice grated from behind. Joe looked back.

The robot held an automatic rifle at his iron hip. His

finger was hooked over the trigger. Nothing was happening. The gun was empty; it had been empty for years. As the robot squeezed, the trigger guard broke off, rusted through. It tinkled to the concrete road.

Joe walked on, leaving the robot standing motionless in the centre of the road, an indistinct figure in the driving rain. Such reminders of the machine age were rare, nowadays. He felt grateful to Tu for knowing how to deal with such a situation.

The road bore to the left and began to sweep downhill, a steep declivity through a wooded cleft. They were heading towards the sea again and the full force of the gale blew up the road, funnelled by the slopes on either side, howling through the trees and scattering leaves and twigs. Joe hunched his shoulders, Tu crouched behind his downthrust head, clinging hard.

"Down here, Joe, where the road meets the sea, there is a village. We will find a place for the night." Tu's words were whipped away by the wind as he shrieked in Joe's ear.

"Good." Joe supposed that the robot would have gone back into his hut, now. Out of the rain.

He stopped, peering ahead, eyes narrowed. Someone was approaching, running, a swaying shape through the rain. Later, it seemed, he heard the rapid padding of footsteps, which eventually stopped. The man was before him, panting, wild-eyed, hair plastered down his forehead. He looked about fifty years old, and he was thin, and he wore no clothes. Neither did he have a Chinto on his back. He mouthed at Joe soundlessly. There was a deep gash on his left shoulder.

"We are Joe-Tu," said Joe conventionally.

"We are . . ." The man looked wildly around, mouth hanging agape, "we are . . ." A look of terrible pain and desolation was on his face. His hands reached up, felt his

collar-bone, his upper chest; touched the wound on his shoulder. "We are . . ."

"Your Chinto is gone." Joe stated the obvious, flatly.

"Yes . . . yes . . . The village . . . storm, sea high . . . Oh, God. We . . . are going to get help. We . . . got hurt." Again the lost look, almost panic, then the man brushed past and ran away up the road, the sound of his footsteps soon lost in the pounding rain and driving wind.

Her hair had been jet black and her eyes green, slightly slanting. When she moved her head, her hair flopped across her face. She raised her hand and pushed it back and suddenly there were the green eyes again, looking at him steadily, and his stomach felt strange, shivery.

"Joe! Hurry up. We've got to get down to the village. What are you doing, standing here in the rain?"

"Sorry." He started to walk again, still faintly surprised at the vividness of his own visions. It was almost as though she had been there, standing before him.

It was a scene of chaos, men running to and fro, their Chintos urging them on, instructing. The squeaks of the Chintos and the gruff shouts of the men rose above the roar of the sea and wind as they laboured in the rain and spray, the whole rendered more confusing by the overcast twilight.

"Come and give us a hand." A man stood before them, his Chinto gibbering. "We need all the help we can get." The Chinto released his grip on the man's hair and gestured at a human chain which had formed along the foreshore, under the towering black cliff. The Chintos were directing the operation, standing in a little group on a raised slab of concrete among a pile of rubble, conveying their instructions to a tall man who shouted commands, hands cupped around his mouth.

Joe carefully lifted Tu from his back and set him down

among the other Chintos, then joined the chain, feeling lost, keeping his eyes on the furry group on the concrete slab. Something familiar about the slab struck him. It was a house, collapsed, leaving only the solid foundation. Water washed cold about his ankles.

A chair was passed into his hand by the man on his left. He gave it to the man on his right, turned back, received a load of wet bedding, flapping in the wind, passed it on. They had been organised well. While other folk, not thinking to join the chain, wandered about vaguely with articles of furniture in their hands, the long line of organised men worked on, efficiently, transferring possessions from collapsed houses in a long line along the beach, then up a winding path to the secure buildings on the cliff-top.

They worked on for half an hour or more, feverishly, rhythmically, while it became darker. Guttering lanterns were sited at intervals along the beach and away to Joe's left was a blaze of light marking the scene of the rescue operations.

Away from Tu, by himself, an independent man among a row of independent men, he became aware, gradually, of a strange sensation, a mental unease. No, not exactly unease, just a stirring of . . . interest. Curiosity. What was going on? Why were they passing these possessions along the foreshore, while the surf pounded at their feet and the rain drove against their backs? What was it all about?

He found that he had left the chain, was trudging along the beach, the pebbles crunching under his feet. He approached the group of lanterns around the . . . the shattered house, where men, directed by Chintos, shifted beams, tugged at projecting corners of furniture and passed salvaged items to the first man in the human chain.

The shattered house. The cliff had fallen in here, sliding forward, burying a row of houses on the foreshore, smashing others without burying by the sheer force of huge slabs

of falling rock now lying scattered about the beach like giant dice in a mammoth game of chance, life or death.

He wondered whether the other houses, those towards the far end of the beach, had been cleared of the injured and their possessions, or whether they had been abandoned as beyond hope of rescue or salvage. Aimlessly he wandered towards them, swinging a lantern at his side.

He began to pick his way over boulders, clambering clumsily with one hand holding the lantern high. Shadows flickered before him, the rocks seemed to move, to shift like giant turtles in the guttering light. Presently, he sat down . . .

The two Chintos had chattered over his head as he had gazed into her deep eyes, chattered as he gazed only half listening, stargazing . . .

Blood group? Parentage? I.Q.86? Stamina factor? Foot-pounds per stone? Gene pattern? He heard, he didn't understand. He didn't try . . . He was spellbound.

No. Not suitable.

"Come on, Joe. We must be on our way."

He looked up, aware suddenly of his surroundings. It was dark, apart from the pool of light from the lantern at his feet. The voice? The voice had been in his head, an echo from . . . yesterday. Just an echo of a disappointment he knew he would never forget, where usually he found forgetting all too easy.

The din was deafening as he struggled back across the boulders, the rain and spray now stinging the other flank. There was, nevertheless, something missing from the sounds of the beach. He shook his head, clearing his ears of water.

There were no voices any more.

How long had he been sitting in the rain? The chant of toiling men, the twittering of the Chintos, they had ceased.

He arrived at the shattered house which previously had been the scene of frenzied activity. No one was there. A

few pathetic, forlorn rags and sticks of broken furniture lay about, gleaming wet in the lamplight.

He hurried on, he began to scream.

"Tu! Tu!"

Tu would never leave him. Tu would be waiting, along the beach a bit, on that big concrete platform with all the other Chintos. Soon, Tu would be on his shoulders again and they would be off to the next village. Together, the same as always. He hurried on, sobbing, not trusting the logic which told him Tu would be there.

The platform was here . . . Just along a bit . . .

Not here! Oh, God, not here!

A vast, dim pile of rubble rose before him, merged into the black sky as he lifted the lantern, trying to see the end of it. Boulders, shale, sand, turves of grass in mountainous confusion, as high as the feeble light would carry. The cliff, undermined, had toppled, fallen, and spread across the beach to the very margin of the sea.

The lantern fell from Joe's hand. Blackness closed in on him as he threw himself at the amassment, clawing, screaming.

"Tu! Tu!"

He came round.

He came round slowly, painfully, harsh light forcing his eyelids open, biting cold compelling his limbs to stir. He shifted painfully, looked around, dragged himself upright. He was shivering, his hands a concentration of sharp pain. Before him was an indistinct mountain of rubble. Around him was swirling mist.

He remembered.

With memory came the sense of desolation, of a loss too appalling to bear; somewhere, under that rock, was Tu. Tu, who had been his companion and guide for many years, without whom he was incomplete. His mind, his whole

body, was numb at the thought of it. What could he do? He stood there irresolute, regarding the mountain of boulders. He might have stood there until he dropped from exhaustion and exposure, but after a while the long-instilled instinct of symbiosis gave way to an instinct even more basic. Self-preservation.

He began to walk, stiffly.

What had they said? What had Tu said to him so many times, speaking softly into his ear as they strode together?

"If ever anything should happen to me, Joe; if I should die, or if you find yourself alone through some accident . . . report to the nearest Centre. They'll take care of you."

He had protested, when Tu had said this. The suggestion was too morbid to contemplate. But he had remembered.

He was climbing now, climbing up the cliff path at the end of the ruined beach, his body strangely light, his shoulders feeling somehow exposed, unnecessary angles protruding from his neck, purposeless now that Tu had gone. He windmilled his arms, trying to generate some warmth in his body. His arms felt slack, unobstructed.

"Report to the nearest Centre."

Where was the nearest Centre?

Oh, yes. He had passed Centres before, many of them, in the coastal villages. Therefore he must retrace his path, keeping the sea to his right.

Tu had once said to him: "You mustn't resent me, Joe. You mustn't feel that I am a burden on your back, that you would be better off without. I admit that I am dependent on you to carry me around, because my limbs are no use. But I can *think*, Joe, and therefore you need me, because Man cannot think properly any more." Or something like that. They had been drinking in an ancient stone beer-house. Joe had stumbled, stooping to get out of the door, and bruised his knee-cap on the stone flags outside. He had been slightly drunk and he had spoken unthinkingly. Why the

hell did they build doorways so *low*, in the old days? They could knock a Chinto's head off, if you weren't careful.

Musing dimly on times past, Joe trudged back along the cliff-path in the mist-filtered morning sun.

Later the sun had broken through and it was becoming quite hot. The sea was dazzling as Joe walked, not thinking any more, just walking.

Perhaps the screams had been continuing for some moments before he heard them. They were high-pitched and desperate; urgent. He quickened his pace. He had once trapped his foot in a rock cleft and had lain on the ground helpless, unable to wriggle free, not knowing what to do. And Tu had urged him to shout, to scream. Presently, help had come and he had been released.

The screaming continued as Joe quickened his pace. A man must have caught his foot. Joe would free him. Joe knew what to do. Everything would be all right and perhaps they would take him to the village. He shouted encouragingly and broke into a confident run.

He topped a rise then paused, irresolute. In the hollow were a group of men . . . Just men, crowding around, jostling, moving seemingly at random, and a screaming from their midst. A few of them were bending down, those in the centre of the group. He moved forward again. He reached the outskirts of the group; they were just men, alone, without Chintos. He nudged the nearest one, who wheeled round.

"What . . .?" Joe asked, pointing.

The man's eyes were wide, fearful. He looked at Joe blankly.

"What is happening?" asked Joe, making a conscious effort to clarify his meaning.

"You, also," stated the man abstractedly. "Cliff-fall, back . . ." He gestured. "In the dark. Our Chintos were . .

gone. Gone. You know? Some of us walked . . . into the sea."

"Yes . . . But what is happening *there*?"

The man smiled uncertainly, the panic abated in his eyes as he mentioned the word, the blessed word "Chinto".

Suddenly, the crowd resolved itself; those in the centre straightened up, a battered, dazed Chinto was hoisted aloft and settled on the shoulders of the tallest man. The whole crowd set off at a trot. The Chinto, eyes rolling, looked back as they ran, twittering softly but desperately, "Shirley! Oh, Shirley!"

Joe watched them go, then bent down to the girl lying motionless on the short grass.

But sometimes the errant atom of Carbon-14 will stir, changing subtly, and in the manner of its changing alter another, and another. Or the sun's unseen rays, striking the microscopic egg or wriggling sperm, will cause an imperceptible mutation, a slight change from the accepted nature of things. If these mutations are favourable, they may live. If not, they will die . . .

His heart was pounding, his stomach was weak and filled with an empty fluttering. She was lying there helpless and they had torn her blouse in separating her from the Chinto, uncovering her left breast as she lay, still breathing, thank God, still breathing, still alive. Her breast was small and neat and, with a random thought which surprised himself, Joe thought, "Funny, I've always liked to see girls with big breasts, and yet . . ." And yet, when after a while the eyelashes fluttered and he gazed into the deep green eyes of the girl with the small breasts, she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen, and he was lost . . .

Her eyes were open now but she didn't see him, not yet. Her gaze was turned inward and her face shadowed with

pain. She moaned softly and Joe laid his hand on her waist as she lay there and he muttered something, awkwardly. She must have heard, because suddenly her eyes cleared, focused on him, widened in sudden, surprised recognition.

"Oh." She moved and made as if to get up.

"Stay there," Joe said. "Stay there for a while. What happened?"

She began to speak and suddenly it was like listening to Tu again, so easily did Joe understand her meaning. Her speech so clear after the inarticulate human grunts to which he had become accustomed.

"They took my Chinto. She was good to me, her name was El. We were walking along the cliff and they came from over the hill in a crowd. They wanted us to take them back to the town, but El said we couldn't, there was something more important; but she told them which way to go. They were frightened, I think. They kept looking at El and they wouldn't go away. Then one of them suddenly made a grab. They were all round us, we couldn't get away . . ."

"I'm sorry," muttered Joe, his eyes fixed on her face. He would have liked to have said, it's all right, I'll look after you until we get to the town. But it didn't seem right, because he knew that this girl was different from the usual people. She could talk. She was clever. She would get along all right on her own without her Chinto. "What shall we do?" he asked instead, humbly.

He watched her as she rose to her feet painfully, yet with a certain grace. Somehow, she looked quite natural standing there without a Chinto. He himself felt awkward, slightly ashamed in his incompleteness, but she looked as though she were used to standing alone.

"There's an abandoned house, back along the path," she said, with a clarity of recollection which amazed him. "We'll go there. Stay for the night. Make a fire. It's too late to start walking back to the town now."

"Yes," he agreed, staring at her, astonished to find her hand in his as they began to walk.

"Why . . .?" he asked. "Why were you . . . Where were you going?" He felt at ease with Shirley, words came to his lips and he was able to utter them, to express concepts which he had never even thought of before.

She turned over, on to her back, and he watched her profile outlined in the rosy glow from the fire behind her. The fire which she had lit with such skill, actually producing a box of matches from a pocket in her skirt. They had lain together close on the floor by the fire, then; and after a while, they had lain even closer, and Joe was still drunk with her beauty. He watched as she lay silent.

"Why?" he asked again. He wanted to know everything about her.

She hesitated. For a moment her self-possession seemed to have deserted her. She turned her head towards him as she lay, her hair falling dark to the floor, her face in shadow. "Do you . . . do you remember me, Joe? Do you remember where we met before?"

"I remember, Shirley," he said.

She smiled, a glow in the shadow, and took his hand. "Oh, good. I thought . . . People forget easily, you know. I thought I might be making a fool of myself."

"Why?"

"Because we were coming after you, Joe. El and I were coming to find you."

"Coming to find us?" he repeated stupidly.

"No. Not you and Tu. Well, not entirely. It was *you* we were interested in."

"Me?"

"Yes. Listen carefully, Joe. I'll try to tell you.

"The Chintos have always looked after me well. Very well. I've had several of them, they used to change them

from time to time. El was the last, and they have all tried to . . . to teach me things, and make me do things for myself. They said I was brighter than most people. My I.Q. is 118." (Joe nodded, he had heard Tu mention his, Joe's, I.Q. many times, with some pride at the fact that it was 86. 118 must be very clever indeed.) "They said that I represented a real hope for the human race. They felt very bad about the way people had lost their brains. In a way, they felt responsible.

"That day, after we first met—it was the day before yesterday, you know, Joe—I said to El, 'I like him.' And El said, 'It was very debatable. He was almost right for you.' And we went back to our room and El got out the charts, and after a while she said Oh, and she chattered fast; you know the way they do when they get excited. She said something about matching gene patterns.

"And then . . . and then she said, 'We must find him.' I couldn't believe it. We set off almost immediately, as soon as El had sent off a letter to the Master Centre. A letter about us, Joe. Us. Imagine that!"

"What shall we do tomorrow?" asked Joe. It must have been hours since he had last thought of Tu.

She smiled, rather sadly. He hadn't understood. He had grasped that they could stay together for a while, but that was all. He couldn't understand that, together, they might have a child who could be the start of a new pattern of civilisation, with Man playing an equal part; and there was no use in her trying to explain it. He wasn't trying to listen now, she had spoken for too long. He was just looking at her, the firelight tinting his face carmine as he gazed at her without understanding, with the unquestioning eyes of love. And even then, he could only think of her as a sleep-stress, a temporary bedmate, because to him permanency was unimaginable.

Yet the odd thing was, that she loved him too.

"What shall we do tomorrow?" Joe asked again.

He might not be able to visualise the far future, but at least he could think about tomorrow. Perhaps she could keep him here for a while, for a week or two at least, until they were found, and he was taken away from her, having served his purpose. It was isolated here, at least five miles from the nearest village.

"Tomorrow?" she said gaily, leaning across and kissing him on the cheek, so that his arms went about her, tight, "tomorrow I shall take you fishing."

It could be called coincidence that these two met again, that they came together on that lonely hillside through a one-in-a-million chance. But then, all mutations are random. They occur, therefore they must occur *somewhere*. This mutation, which might or might not be of sufficient importance to alter the whole structure of civilisation, occurred at a point some five miles west of the village of Ixton near a beach called Red Sands, about one hundred yards from the water's edge. Why not? It had to happen somewhere.

THE TRIAL

by

ARTHUR SELLINGS

If Man and Alien ever meet (if, indeed, we have not already done so!) will either ever be able to understand the psychological workings of the other's mind? Almost certainly not unless some sort of mental bridge can be formed.

THE TRIAL

One

An airborne patrol squad caught the hoppo—purplehanded, as the sergeant commented with heavy humour—in a native village in the seventh sector. It was on its own, which was unusual; hoppoes normally worked in pairs. So was the fact that the creature made only a clumsy attempt to escape. The jerky gait which gave the species its nickname could carry one of them on a jigging run at a pace few Earthmen could match, especially on a thin-air world like Bates.

As it was, the hoppo, after eluding the first squaddie, ran straight into the arms of another. It struggled only briefly as manacles were clapped on to its wrists and ankles. The sergeant frisked the single body garment and came up with a pack of hoppo food concentrate, nothing more. Grimacing his distaste, the sergeant made a routine check of the creature's orifices. But it wasn't carrying that other means of escape that some of them secreted about their persons—a poison capsule.

But its protest was to form. Flutingly, in the hoppo tongue, it started to say: "Claim-to-be-mine emerges against freedomloss on——"

The words faltered as the sergeant glared and pointed to the blue light of the planet flyer. The hoppo might make out that it did not understand, but the natives had understood clearly enough. They had melted away into the shadow of their huts as the squad had swooped down on the hoppo. The latter rallied.

"Blue lamp of Earth unVryn. No oathfact or——"

The sergeant bellowed across his speech :

"The law of the blue lamp is an intersystem requirement laid down by the Galactic Council to counter exploitation. It requires that no extraplanetary being shall make any contact with a native race without signalling the fact by setting up a lamp of the colour blue, a wattage not less than three hundred and not more than one thousand. Failing this, any village, town, encampment or congregation harbouring such illicit contact shall be deemed to be under the protection of Terran Law for a period of thirty Earth days or ten rotations of the planet, whichever shall be the greater, and the maker of such illicit contact be liable to be held for interrogation."

The sergeant took a deep breath of the thin air. There was no argument against *that* law, by this hoppo or by the whole hoppo race. It had been deliberately wrought. Blue was a painful light to them, mentally as well as physically. This one now kept his eyes averted from the flashing blue light of the flyer, as its race kept their corporate eyes averted from systems whose suns were too blue. But they were found on every other—including many that Earthman found hostile to his own makeup. A hoppo's lungs could adapt to a wider range of atmospheres, the springy cartilages in its legs to heavier gravities. The blue light law went only part way towards redressing the balance.

It wasn't as if the hoppoes offered anything positive to the inhabitants of a planet. Earth could provide whatever a world needed. Antibiotics, technical aid, teaching programmes, factories—anything. Without asking for more in return than adherence to the democratic laws of the Galactic Council. Even then, the Council was pretty lenient in the adaptation of those to alien customs. Earth—the moving power behind the Council—only wanted order and security.

The hoppoes could offer little. A few rudimentary techniques and a medicine that seemed to rely more on mumbo-jumbo than science. It was a wonder that such a race had ever managed to lift itself off its own world. But it had—and was the only race Earth had yet encountered that constituted a threat. A devious and secretive race, they had broken off relations with Earth very soon after the first contact had been made.

They differed little from Man in appearance. Longer legs, a hairless skull . . . such divergencies from the norm could be found in the range of *genus homo*. Even the faint violet pigmentation of the skin was all but invisible in most lights. And yet they were *alien,* far more alien than some races that were only quasi-humanoid. Their faces were strangely blank, showing no expression that an Earthman could read or, reading, be certain of. Their eyes, yellow and nearly all iris, were of no help.

If their appearance was enigmatic, so was their purpose on other worlds. Man's was simple—to spread enlightenment. The hoppoes' only deducible one was to undermine the morale of the other races, to soften them up for an eventual takeover. In nearly two hundred years no takeover had come yet, no open declaration of war. But Earth's forces were alerted on every oxygen world of the explored galaxy. And machines lay waiting in the depths of many non-oxygen atmospheres, for there was no trusting the planet Vryn.

The sergeant gestured curtly to the creature and jerked his head in the direction of the flyer. The hoppo was led unprotestingly away.

"Male Vrynian, height one metre eighty seven," intoned Franks, the medpsych. "X-print to be filed under reference number B stroke 2431 stroke seven three nine. Age . . ." He looked up from his clip-board to the hoppo. "Age?"

The hoppo returned his gaze and said nothing. The medpsych shrugged and turned to the interrogating officer, Captain Geddie. "What do you say?"

"You're the doctor."

Franks peered large-eyed at the detainee through contact lenses. "It's no youngster, but there are no age blotches on its thorax. I'll put fifty Vryn. It's not material." He was new at the base and tried to sound blasé. But it was the physical fact of his newness on Bates that prompted his yawn. He pushed his breathing aid up a notch and handed the clipboard over.

Geddie had no need for a breathing aid. The yawn he suppressed, triggered by the other's, was born strictly of routine and boredom. Another year of this godforsaken tangent world and he would be home. For good and to a pension. These interrogations yielded little any more. A few hints as to the strength of the hoppo contingent; a few local trends; a few scraps to add to Earth's knowledge of the overall pattern of hoppo infiltration.

But the routine had to be gone through. Each entry added points for a merit supplement to Geddie's pension. He addressed the hoppo:

"You do speak Earth tongue?"

The hoppo stared back at him.

"It won't help you, not talking." He repeated it in hoppo. Still no response. He went on in the other's language—or in an Earth version that bypassed the involved syntax of Vrynian:

"You need only tell us your Vryn name and answer a few simple questions. Nothing of what you tell us will be communicated to your own authorities. Co-operate and you can be out of here inside an hour. What do you say?"

The hoppo kept its silence.

"Have it your own way." The Earthman reached for a

switch. As the powerful white light snapped off, a blue light replaced it. The creature turned away. The officer waited, then switched up the intensity.

The hoppo spoke at last, its voice low and hurt. Geddie was conscious of the medpsych fidgeting in the indigo shadows beyond. To anybody new to interrogation the fluting sound of a hoppo's voice could sound very much like a whimper, but Geddie knew better. There was defiance in its voice and in the words it spoke:

"Blue light is violence contrary to law."

"Not so. It's a whole lot less strong and less blue than the light on some worlds that your people have been turning up on lately."

"But those are specially——" The hoppo stopped abruptly. His inquisitor smiled and made a note. *Bred? Adapted?* The broad fact was known, but every scrap of confirmation helped.

"You will not trap me," the hoppo said. "I can endure."

"Endure what?" Geddie said cheerfully and switched the beam back to white. "Any statement you make is voluntary. Let's try again, shall we?"

But after twenty minutes he had extracted no further information. He turned to Franks and shrugged.

"Let me try," said the medpsych and held out a hand for the clip-board.

"If you think you can get any more out of him." Geddie's tone was ironic, but he yielded up the board willingly enough and took out a cigarette. He turned away and had taken the first of several puffs needed to ignite it in this atmosphere before he could move to stop the other. And it was too late by then.

"You fool!" Geddie snatched the hypodermic away as the hoppo's eyes clouded. "That's construed as violence. If the CO hears of this, there'll be——"

He broke off, the cherished vision of his pension withering.

"Violence?" Franks said, unperturbed. "Look again." He held up the violet-coloured left arm of the hoppo. It was quite limp now. There was no mark there. "You old hands don't know all the tricks."

"But——"

"I wouldn't waste time arguing if I were you. The effect of one of these syringes isn't as powerful as the ordinary kind."

Geddie hesitated, then snatched the clip-board and stood over the hoppo.

"Name?" Agitated, he so far forgot himself as to speak in Terran. It proved one point, for the hoppo answered. Under narcosis the fluting tone was gone, a dull monotone replacing it.

"Lahn Thelva."

Geddie went on in Terran. "Is that your true name or merely a name you use on this world?"

"It is my true name. But . . ." It faltered.

"But what? Have you another name?"

"I have . . . no other name."

"Have you ever had another name?"

"Yes."

"*What* name?"

Geddie was nervous. He knew he had taken this questionable opportunity—after years of regulation-bound routine—with a fatal eagerness. And now unreality hit him like a blow. For the hoppo answered:

"Frederick Russell Smith."

Geddie found himself gaping at Franks. Franks gaped back. Geddie strove to reconnect his thinking and blurted out the standard next question.

"Place of birth?"

"Christchurch, New Zealand."

Reality started to crumple up like a dissolve in a stereo movie. Franks was waving something in front of Geddie's face and blathering. "I only glanced at it. Checking in case the sergeant had missed any object in his search. I didn't examine . . ."

And Geddie became aware that it was an X-print, but he didn't understand it. There wasn't room in his mind at this moment. He sank into a chair and dropped his head into his hands. When he lifted it his face was grey. One fact he understood clearly enough, and there was no escaping its necessity. The hoppo was stirring—the fact registered only subliminally—as he said to Franks:

"I think you'd better go and get Colonel Hurst."

Two

THEY came in a long sleek ship of a model nobody on Bates had ever seen before. And it arrived in half the time from the sending of Colonel Hurst's urgent intergram than anybody on that planet could have believed possible. Nor had Bates ever seen such a concentrated group of brass as stepped out of it.

Hurst knew the squat leading figure in staff blue from pictures—Lieutenant-General Hoffman.

"You've broadcast notification of the holding of the suspect to the Vryn authorities?" Hoffman asked curtly.

"Of course, sir," Hurst answered.

"Any acknowledgment?"

"None, sir—as usual." Hurst wondered if any of this party knew what conditions were really like on a tangent world station.

The brief gesture of a gloved hand dismissed the point. "Notification of our further action is being relayed through every possible channel. Very well, Colonel Hurst—you're relieved of the command of Bates Station." The hand moved

briefly again. "No question of demotion is involved. Simply that you will be wanted on Earth." He gestured forward the one man in the company from Earth in field drab. "This is Colonel Alvarez who will take over your command forthwith. Major-General Remarque"—he indicated the tall figure in black by his side—"Attorney-General of the Legal Branch, will give you the rest of your instructions."

The man in black drew a paper from a slim folio and spoke tersely.

"Besides yourself, Colonel, I require made ready for immediate embarkation Captain Geddie, Lieutenant Franks, Sergeant Rawson." The ghost of a smile flickered on his lean face. "And the suspect, of course."

And within an hour it was done, and the long ship had shuttled away into the depths of sub-space from which it had emerged.

Major-General Remarque looked across his desk at Robbins, his assistant.

"Leave the uniform aside from now on, Steve, will you?" He himself was dressed in a light grey suit with a formal wine-coloured cravat. "We'll play down the military aspect. All right, you needn't rush off to change now. There are more important matters to attend to. First— we've got our judge. It took some shuffling of courts and pending actions, but I fixed it. Like to make any guesses?"

"Braithwaite? Stefano?"

"Way off target. No—Judge Harold Vinson."

Robbins' pale eyebrows rose. "A *liberal*?"

"Justice must not only be done but be seen to be done," Remarque said suavely.

"Even so, sir. It was Vinson who threw out the Department's claim for multiple voting rights for Service personnel. In a case like this one——"

"Like this one? There's never been a case like this one.

This is the first time we've really caught Vryn in the act. In the most flagrant violation of inter-species rights ever committed. And they're going to be exposed in front of the whole Galaxy. How are member-planets responding?"

"We've sent out thirty of our fastest ships. Response so far . . . well, you know what some of those races are like. But I'm sure we'll have a gallery of two hundred at least."

"Fine! I want each place fitted with simultaneous translators in Terran, Galactic Basic and Vrynian. As many member-worlders speak hoppo as Terran or Basic. Probably more, if they'd admit to it. But just so there won't be any doubt, each one must be offered translation in his own language too—*and it must be supplied*. No excuse, you understand, no matter how obscure the dialect.

"This is a chance we can't afford to miss. We're having to approach it from a strange angle but we've got to play it straight. That's why I wanted Vinson. Now do you see why I went for a liberal judge? I played it to His Honour for all it was worth that our only interest was in establishing the truth—if only for the sake of what's left of a man inside that hoppo shape."

Remarque swivelled in his chair and looked out through the huge plexiclear window, out over the white and copper buildings of Terropolis, glittering in the sun, to the ice-capped Sierras beyond.

"The poor bastard," he said quietly. "A gallant officer with a fine record. Then *this*. And the only way we can bring the truth to light is to put him in the dock for——"

One of the telephones on his desk rang a middle C. He swung back and picked up the red one. "Yes." He listened, said "Good," listened some more, then replaced the receiver.

He looked up at Robbins.

"Well, we can save our pity. He'll have one of the shrewdest defence attorneys in the system. Lester Wells."

Robbins whistled. "Wells! Has he gone senile? Lawyers half his size have turned it down."

"Which is probably the precise reason why Wells has picked it up. He just got back from a big mineral rights case in Lunar City and accepted the defence on the spot. And don't underestimate Lester Wells on account of his years. We've got an opponent worthy of our mettle."

"All right," said Lester Wells, pacing up and down. The place was more like a hotel room than a cell. The State was obviously out to demonstrate that Terra gave its prisoners proper treatment.

Wells was a little man, not much over five feet tall, with a thatch of white hair. His clothes managed to look crumpled in defiance of all the claims of the syntex manufacturers.

"All right," he repeated to the figure sitting on the bed. "Failing an answer from you, I'll enter a plea of Not Guilty. But, some time before we go into court, I trust you'll find your way around to talking to me." He gestured to the interpreter by him, who translated into Vrynian.

The figure on the bed made no response.

Wells sighed.

"As you will. I'll read the facts of the charge out to you. Then I'll have it typed out in Terran and in Vryn. And you can mull it over before tomorrow." He turned to the interpreter. "See you back at my office in an hour, Dave." Going with him to the door, he murmured, "I'm sure he understands Terran. I know the only evidence for that emerged under narcosis and there may be some kind of block, but we'll find out as we go along."

Wells turned back, loosening his old-fashioned necktie, and began, referring to notes as he went along.

"You were picked up on Bates as a Vrynian in a minor infringement of Galactic Law. It then came to light that

you are physically not a Vrynian in fact, but a Terran who had been made over. The X-print shows, apart from arguable slight divergencies in organ shape and placement, that extra cartilage had been at some time inserted into your patellae. Your eyes don't quite conform to Vrynian norms. It is deduced that depilation was carried out on your body and that the normal pigmentation of a Vrynian was simulated by injection or some other means.

"Under narcosis, furthermore, you revealed that your name is, or once was, Frederick Russell Smith. The facts were immediately relayed to Earth, where it was discovered on checking records that a man bearing that name had held the rank of captain in the Space Service. Ten years ago that man was awaiting transport back to Earth from the planet Falco when he disappeared.

"Fingerprints were checked. Vrynians don't have prints such as Terran man. Your prints now do not show the whorled pattern of man. But neither do they conform to any known Vrynian form. Expert opinion is that at some time your Terran-type prints were deliberately obliterated.

"If you were a Vrynian, then you could not have been detained on Bates for longer than laid down by statute. Nor could you have been brought to Earth for a full judicial examination. As a Terran you could be. And it is as a Terran that you're being charged . . . with treason."

Wells looked up from his notes. "I shall conduct your defence on the following lines:

"That, on Falco, you were captured by Vrynians. I can put up a motive for that—that Captain Smith, then Sublieutenant Smith, had earned Vryn enmity from an incident many years earlier on the planet Lengan. Service records state that Sublieutenant Smith was decorated with the Galactic Star, Second Class, for—as the citation put it—'devotion to duty and the protection of his men in perilous circumstances on a tangent world'. In fact, as my pre-

liminary research confirms, it was an action against a party of Vrynians.

"The incident supplies motive. Motive for what Vryn did to you after you disappeared on Falco. I don't seek elucidation at this stage. Only Vryn can tell me—or you, if you will or can. Perhaps it was a Vryn sense of humour—a grim one—or there may be some deeper motive involved. If they brainwashed you—then you'd have been more use to them, presumably, in the shape you were. Why work you over to make you look like a Vrynian?

"Or did they repress what was Terran in you, leaving only a vestige of a human personality? And supplant it, by some unholy means, with the personality of a Vrynian? Giving the mind of a Vrynian control over the memory of a Terran? That would make a very useful combination for undercover work.

"Whatever, I'm going to plead for you as you've been charged—as a man. With or without your help. But, without it . . . without the help of whatever there may be left of a man in the body I'm looking at . . ." He broke off.

"Just try and give me that help, will you?" He stowed the papers in a pocket and turned to go. He turned back.

"And if you're a Vrynian—whatever you may think of Earth and Terrans—and of me as a Terran—remember that I've undertaken to defend you. And I'll bust a gut to do that—whatever you are."

THREE

Six weeks later, Wells faced his client.

"We've got only a few minutes before you're led into court. I've been here every chance I've had, trying to reason with you. You haven't given me a single word back. It's going to be tough enough out there. Give me some kind of a

lead and I'll build it up into a case. Without it——" He shrugged small but eloquent shoulders.

His client looked back at him with large yellow eyes, which might have held an expression of regret—or of mute defiance.

Wells sighed and lit a cigarette. He didn't have time to finish it.

The trial opened in Number One Court of the Terran Hall of Justice. The State had spared no expense, Wells saw, as he went in with his client between armed security guards. The front tiers of the public gallery were packed with member-worlders of various shapes and colours. The seats beyond were packed too, with Terrans. The case had aroused planet-wide interest.

They took their places. The Judge entered and assumed his seat at the rostrum. The State opened its case, Remarque prosecuting in person.

"The present indictment has certain unusual features, none of which does the prosecution wish to gloss over. In fact, it is the State's wish that every aspect of this case—however distressing or disturbing any of them may be—shall be exposed to the full light of judicial procedure. But the gravamen of the charge is simple. The man before the court faces a charge of treason, in that being an officer in the Space Service, he——"

Wells was on his feet immediately.

"I object! I demand that the use of the title of Captain be ruled out of order. Frederick Russell Smith had completed his term of service three days before the date on which he disappeared."

Remarque smiled. "It is a courtesy title. Even after retirement an officer has the right to use the title of his rank."

"We are not dealing with courtesy titles here, Major-

General Remarque, but with a matter of life and death. Furthermore——"

Judge Vinson's gavel descended. "You will address the rostrum, Mr. Wells. Do I gather that your objection is founded on the sentence applicable on this charge, if proven?"

"Precisely. Treason, if proved against a serving officer, carries a maximum penalty of death. In this case——"

"May I intervene, your Honour?" said Remarque. "The prosecution will withdraw the use of the title at this stage. The indictment bears no title of rank."

"Does that satisfy you, Mr. Wells?" the Judge asked.

"It'll do for now," Wells said casually. "But I reserve the right to raise the point at a later stage."

"You may do that, Mr. Wells."

"And just one point," said Remarque, "before we proceed I should be obliged if Mr. Wells would similarly refrain from the use of any military title I may myself possess. I come before this court as chosen State's prosecutor, not in any military capacity."

"I think the point is taken, all the way round," said Judge Vinson. "Proceed, Mr. Remarque . . ."

Remarque smoothed his cravat.

"In the course of routine security operations on the planet of Bates, on the third of July 2431, Terran calendar, a Vrynian—or a person thought at that time to be a Vrynian—was apprehended in the course of illicit trafficking with natives. On examination, however, this supposed Vrynian was found to be a Terran, answering to the——"

"I object!" Wells was on his feet again. "The examination, so-called, was an illegal process, and any deductions drawn from it are, I submit, inadmissible as evidence."

The Judge turned to Remarque.

"What was the precise nature of this examination?"

"It consisted of a routine taking of X-prints and finger patterns, photographing and verbal interrogation."

Wells was still on his feet. "This so-called interrogation was duress, in violation of Galactic Law and common law protection of personal rights. The only substantiation the prosecution has of the identity of the accused is alleged witness to alleged words uttered by the accused under the influence of an illegally administered narcotic."

The Judge turned to Remarque. "What is the State's submission on this objection?"

"This is one of the matters, your Honour, which—as I mentioned in my opening statement—the State wishes to be laid completely open. And I am grateful to my learned opponent for initiating it. Terran authorities are always vigilant in ensuring that every interrogation is conducted according to Galactic Law. In this case a newly posted medical officer used methods which are not laid down in the Manual of Operations and Conduct. But the prosecution maintains that it was not of such a kind as to constitute duress by any standard. The medical officer merely used a form of interstitial spray, of a narcotic nature, which neither maimed the flesh of the accused nor caused any pain whatsoever. It could quite conceivably arise that a detainee might be violent and, for his own protection, just such a form of mild narcotic might——"

"I object! The prosecution is adducing a completely hypothetical set of circumstances."

Judge Vinson turned on Wells. "And I object to your continual objections. You will allow the State's attorney to make his statement of case."

"I would if it didn't contain too many mis-statements!"

"You will have the opportunity to question them as soon as Mr. Remarque has finished."

Remarque smiled. "Thank you, your Honour. But if Mr. Wells wishes to contest the point, I yield."

"I'm obliged to you," said Wells stiffly. He ferreted in his pocket and held up a small carton. "There is only one such syringe on the market, the manufacture being restricted by patents, and here is a specimen. You will see that its containing box is quite clearly marked *Hypodermic Syringe*. If your Honour wishes to satisfy himself on this point?"

"Our eyesight is quite strong enough to register the fact from here, Mr. Wells. What is precisely your objection? Surely the point is that the instrument has none."

Laughter greeted the thin judicial pun. Wells only winced.

"I make the point," he persisted doggedly, "that the prosecution's calling it a spray obscures the facts."

"Mr. Wells, the rostrum appreciates your efforts on behalf of your client, but will have to rule on this matter. Which is precisely one of degree. I am prepared to recognise that some small measure of what might be legally definable as violence did take place. But, in less unusual cases than this, testimony is often admitted though the means of gaining it be open to question. I may cite an example of evidence gained as a result of illegal entry. No court condones such methods—indeed, it often sees that the wrongdoer is punished in consequent process—but neither does it necessarily exclude evidence so gained. Bearing in mind the gravity of this charge, and the smallness of any irregularity that may have been committed in the gaining of this evidence, I overrule the objection and find the evidence admissible."

Wells sank back in his seat and turned to his client. "I didn't think for one moment we'd get far on that tack, but we had to try."

The alien head turned briefly, then the yellow eyes turned back to their expressionless gazing into space.

All right, Lester Wells muttered to himself, *we'll try again.*

He was on his feet ten minutes later as the prosecution's case began to unfold.

"I must ask the rostrum's indulgence if I seem to be objecting with undue frequency. The prosecution has stated what is obvious to us all, that this case is an unusual one, so I hope that I can claim such indulgence. I am objecting now, not to the accuracy of the facts as stated by my learned and gallant opponent, but on the matter of their cumulative interpretation. He has stated facts that, to him amount to positive identification of the accused as Frederick Russell Smith. And the charge has been brought in that name.

"I wish to submit, before we go any further, that my client has no case to answer. That he is not in fact Frederick Russell Smith."

A loud murmur ran round the court, dying away as the Judge banged his gavel.

Judge Vinson spoke: "But you say that you do not object to the facts as stated. They seem to establish a *prima facie* case for the identification of the accused as the person named in the indictment."

"With the physical identity we have no quarrel at this stage, reserving our right——"

"Yes, Mr. Wells," the Judge interjected wearily. "Reserving the right to contest the point at a later stage. I appreciate that, if not the motive for your objection now. This trial, as any trial must be, is of a physical entity—a person."

"I submit that the two words, which your Honour uses synonymously, are in fact in opposition. In this case, at any rate. My client is being accused as a man, a Terran, only in the context of Terran knowledge and science. The culture of Vryn is virtually a closed one. We cannot tell to what changes the entity of Frederick Russell Smith has been subjected. The surface physical changes, yes, but the crux of this case is in the mental change wrought."

He wheeled and pointed dramatically at the accused.

"If there were still within that seemingly alien body a free agent called Frederick Russell Smith, he would surely have spoken by now. In fact——" He had concealed his client's obdurate silence from the Press and everyone else until now. "In fact, not one word has been uttered by the accused, even to me, his counsel. And I am prepared to take the witness stand and swear that on oath.

"Now, is that the conduct of a man faced with a serious charge—or even of the vestige of one? Or is it—as I submit—clear and undeniable proof that the entity accused is to all intents and purposes not Frederick Russell Smith—but Lahn Thelva of the planet Vryn? I submit that the personality of a Vrynian was at some time subsequent to the disappearance and abduction of Smith, imposed upon Smith's personality by unknown—and possibly forever unknowable—processes of an alien science."

Remarque was on his feet.

"May I answer, your Honour? The form of indictment was only arrived at after careful thought. The State has no wish to persecute a gallant officer . . . nor even any Vrynian called Lahn Thelva . . . but only to show that a shocking crime was committed.

"We could not have brought this charge, or any other, in the courts of Vryn. Indeed, we do not even know if courts of justice exist on that world. But we do have them on Terra. And there is a *prima facie* case, as your Honour has ruled, for investigation. The workings of Earth courts are not solely for the punishment of the guilty but equally for the vindication of the innocent.

"The powers-that-be of Vryn are at liberty to appear and intervene on behalf of the accused. The invitation—with the facts of the indictment—has been sent out through every channel. But"—Remarque looked around the court—

"no Vrynian representative has appeared or contacted us to this moment. We can therefore only proceed in Terran terms. Any speculation about what Vrynian science can, or cannot do, is entirely fruitless."

Remarque sat down.

Wells got up again.

"Speculation is indeed fruitless. That is the substance of my submission. We do not know the powers of Vryn—but precedents exist—have existed—on this very planet. I should like to bring certain facts to the prosecution's notice. With the rostrum's indulgence, of course."

He reached down beneath his table and hauled up a large leatherbound tome.

"I shall quote first from Bogue's *Discourse on Sorcerers,* published in 1610——"

Remarque was on his feet.

"Are you objecting, Mr. Remarque?" asked the Judge, almost hopefully it seemed.

"I was hoping that Mr. Wells might withdraw without my having to. In a twenty-fifth century court bringing up ancient books on sorcery, indeed!"

"What writers of that day called sorcery," Wells retorted evenly, "was only one of the words they used to describe something they didn't understand. But which they recognised as a phenomenon. Another word—the one germane here—was *possession.* I shall adduce actual court proceedings. If Mr. Remarque flinches from such words as *sorcery,* let me add that I have other books under my table with more respectable titles—like Cimber's *Curious Archives of the History of France,* 1836."

"*Are* you objecting, Mr. Remarque?"

Remarque shook his head and sat down.

"Good," beamed Wells. "I'll try and be as succinct as possible. Now, let us start with a case of lycanthropy." He looked across to the jury. "Of a man's being taken posses-

sion of by a wolf. The case of Jacques Rollet, who was tried at Angers in the year 1598 . . ."

But by the next afternoon, for all his efforts, Wells had had to admit defeat on the identity issue. Remarque resumed his statement of case and called the State's witnesses. They numbered four only—the personnel from Bates. Wells cross-examined them, briefly and without marked success, and had finished when the Judge adjourned the day's proceedings. The attorney for the defence accompanied his client to his cell.

"Well, that's it. Tomorrow I have to get up out there and make some kind of an answer to the charge. And, frankly, I haven't the faintest idea how. This is my last desperate plea to you after two days of your seeing a Terran court in action. And, let me tell you, that's only a taste. Shall I predict what will happen next?

"They know they can't *prove* treason. But you're not in the dock—Vryn is. Remarque is achieving what he set out to achieve—the denigration of Vryn.

"I took a big chance yesterday and today, hammering on the issue of responsibility. Remarque knows as well as I did that I was on dangerous ground. I was only hoping—pretty forlornly—that I could get you classified as a Vrynian, which would wash the treason charge out of court. I had to make that attempt. I——"

The little man broke off and lit a cigarette. He looked at the figure sitting in front of him and suddenly exploded . . . quietly and vehemently.

"All right . . . I'm wasting my words! Just as I've wasted thousands of them out there in court. And there's a chance you don't understand one of them, but I strongly doubt that. You didn't use the translation apparatus once." He exhaled smoke savagely. "*Listen*. As soon as I've closed the pitiful case for the defence tomorrow, Mr. Major-General

Remarque is going to put a submission before the Judge, as sure as I'm standing here. It's going to be an unusual one coming from the prosecuting attorney, but everything's been cockeyed in this case. He'll get up out there, with all that smooth manner of his, and announce that the State will accept a ruling of insanity. And I can just hear the phrases he'll use . . . *dementia praecox* . . . fragmentation of personality. And the very fact that I argued division of responsibility will have laid us wide open.

"And justice will be seen to be done. Not only justice, but *leniency*. And you'll be taken away, all legally, to a nice white hospital somewhere in whatever remains of green countryside on this planet . . . and then they'll really get to work on you. You had more rights—far more rights—as a Vrynian guilty of a misdemeanour on some remote world than you'll ever have as an assumed Terran on his native Earth. They'll break the truth out of you under the guise of beneficent medicine. This is your last chance to defend yourself."

He stubbed his cigarette out and turned to leave, knowing that he had failed.

And then the other spoke.

"I'm truly sorry that you have had so much work and worry on my behalf."

The words were in Terran, but the accent was a fluting Vrynian. Wells gaped, then, quickly to cover his startlement, lit another cigarette. He had talked for days, using every argument he had. Now he couldn't trust himself to speak. The other went on calmly :

"I could not speak before. The discipline of Vryn forbade me. But I appreciate your argument. Tomorrow I will speak."

Wells found voice. "Tomorrow? But we go into court tomorrow."

"I mean that. I will speak on the stand."

"*No!* Once take the stand and the prosecution have the right to cross-examine. You *do* understand Terran—then for heaven's sake understand this! They'll crucify you. Speak to *me—now*."

"No, Mr. Wells." And for the first time something like a human expression showed in the other's face. "I have had many days to think. Only I can decide, for only I know the facts. You will please ask me certain questions in court. Will you take a note?"

Like a man in a trance Lester Wells reached in his pocket for a stylus.

Four

The court was no more crowded—that would have been physically impossible—than it had been the first two days. But Wells, as he rose, felt the pressure of souls, Terran and alien, even more acutely. He cleared his throat.

"The defence will call its first witness. Its first and only witness—Frederick Russell Smith." And he enjoyed the pleasure of seeing the jerk of Remarque's sleek head. The accused stalked to the witness box in an absolute silence.

Wells followed him and tried to adjust himself to the casual stance of the experienced examiner. But a tic started in his left knee, distracting him. He paced the area in front of the witness stand. He knew what they would think—Lester Wells playing to the gallery again. Which was just as well. *I'm getting old, dammit.* Then why this feeling that he was back nearly fifty years at his first case with the whole world against him? He had lost that first case. He turned on his only witness almost brusquely.

"We have spent two days in this court, and most of the questions, the submissions, have revolved about the central question of your true identity. Will you now please state this?"

"My name is Frederick Russell Smith."

A ripple of sound ran around the public tiers. Judge Vinson's gavel poised, but was replaced as the noise died.

"Are you a Terran?"

"I was a Terran."

"You were captured by Vrynian forces ten years ago?"

"Not so. I voluntarily sought out a Vrynian outpost."

"And then?"

"I explained myself to their . . . there is no word in Terran . . . their responsible man is the nearest I can translate."

"How do you mean . . . explained yourself?"

"My reasons for making contact. I told him that I had completed my term in the Space Service. That I considered that my obligations to the Terran Government had been fulfilled . . . and had lapsed."

Wells was aware, with a chill that made itself felt along his spine, that Smith was walking the edge of the abyss. The charge was treason. Now he seemed to be on the brink of admitting it. Smith had dictated the list of questions. He had not explained them, nor hinted what his answers would be. All Wells had been able to do was to try and make sense from their sequence—to fill in the gaps with possible answers. He hadn't been very successful. He had to warn the other now. He departed from his brief.

"You were a gallant and decorated officer lately in the service of Earth?"

The reaction was of Earth. A flinching; an embarrassed silence. Wells went back to his brief. The statement, the reminder to the court and to his client, had been made.

"What did you do then?"

"I confessed my wish to become a Vrynian for the rest of my life."

Now the Judge had to use his gavel—several times—before the hubbub subsided.

That had been the biggest, the deadliest, gap between question and question. Wells had to cross it, in emerging awareness of the context now, armed only with a single word that might well be turned against him: "Why?"

"Because of what I had seen during the years of my service." Smith's answers, though in perfect Terran, had started with a Vrynian accent laid on them. Now, as the accent faded, he sounded like a man recovering the use of a language after many years.

"I went into the Service at eighteen. I suppose I had the normal ambition of youth, the normal dreams. Being a part of an enterprise that seemed great and noble—the inhabitants of one small world reaching out across the Galaxy to make contact with other races. I knew that we had found no other race so far which had attained to the achievements of Man. Except one . . . and that a hostile one. I accepted the fact that the Service was a virtually military organisation. There had to be discipline among its members, for the good name of Earth—and for the protection of its aims against that other race that was abroad in the Galaxy."

The yellow eyes looked out over the crowded courtroom as if it were not there. It was well-nigh impossible to read the inner thoughts of Vrynian. When it came to a man, or what purported to be a man, speaking from the ostensible body of a Vrynian—Wells remembered the words of a statesman centuries dead . . . what had it been? . . . a sphinx wrapped in a riddle inside an enigma? . . . the exact words eluded him and the figure on the stand was continuing:

"I took my part unquestioningly in operations on half a dozen worlds, wherever I was sent. In the action for which the Service awarded me a medal, we surprised an unusually large group of Vrynians—over twenty of them. They had just disembarked on the nightside of Langen. It was the first

time I had seen a Vryn ship. They were startled. So were my men. Somebody fired, and in a moment a pitched battle was in progress. The Vryn ship took off. The whole landing party was wiped out."

Wells shot a quick glance in Remarque's direction. The Prosecutor was leaning forward intently in his seat, as unbetraying of any emotion as the man on the witness stand. But Wells would have staked his life that he was gloating. The defence was carrying on doing his work for him. Vrynian venality was being stripped bare for a galaxy to see. A world that moved its agents by stealth, which abandoned its own men in a crisis . . .

Smith went on :

"It was only when we counted their dead that we found that they had been unarmed . . . every single one of them."

Remarque was on his feet now.

"And Terran personnel are normally unarmed. The prosecution objects to the implication."

Wells was unbriefed on the point. Smith answered for him, or began to. "On Langen——"

"We know," Remarque interposed quickly. "On Langen there are certain dangerous fauna, making sidearms mandatory. At least"—his tone was heavy with sarcasm—"Terra considers it necessary to give its personnel protection. In any case, depositions taken by men in your company testified that the Vrynians acted hostilely first."

"It was night and the situation was confused."

"Thank you. As long as the fact is made clear to the court, I withdraw the objection." Remarque sat down.

"I have no interest in disputing the point," Smith said evenly. "It happened nearly two decades ago and nothing can right whatever wrong was done. I spoke of it only to recount the turning point in my thinking. I continued to do my duty as an officer; I accepted promotion as it came. But I went out of my way from then on to learn as much about

Vrynians as I could. That was my duty, of course, and whatever was germane I filed in my reports. But, outside my duty, I researched among the inhabitants of whatever world I was posted to. It was not easy—but over the years certain facts emerged . . . fragmentarily, but assuming the substance of truth."

Remarque leapt up.

"I object! What are these nebulous 'facts' that are being adduced in evidence. I have been through all the reports of the accused during his term of service. Only these can be admitted or——"

Judge Vinson banged his gavel.

"You are out of order, Mr. Remarque. Yes, Mr. Smith?"

"There is a simple reason why such facts were not included in my reports. I suspect that my commanding officer"—a suspicion of a smile moved on the Vrynian face—"might have thought them treasonable. For I found not only certain facts about Vryn, but others—hard and unpleasant facts—about Earth and the attitude of other-worlders towards Earth.

"Oh yes—I know about the welcoming committees, the artifacts inscribed with addresses of thanks from a grateful people. But Terran power is strong—and what other course is open to less advanced races? Earth may come in peace—but it is an imposed peace. Planetary patterns—primitive ones, perhaps, but *natural* ones—become corrupted by the influence of Earth. I came to see Terran civilisation not as a gift from the heavens to the less fortunate—but as a plague."

There was tumult on the public tiers. The Judge's gavel banged repeatedly. Remarque was on his feet protesting—and seemed to be stranded there as the clamour yielded finally.

Judge Vinson spoke firmly:

"I will clear the court if there is any repetition of such

conduct. In which I include yours, Mr. Remarque. You stated that you wished all aspects of this case to be illuminated. Unless you have legitimate objections you will kindly refrain from exacerbating any disturbance. Have you any such objection at this point?"

Remarque shook his head slowly and resumed his seat.

Smith continued:

"I saw that it was only an extension of Man's conduct on his own planet—where by now he has wiped out all but a few other species of sentient life, where he has steamrollered into planetary conformity all the lesser cultures which helped raise him to his eminence.

"And I realised that the Vrynians had detected this in Man from the time he first made contact with them. Vryn is not so advanced as Earth; they lack the peculiar ruthless intelligence of men. But theirs is an old culture—and intelligence is not the same as wisdom. In their wisdom they broke off contact with Earth before they too were corrupted. And acted, as far as their limited powers would allow them, to counter the process of corruption on other worlds.

"Not by working hostilely against Earth, but simply by visiting communities. Teaching a simple faith, an integrity of species, a philosophy. What Earth interprets as the duplicity of Vryn is simply an earnest desire to avoid the excesses of Earth . . . or their own influence would be no better.

"I had taken an oath of loyalty to the Service. But, after I had finished my term, my duty done, I knew that I had a greater duty. A duty that transcended my obligations to Earth. I wanted, in whatever lifetime was left to me, only to make amends. I was ashamed of being a Terran any longer. I——"

Remarque leapt to his feet again.

"I protest, your Honour! I protest with the utmost force.

What is being uttered in so-called evidence is only the subjective distortion of fact."

The public tiers had been listening in shocked silence; now they erupted again—or began to. Judge Vinson rose as he banged his gavel.

"The court will take an hour's recess. I will see both counsel in my chambers."

FIVE

THE Judge had divested himself of his robes. Seated now, he faced the two attorneys across his desk.

"Let it be clearly understood that any repetition of such conduct will not be tolerated from either of you. All right, this case has some unusual aspects—and let *that* be said for the last time. But there's no excuse for turning the court into an arena." He addressed Remarque. "Does the State intend to pursue the charge?"

"What else?"

"From an attorney of all people I'm not going to have a question answered by a question."

"All right, we intend that Smith's guilt be shown beyond all reasonable doubt."

"Then you'll cross-examine?"

Remarque hesitated. "We might waive that right."

Wells leapt in. "Over my dead . . ." He stopped and smiled blandly. "No, over my very live body. In fact, I'll ask your questions for you." The smile vanished. "You came into court to make propaganda. Now it's turning against you, you'll just have to sit back and listen."

"Not at all," said Remarque thinly. "As soon as court is reconvened I shall move that Smith be remanded for a psychiatric examination on the grounds——"

"That *will* be over my dead body," Wells hollered. "Forgive me, Judge, but you threw out my submission that there

was a diminution of responsibility in this case. Remarque can't have it both ways."

"You forget," Remarque intervened smoothly, "that fresh evidence has been admitted since then. Just now, from Smith himself. Any man who could voluntarily submit to surgery to make himself look like an alien must have a masochistic streak a yard wide, to begin with."

"*Surgery?*" Wells' voice was withering. "Alterations not very different in degree can be bought on Earth from cosmetic surgery shops on any main street. What Smith did may have been eccentric—but don't try building it up as evidence of insanity. Men have taken on the guise of another race before now. I can name two offhand: Burton, to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, and Lawrence of Arabia. They're both folk heroes."

"Hardly good witnesses to your argument," Remarque said drily. "They both remained loyal to their country."

Wells answered quietly:

"And didn't Smith remain loyal to his? To the last day of his service? And after . . . are you going to prove that anything he did was counter to the interests of Earth?"

"Are you *supporting* his treason?"

"*Quiet,* both of you," Vinson said curtly. He addressed Wells. "If the State moves for a psychiatric examination I feel that the rostrum would have to give consideration to it."

"Do that," said Wells fiercely, "and I shall countermove for a new trial on the grounds of a miscarriage of justice. Dammit, I've had both hands tied behind my back up to now." His eyes glinted. "But with a new trial——"

"Can't we keep our heads on this?" The words, surprisingly, came from Remarque. "Could we agree to a lesser charge being substituted?"

"It's the prosecution's prerogative to make such a submission," said Judge Vinson.

"Precisely what lesser charge?" asked Lester Wells quietly.

"That depends. Will you allow me half an hour to confer with my assistants?"

Judge Vinson looked at his wrist. "I called an hour's recess. We've had twenty-five minutes so far." He held out a case to Wells. "A small cigar?"

They were stubbing them out when Remarque returned.

"It's a pretty unfamiliar charge—one of the things that got left on the statute book when the amalgamation took place two centuries ago. Even the language is rather quaint, so I'd better outline it briefly."

When he had done so, Judge Vinson looked enquiringly at Lester Wells. Wells pursed his lips.

"If we plead guilty to that, what's the sentence?"

"The minimum, a fine of a thousand credits and/or one year in a corrective colony."

"And the maximum?"

When Remarque told him, Wells pondered, then turned to the Judge. "Do you think it's that serious a breach of the law?"

In the cells he faced the accused.

"The prosecution have been rooting around in the vaults and come up wih a law that somehow got shunted into Terran law from some old military code. They're prepared to drop the treason charge and substitute, as the statute reads, 'Behaviour unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.' "

Smith actually smiled wryly. "Weren't you at pains at the beginning of this trial to stress that I was no longer an officer?"

"Don't quibble. Not now, for heaven's sake!" But Wells too smiled as he said: "I'm not even going to quibble when the prosecution demands the maximum penalty."

"Which is?"

"I'll come to that. I want to have my say first.

"I've been through too many courtrooms to seek for motives when the facts suffice. When I've seen this case out I've decided it will be my last one. I'm going to retire and write my memoirs. And I'm pretty sure that this case won't figure in them. It's something best left to others to comment on. I'm certainly not going to bother this old head with the philosophical implications. But——"

The yellow eyes were on him—and Wells knew that one question would never be answered finally. The other had claimed to be a man in the end. And yet—Wells hadn't pressed the point in cross-examining the State's witnesses—he had averted his eyes from the blue light just like a Vrynian. Mere camouflage wouldn't have built in that reflex, surely? Or was it a result of that discipline that he had mentioned? A part of the process of becoming the adherent of another creed?

"—But either Vryn has had its way and struck the propaganda blow it intended all the way along—or you as an Earthman, a renegade Earthman, have opened a ray of light upon the conscience of mankind."

For the second time in their brief term of communication—no more, after all these weeks, Wells realised, than a few hours, less than the rotation of a world—the man opposite, the Terran in alien guise or the Vrynian in a totally ambiguous one, made a gesture that was totally Terran—a slight flinching of embarrassment. Then said quietly:

"The maximum sentence, you were saying?"

"A very harsh sentence in Terran eyes." Wells gazed at the other, then broke off to light a cigarette. "Perhaps I will write that last chapter in my memoirs, after all. This *has* been the most cockeyed case I ever took. It was Earth that never got the chance to answer—Earth that got blackened in front of the whole Galaxy. Somebody will have to answer. For Man isn't as black as that. Maybe we're the

villains of the Galaxy—or the maniacs. Or the plague carriers. But we got out there. We made contact. Races are no longer on their own, living out their histories isolated behind vast distances. No species, no more than any individual, can know itself except by the image it sees reflected from others. If the image of Earth is a bad one . . . well, perhaps another race will show up to present a better one. Perhaps Vryn, perhaps . . ."

He hoisted his small shoulders and ash dribbled on to his jacket front.

"Like I said, to hell with the philosophy! You asked me what the maximum sentence is. Something which I believe you set out to find in the first place. Exile for life."

The accused looked at him for a long moment, then stretched out a hand.

"I think we can settle for that," he said quietly.

THERAPY 2000

by

KEITH ROBERTS

Noise, offspring of the Great Machine Age, continues to batter at our hearing with ever-increasing ferocity. Gradually, too, the hours of silence are diminishing. Soon, doubtless, will come the illusions.

THERAPY 2000

It was the earplugs that started the trouble. Or rather the absence of earplugs, the difficulties Travers encountered trying to purchase such an antique and potentially unsociable commodity. Although he had of course prepared a cover story; in fact he had four, each vaguely less credible than the last. But not even as a laboratory technician conducting experiments in a new and highly secret project concerned with sonic warfare was he successful. Earplugs were not to be had.

Once implanted, though, the notion wouldn't leave him. He developed the reprehensible habit of stuffing his ears with assorted scraps of paper, tissue, anything that lay to hand. He considered the Sound absorbing properties of a wide range of substances. Hot wax at one time seemed a possibility; but there was no way of controlling its runniness. Working on one's own perhaps, one's head turned thus, sideways on the table . . . His one experiment was a messy failure. Wax was definitely out; but other things, equally definitely, were in.

He became absentminded. His vagueness manifested itself in increasingly painful attempts to ram further objects into ears already stuffed to capacity. The trouble was of course, the whole trouble was, that nothing *lasted*. A few minutes, perhaps only seconds, of delirious numbness, the total lack of auditory sensation; then Sound would once more begin to seep and creep in at the edges, through the interstices of the wadding; and there were the devils again, albeit muted, hoofing and pounding inside his skull.

He developed a new theory, one that despite scientific implausibility he was unable to drive from his mind. In essence, it was that the plugs *soaked up* noise, became soggy with din and therefore permeable. His fresh preoccupation dictated rapid, frenetic changing of plugs and alternation of materials. Ceramics were in now, and well greased hand-carved wood. These latter masterpieces he lay regularly in the sink, ostensibly to drain.

This was Travers' life. At dawn, with the Dicky Dobson Rise and Glow Show, he obediently rose. Two hours later—two hours of Sporting Roundup, and the Humming Hillbillies, and Keeling Cocos Walker and his Set and the News in Brief and Howdy Again Folks and all the rest—the interblock tube disgorged him at his place of work, the forty-storey highrise topped, as a cake is topped with icing, by the two floors and mezzanine annexe of Maschler–Crombie–Cohen Associates. There it was his pleasure to paste up an endless flow of newssheet small ads, juggling objects as disparate as hormone cream and harmonicas into proper relationships with the fat-face type, the bursting stars and dollar signs that since time immemorial had been deemed fitting to proclaim their excellence.

"Pasteup man"—the ad game, for decades now merely the poor relation of the PR industry and one of the more conservative of professions, still attached such antique labels to its minions. In fact Travers used a Grant and Digby, a bulky combination of epidiascope and dyeline printer that enabled images to be enlarged, reduced, squeezed, expanded and jazzed up at pleasure before being fixed by the simple pressure of a button. It was a nice machine; some illusion almost of privacy might be gained once Travers had involved himself in the intricacies of its various folding black plastic hoods. Though even there, of course, the office din penetrated. No video, naturally; but the wallspeakers belched forth for the stipulated Union

minimum of six and one-quarter hours a day, their repetitions interlaced with the irate shouts of the studio manager pursuing this or that vanished example of still life: and of course each artist had his own Mintran propped beside him so that at any one instant the total effect might be enriched by tinny renderings of subjects as far removed as Puccini and mid-twentieth-century Progressive Jazz.

At sixteen hundred hours Travers tubed homeward to begin his long evening of leisure. The tubecars were all fitted with Trivee now; he wondered how the youngsters had ever sustained their short journeys without it. He himself, he had decided, was no longer young. He could remember tubecars without Trivee, and many other things; after all he had given twelve years of his working life now to the Grant and Digby. Once indeed while shaving—the twenty-first century, in other respects the acme of technological perfection, had not as yet universally disposed of the human whisker—he discovered a single fairly long white hair. He told Deidre about it that night; but she merely laughed at him in the cool slow way she had, and told him how little age mattered to real men and women, and kissed him and ran away to throw a pebble in the sea.

This was Travers' life in the evenings. The tubecar dropped him again at the foot of his own Elbee. Then he would ride the elevator—they were talking about Trivee for elevators too now, he'd read—past floor after shouting floor to his own room on the forty-third. Though the phrase "own room" struck him from time to time as curious. If by some mischance he happened to find himself one day not in Room 633 but in another of the eight hundred-odd cream-and-floral plastic boxes that comprised the Living Block, how, he wondered, would he divine that the cell was not his own, his private, personal and totally secure fragment of twenty-first century culture? From little marks perhaps,

dents, scuffings on the walls where from time to time he had hurled objects in those fits of childish pique that seemed to be becoming more frequent with him. The missiles of course provoked no reaction; so Sound-soaked were the walls that one crash more or less had become as nothing between friends. So Travers' boots, the condiments from his meagre eats cupboard and occasionally Travers himself, were projected against yielding, translucent walls of rose-budded plastic behind which shadows that were human and shadows that were electronic bawled and strutted throughout the livelong day. And through all but a fragment of the livelong night.

But how precious that remaining fragment! Travers had long since counted the number and decided on the exact disposition of the Trivee sets within his immediate range of hearing. Basically, he was surrounded. Above and below, naturally; and on two sides. The third side of the room, the corridor partition, though by no means impervious, provided the nearest approach to a dead area. The fourth side was the party-wall of a toilet. There was no window. Rooms with windows were expensive; eighty dollars a week against the mere fifty Travers paid for his pad. Not that the absence of a view perturbed him unduly. He was, or had become, impervious to views. He had not, unfortunately, become impervious to Sound; an outside wall would have afforded him another slight zone of quiet, rendered less multidirectional the continuous assault on his senses.

Travers lived what amounted to his life in the three hours between the Wee Small Show (that came after the Late Show and the Late Late Show) and the dawn chorus of the inimitable Dicky Dobson. At one time, the gap in transmission had lasted four hours. Before that, four and a half. Travers had watched its remorseless closing with terror and

dismay, rather as a primitive man might observe, frowning, the inexorable swallowing of the sun during an eclipse. Once indeed the gap had been reduced to a mere two hours; but (possibly for the first time) God had come to Travers' aid. Not admittedly in His own person but through the offices of Walk-In-Light, that immensely powerful body with cells in every country of the globe. Travers heard the announcement perforce, one evening; in accordance with the illimitable possibilities of mathematics, three neighbouring Trivees had at last become tuned to the same channel and the results penetrated the latest version of the Travers Sanity Protector with tolerable ease. The declaration was made by the Chairman of Walk-in-Light in person; at megadollar expense, he reported proudly, the Corporation had negotiated one hour's Silence per day, for meditation and for prayer. Presumably there was an outcry; but Walk-In-Light were rich, very rich indeed, and the ban had held. Travers, in gratitude and curiosity, had even sent for their pamphlet, *Salvation;* it came in a manilla-tinted plastic envelope on which a naked man and woman, both tastefully sexless, held up arms to an engulfing orange sun. Travers was intrigued; not so much, admittedly, by the prospect of Immortal Friendship as by the soundproofed Chapels of the order, where meditation time could be purchased on a ticket-and-rota basis. But enrolment and subscription fees were high, out of the question for Travers with his mere $200 a week, and he had had reluctantly to shelve the dream.

His other dream—the important dream—remained.

He called her Deidre. Or rather by mutual consent they had decided her name was Deidre. She laughing and golden, flicking her golden hair. She was his one vice, hope and recreation.

He didn't know, or couldn't remember, how Deidre had come into being. Born of childish fancies perhaps, those

stories children tell themselves at night beneath the bedclothes; but Deidre was not a night-shape, a succubus. She was real and vivid, real as any woman, more real than some; she got the blues and headcolds and PMT and once she cut herself and bled, she'd have her quiet moods and reflective moods and there was one special kittenish mood where nothing he said was right and nothing he did was right and he'd get mad, knowing she didn't mean it but thinking she didn't realise how Time was slipping and fleeting. Then they'd fight or she'd just sit quiet and watch him, her face calm and frozen and in pain; and next day would be hell. Hell at the office, hell inside the projector where images of her swam bright and golden-brown and sea-blue, distracting spots before his eyes. Next day and next night, till the last Trivee flicked off and she'd come running to him, a litle girl, out of cool dusk or dawn, and say how long it had been, how it had been so long. Then she'd tell him about her day and what she'd done, the clothes she'd made—she was brilliant at making things, clothes, homes, happiness, anything—and ask him how it had been, how things had gone with him. And it would come pouring out, the frustration, the hopelessness, the endless grey and bright-vivid din in the endless grey and bright-vivid city, the human hive of Nothingness. Then she'd hold him in her arms, head pushed hard against her breasts, and croon and laugh and make him forget and he'd lose himself in the warmness of her and sleep to wake, and sleep again.

That Deidre was real was his own private and carefully-considered conclusion. Somewhere, somehow, a spatial, a temporal link had gone bust, he'd come half-way across into another reality, the only reality that held any meaning for him. A time link, almost certainly; for the things Deidre showed him, the places they roamed, couldn't exist. Not now, not any more.

Did she invent the places, to please him? He'd asked her

often enough. But she only laughed then, invariably, and teased him, and wouldn't say. He'd thought for a time she was keeping something from him, some lonely secret that once unlocked might plunge them both back to the limbo of night and day. But there was nothing; she told him that once, honestly and simply, hands round his hands, blue eyes searching his, flicking forward and back in those little shifts and changes of direction that were so much a part of her. When she spoke like that, with calmness and assurance, there was no doubting her. In that voice, and with that manner, she had told him there was indeed a God.

Being real brought its drawbacks. For who could tell in what of a hundred, a thousand ways, Travers might harm his girl? Something done or said, unknowing, in the day, some curious link forged that might . . . what? Destroy, poison somehow all that was lovely and real? With the knowledge, Travers experienced a huge reaction. For months afterwards, nothing was too good for Deidre. And Deidre was so deliciously, so easily capable of being spoiled. For this she took, accepted, with that same naïve—not naïve, that wasn't the word, nor childish nor simple either —that same delight, that revelling in things physical, that characterised all she did. "Look after me" she would say. "Wrap me up. Make me feel all warm and yummy." These things he did, rejoicing yet still afraid; that one day, one day . . .

"Tosh."

Deidre was sitting on a beach. Her favourite beach. The curve of sand, white where the sun had dried it, cream-brown where the retreating tide uncovered it, stretched to a high hill, a green headland crowned by a clump of wind-swept trees. Beyond the headland were others, pillars of rock that marched in stately progression, sunlight misty on their faces, to the bright haze of the horizon.

"Boo," said Deidre. Then once more taking his hands,

"Dear, *I love you*. Can't you see—oh I can't explain, I'm no good with words. But can't you see that's all that matters?"

He wouldn't answer, not then. He was wrapped in thought. Till she scooped up sand to flick at him, and ran away, plunged into the sea. And they came back, to the hut by the beach—it was the hut this time, not the cottage. She had a cottage too with white walls soaked in sunlight and hung with brass and copper pots and pans and a great hearth with inglenooks and deep, deep creamy-white sheepskins for rugs. They would pile the skins and make love on them, in the dancing leaping shifting light of the flames. Afterwards was when he could most look after her. Coffee simmered on the hearth; he would take a cup to her and lift her, still wrapped in the fleeces, hold her while she nuzzled and drank. And she would half wake up, or barely wake up at all, lie tousled and golden and supple, the flamelight on her face, eyes shut, making the warm-cat noises in her throat, smiling maliciously to tease him; then want to go back to bed, and do it again, and sleep, sleep wonderfully. And he would brush her hair, long silky hair she'd grown for him, and she would purr some more and call him childish names and coming from her the brown warm syllables didn't sound wrong. Then at last they would hurry and scramble, both afraid of Time, like kids caught at a cookie-jar more than responsible, responding Adults; and she would hold him again, briefly, and kiss him once more and——

How did she leave him?

He didn't know.

But the cream walls of the cubicle were alive with light, and beyond them the familiar hated voices hammered.

"Wakey-wakey, Rise and Glow; it's the Dicky Dobson Show . . ."

While Deidre faded, wraithlike and sad, into mists.

But the days; the long, pointless, Sound-filled days! The

hours stretched it seemed interminably until he could call her again. Sleep, for Travers, was impossible against the din; and tranquillisers were equally denied him. Once, drugged, he had tried to summon Deidre and she could not or would not come; she had been just a darkness in the dark, a silhouette that cried and cried as a bird might cry, paled and thinned to vanish into another dawn. Hence, he had never touched the stuff again. Hence, the games with the plugs.

Deidre disapproved of them when he told her, bit her lip and frowned. She would not tell him why; he sensed the hurt and worry, and felt lost, and a whole irreplaceable hour passed before they were themselves again. After that he said nothing more to her. He had never, as far as he could remember, kept a secret from her before.

Three days later he found out, in part, why she had been concerned. He developed an abscess.

It was very painful. To be more precise, it was as if a small blazing sun had become locked irrevocably and agonisingly on to his jaw. Sleep with it was out of the question; though he sensed the hands of Deidre, the soul and life-force of Deidre, striving to reach him through the blanket of pain. He shouted and cried, banged his head, fainted perhaps; in the morning, at first light or before—before, even, the Dicky Dobson Show—he was forced to seek his doctor.

Four agonising hours before his appointment. He videoed his studio manager, who laughed at his face then asked if it would help if he cried and when Travers, wordless, shook his head, laughed a good bit more. By then Travers had become grotesque, the pus bursting and squeezing into new pockets, causing fresh inflammation. Though with the increased swelling the pain was mercifully eased. The spiritual pain was worse now; the knowledge of wrongness and stupidity, of having somehow, through what

he had done, hurt Deidre. He needed urgently to see her, explain, hold her in his arms. But that was impossible. Instead, there was Doctor Rees.

The doctor was annoyed. With, Travers suspected, good reason. For the Foreign Bodies Doctor Rees accused him of inserting into his ears—some scraps and oddments were apparently retrieved—were the primary cause of suffering; and Travers' suffering was the primary cause of the doctor wasting his time. Travers was upset. He liked Doctor Rees; or more exactly he tried to like him, conscientiously and seriously. Yet it was difficult; for the doctor had a Trivee clamped to his desk and while he worked and diagnosed Kandinsky—for the fifth time that week, Travers had counted—fought again his classic fifteen rounds with Bleeding Billy Cheshire. Shafts of colour played across the desktop, and there was Sound. Travers was developing, he decided, a retentive memory. He had the frantic commentary by heart, nearly word for word; he found himself correspondingly more ready to twitch at every Covering Up, every barrage of Leftsandrightstothebody, every Scarlet Niagara.

But the doctor was talking.

He was a bland young man with a paunch. And unbelievably, quite extraordinarily, spotty. Secretly, Travers blamed that on the Trivee. It was another of his theories, equally unscientific; that continued Sound, aimed largely at the head, must in time be absorbed till the tissues, becoming as one might say waterlogged, rejected each new assault of breves and semibreves, each shockwave of octaves and dissonances. Doctor Rees' face sweated Sound, through the entire audio spectrum; forty hz to fifteen thousand, with traces of twentieth harmonic discernible only by oscilloscope. The Harmonic, or Unharmonic, Theory of Pustules . . .

Travers really must pay attention. He was being sent to a

Specialist, he understood, because this must stop. Yes, he nodded, yes; he understood and did agree. They had dressed his face for him; it felt clean and comfortable. He would do anything, anything at all; for his own good, he appreciated that. Or there would be real trouble; and Travers, unconsciously and a trifle mysteriously, would be in it.

He told Deidre, that night. She had half a hundred questions for him; about the doctor, and what he had said and done, and the Specialist Travers was to see. What sort of Specialist?

Travers blushed, feeling foolish. He had been too nervous to ask.

But he thought once more what he had thought many times before, what a splendid nurse Deidre would have made. He saw her in a cool ward, white and starched and tall, with a headdress like a great crisp linen butterfly. He woke for once refreshed; and the image sustained him through his hours at Maschler–Crombie.

In the evening though, there was trouble again.

He had wanted to call Deidre early. Really early, just for once. Because there was so much to say again, about his short, tumultuous day. He'd heard—just heard mind you, it was only in the wind—about a new position going at Maschler. An upstairs job. He'd asked his studio manager and Rawlinson hadn't refused, definitely hadn't refused. Hummed and hawed maybe and glared over his glasses tops and doubted this and doubted that, but he hadn't said no, not outright. There were fifty dollars a week in the change, the chance of an outside room. Travers felt nearly faint at the thought. An outside room, with all the privileges it entailed; a whole wall, one complete side of his existence, free from din! In his mind's eye he already saw the room, himself sitting at the window; a summer night maybe, with the millions on millions of winking jewel-lights that were the city shimmering and crawling, a living map spread out

far below . . . After that the reality of Pad 633 was hard to take. Particularly now that he had been forbidden his secret vice. He sat and brooded, in the brightness and yammering din, hands cupped to the sides of his head; lay down on his pallet, tossed, got up, made coffee, drank it, lay down again, sat. The hands of the wallclock crawled with impossible slowness, marking the seconds and minutes sullenly; as if even the clock wished to deprive him of that interlude of peace still so achingly far away.

Towards twenty hundred hours a curious mood took possession of him. For the first time, perhaps, in years, he found himself questioning why he, Travers, must be singled out for such bizarre misadventures. The affair of the plugs, for instance; thinking back, reconstructing his every action, he could find no flaw in logic, no point at which one might say "Here, Travers went off the rails". No, he had done what he had done out of need; a quirk perhaps, but basic necessity to him as an individual. Then he took to wondering if there had ever been a time—in the Cambrian for instance, or the lazy, lagoon-haunted Devonian—when there had been Quiet. If there was in fact any place now (apart from those priceless Chapels that had made the fortunes of Walk-In-Light) where Quietness might be said, even briefly, to prevail. Certainly not in what remained of the countryside. He had scraped and saved years enough to buy his one brief vacation away from the city, but it had been pointless. Everywhere, every few yards it seemed, in those carefully-preserved fields, on fragments of beach, in the hills that at one point defined the city's limits, they had set up comfort posts; the tourists, wandering aimless and a little scared, clustered round them plugging in earphones, handsets, recharging the accumulators of Mintrans, drawing a precious ambrosia of Sound into their very souls. There had been nothing for him there. None of those

empty beaches of his, or Deidre's dreams, no sighing of wind in grass, plash and chatter of waves and rock and sand . . .

He found himself, against his will and better judgment and much to his surprise, using his vidphone. The directory numbers flicked past green and vivid as he spun through the lists. He found what he was looking for, dialled Post Office, Central Tower, gulped twice and made his complaint as clearly and concisely as he could.

The gentleman who faced him from the small, fizzing screen was sympathetic. Yes, yes, excess of Sound, very regrettable; each citizen was of course strictly controlled, was given a decibel rating in exact accordance with his status; was Travers *sure* local db regulations were being abused?

Travers was sure.

Then, said his new friend and benefactor, action would be taken. Immediately. Central Engineers combed the city constantly in search of defaulters; a van was on call in the locality, was in fact already on the way. Not to worry, Mr. Travers; just sit tight, and wait for the light . . . With an impersonal, professional grin the complaints clerk erased himself.

I've done it now, thought Travers, with a mixture of terror and exultation. *Deidre, I've really done it now . . .*

But what if . . . suppose, hope against hope . . . suppose something was actually *done*? Travers imagined, or tried to imagine, Silence. Spreading like a balm, like the stately ripples on a pool, from his cubicle, through and across the building. He gave himself up to dreaming. He saw himself the patriarch, the archpriest, of a new faith. What if, from its tiny beginning, that faith was to continue to grow? Through the city, the country; leaping seas maybe, to span the world. The vision was giddying and immense. Silence; a new creed gathering hundreds, thousands, millions perhaps

of converts. How large a box, he wondered, would be needed to ensure total Quiet? Walls a yard thick, a hundred yards, half a mile? Money would be no object. He saw the treelined roads that would radiate from the shrine, the traffic on them crawling and muted. He saw the place with inner vividness, the white square sundrenched block of its walls. Inside, an eternity of Quiet. With Deidre . .

The caller telltale above the door winked insistently, an angry red eye.

How long had he been engrossed? Minutes only; but even Sound had temporarily faded from him. He drifted to the door, dreamlike still in his new and temporary exaltation.

There were two engineers. And a vast amount of apparatus, meters, bowl-shaped direction finders, trolleys replete with controls and dials, a microphone on a collapsible stand, its head flattened and jointed like a shining chromium snake. They plugged in this and tested that, logged the time, reported back to headquarters, checked Travers' name and Identicode; consulted sheafs of tables and notes, produced from somewhere a huge plan of the Elbee—they were it seemed wonderfully well equipped—and at last were ready to begin.

Travers prayed, silently.

The microphone head turned questing, while the dial needles swung and quivered. Lights flashed off and on; Travers felt sweat break out on his forehead and beneath his arms.

The microphone was snuffling at the ceiling now.

"Negative," said the Post Office man. "Two point eight (something or others) inside max."

They pointed the little machine at the floor.

"Negative there," said the operator, recalibrating. "Five off zero reading."

But the screaming and yelling, the music, the rhythms that mixed and madly overlapped, the brilliant, endless din;

this was *negative*? The microphone was deaf, or not adjusted. They were cheating him.

"Look, mister," said the Post Office man. "You got us on a kind of bum call here."

"Wait a minute . . ."

Fresh hope.

The mike head was pointing at a corner of the floor. Almost, to Travers, it seemed to be quivering. As if scenting a victim.

"We've got a nine five over there," said the operator. "OK, mister, you got a case."

Direction finders were put into operation. Dials consulted, the plan spread out on Travers' pallet.

"That's the guy," said the Post Office man, pointing. "Name of Lupcheck. That's an eighty dollar fine. OK, Mr. Travers, thanks for calling us. Can't have people getting all upset by racket. Not good for the system."

And with a final scurrying of leads and flexes, a vanishing of shining, incomprehensible objects into boxes, they were gone.

Travers wrung his hands.

Lupcheck . . . He knew Lupcheck, well enough. And Lupcheck knew Travers, their paths had crossed once before. Lupcheck drove a crane at the local supermart; a bulky, bright blue affair that raced continuously, with pneumatic hissings and snorts, along the complication of rails suspended above the acre and a half of displayed wares. Grapefruit, canned goods, toilet packs and MinTrans, artificial flowers, eggboxes and cheese, each and every conceivable commodity was seized by Lupcheck from its warehouse rack, flung to its allotted place as the dumps dwindled under the feverish, picking hands of the Consumers. Often Travers had admired his dexterity with the crane; till one day some complicated event took place that left a Consumer buffeted and hatless and spilled banana

clumps and tinned Sevilles and marmalade pots and cereals across the floor. The Consumer shouted something angrily at the roof, and was answered, and kept on shouting, till Lupcheck swung down—he had a little spidery unexpected ladder that extended from the side of the crane. Lupcheck was not tall; but he was very broad, and sported orange-grey hair that grew in erratic tufts across his wide skull and thick, reddish forearms. His fists were large, with knuckles that were seamed and cracked; one swipe from one fist and the Consumer's spectacles were terribly embedded in the side of his face, and blood was dripping and splashing in big round gobs on to the floor, and the Consumer was crying while Lupcheck climbed, still annoyed and grumbling, back to his machine. And Travers walked quickly to the exit, feeling ill and not wanting the things he had bought, wondering with a sort of sick amazement why he had never realised before the full destructive power of the ball of bone at the end of a human arm.

Travers was afraid of Lupcheck. Now he had cost him eighty dollars.

Some time after the decibel hunters had gone, one might or might not have detected a small reduction in the overall uproar from the Trivees. Travers passed a restless night, too miserable for sleep, unable to summon Deidre. As always, disbelief came with the cessation of the din. It was like trying to remember pain; it seemed inconceivable that the Elbee had not always been wrapped in a breathing quiet. Lights flicked off in the surrounding cubicles till Travers lay staring into velvet dark. In the dark, he cursed himself bitterly. What a little thing it seemed after all, this simple matter of Sound! For no reason at all, or hardly any reason, he had jeopardised the coming morning. And denied himself Deidre, and hurt her; he had no doubt of that. He composed himself for sleep with a species of desperation;

but dawn inched up, and Dicky Dobson burst into his daily cacophony, while Travers still lay red-eyed and restless. Now, horrors yawned; for if he avoided Lupcheck, this was in any case the Day of the Specialist.

Lupcheck caught him in the elevator.

Travers thumbed the controls in panic but the other was too fast for him. He rammed a shoulder at the door as it was wheezing shut; the mechanism whistled peevishly, slid open and closed again with Lupcheck inside. The elevator started its smooth descent.

Lupcheck twisted his fingers in the front of Travers' clothing, lifted him to his toes and pushed him against the side of the car. Travers wheezed, staring into bulging pale-blue eyes. As had happened before, he felt curiously detached; a part of his brain realised that Lupcheck was genuinely angry and puzzled over it while his eyes recorded the coarse texture of the other's skin, the networks of tiny branching veins, the individual tousled hairs of the thick brows, some reddish, some white, some grey. A tiny muscle twitched at the corner of Lupcheck's mouth and Travers wondered for an instant of time whether the crane operator might not be as unhappy as he. Then the rage came, swimming and cold. It dictated that Travers should drive his knee into Lupcheck's groin, bring down a disabling fist on the junction between nose and eyes. What he had seen in the supermart held him back. Lupcheck was invincible; there would be other blows, like the blows of a great salty hammer, too terrible to be borne; and things breaking inside Travers' mouth, he could see the blood already and feel the pain. So he hung limp while Lupcheck banged him at the side of the elevator again, and growled and promised and swore.

Whatever happened now Deidre would be angry. Angry at his cowardice, angry if he fought and was uselessly hurt. So Travers had to hear the things Lupcheck said, and make

the undertakings Lupcheck required, and scuttle away, when Lupcheck finally released him, grateful and reprieved. The rage still seethed and boiled; it wouldn't leave him now, he knew, till Deidre had suffered for it. As ever, against his will. But suffer she must; if for no other reason, for the folly and incompetence of God.

The rage buoyed Travers on his way to Hospital Block. He had been there once before, years ago, and dimly remembered the way. He shoved along crowded underpasses echoing with the high-pitched clatter of Travellators, the heavier thunder of streetcars. Trivees, set here and there in walls and roofs, competed with the din. Interspersed with them were talking posters and advertisements, round the borders of which blue and pink and scarlet, white and yellow flame-shapes and tartan-patterns raced. Hospital Block was well signposted. It seemed to extend electronic nerve-fibres into the underpasses; soon Travers found himself confronted by the conflicting possibilities of Path, Ear, Nose and Throat, Ophthalmic, Geriatric, Cancer and half a dozen more ominously-labelled departments. The light-trails —follow the Red and Blue—also flashed, confusingly. He went wrong twice, backtracked, found his way eventually to a Travellator that wound smoothly up a steepening incline, deposited him in the reception area of the place.

This too he remembered. The endless concrete walls, the hard white glare of lighting from many troughs; and the din. Loudhailers, aimed in all directions, rasped strings of Identicode numbers, referring Outpatients to any of a score of gates and elevators. In line after line of frontless, unpainted cubicles, cases deemed unworthy of admission to the maze above were treated by frantically-rushing white-coated staff; beyond was Casualty Section, hectic with the influx of an entire city. Ambulances, delivered at intervals of seconds from a range of entry lifts, disgorged stretchers

and walking injured; more staff, nurses and orderlies, swarmed round them. There was a constant clanging of alarm bells, a clash and rattle of trolleys. In one place Travers saw the wreckage of a vehicle, transported in the maw of a huge recovery truck, decanted with scant ceremony on to a sloping slipway. Men scuttled forward, one lugging the cylinders of an antique oxy-acetylene cutter. The victims would presumably be extracted on the spot, like fresh bright herrings from a can. Travers shuddered and turned away, presented his Identitag to the impersonal scrutiny of an Appointments Monitor. The machine blinked, ticked rapidly and rewarded him with a punched and coded card. He hurried on, jostled now, deciphering his instructions as he went.

Within the Block proper the din was if anything worse. There were wards, full of noise, bright-glimpsed as he hurried past; corridors echoing with the mechanical clatter of trolleys and utensils. He was harried and buffeted, directed from point to point. At length, high in the building, the wall codings began to make sense. He found his corridor, counted off doors, presented the card to a scanner and was mechanically admitted to a featureless, carpeted anteroom.

At least it was quieter here. A solitary Trivee played, its Sound muted. A receptionist—human at last—took over the direction of Travers' affairs. He was told to sit and wait, given a plastic-leaved magazine to thumb. He read, automatically, words that made no sense. And prayed for Deidre. At other times, other great crises in his life, the technique had worked. He closed his eyes, concentrated. Forced back the light that filtered through the lids, forced back the Sound.

"Mr. Travers . . ."

Travers looked up with a start at the testy repetition.

Again, he was off on the wrong foot. Now he had annoyed the Specialist.

He was ushered to an inner office. Here, at last, was Quiet. A Quiet so intense the whick-whick, the slow whirr and rustle of the ceiling-mounted fan sounded loud. The Specialist consulted a plastic-covered folder of notes, frowned, clucked and shook his head. Then he steepled his fingers, regarding Travers morosely over their tips as he talked.

The great man made his points carefully, occasionally tapping the desk top for greater emphasis. First, Travers must realise the considerable problem he and others like him posed to a modern society; a society, the Specialist stressed, organised on sound historical principles for the greatest good of the greatest number of its members. He repeated, in effect, the admonitions of Doctor Rees; while Travers nodded dumbly, wishing to be no inconvenience. Only wanting, were the truth to be known, to escape once more into his desert of Sound.

But that, it seemed, was not to be. For the Specialist was still talking, questioning and probing now, insistently. The direction of the questioning was strange. Things from Travers' childhood, remote events to be dredged up and re-examined and puzzled over. Travers answered the questions, reticent at first then more eager, till at last the whole grief came blubbering and boiling from him, the Need, the great Need of his soul, for Quiet. The notion of the Shrine.

Travers stopped, appalled. But the Specialist was beaming now, urging him to continue. The Specialist himself understood Travers' problem; he really understood. As for a solution; why, within this modern society, in this best of all possible worlds, anything could be achieved. And the Need was after all very simple to fulfil. The answer? No mile-thick pill-boxes, no apparatus, no romantic, unattainable dreams . . .

Travers blinked as the full beauty of the solution dawned on him. So simple, so sublimely simple, simple as Relativity, simple as all truly great and original ideas . . . It would mean of course the sacrifice of his new position, the end of the day-old dream of an outside room; but his mind glowed already with the other, greater possibilities. Happiness, total and complete; for him, and for Deidre. He saw himself already, breaking the wonderful news; of Time, Time unlimited, Time for them to be together. The world faded; he saw nothing but the bright and perfect future. He nodded, feverish, voiceless in his impatience, eager only to sign the forms the Specialist proffered him, and begin.

He was conducted to yet another room. Aseptic this time, white and gleaming. The nurse who readied him was brown-skinned and supple. Like Deidre, almost; with silky hair, a wave of it he was sure, hidden by her neat white cap. But she shoved and pushed at him indifferently, as if he were a carcass, a simple hunk of meat unworthy of human consideration. Her eyes, when they once met his, seemed full of a bored contempt; then he saw the Mintran speaker in her ear, the spidery flex running into the collar of her uniform, and was able to return the stare from the height of a loftier indifference.

The local took effect immediately, an icy numbness spreading from jaw to neck and temples. He was led to a chair that moulded itself to him as he sat, reclined and tilted at the touch of innumerable shining levers. A lamp was switched on, planet-bright and close; he felt the momentary pulse of heat from it on cheeks and nose before a cloth was laid neatly over his eyes. His head was turned; fingers probed his dead cheeks, dimpling.

The instruments made little sounds. Ringings, and clinks. Then closer squeaks and gratings, once a crunch; then nothing. Nothing at all.

The cloth was withdrawn; and Travers stared round dazed. The nightmare was ended; cleanly and neatly, in a mere instant of time. No more Dicky Dobson now, no more Rise and Glow; no more Travellators, no more Mintrans, no more traffic, no more people; nothing. So perfect was the technique, they had assured him, that his balance would be unimpaired; just a simple matter of excision, removal of tiny bones that worked in sequences of other tiny bones, alignments functioning with jewel-precision to transmit hell from the four quarters of the globe to the inside of his skull . . .

The faces were mouthing at him now. Nurse, anaesthetist, surgeon; praise or curses, congratulations or contempt. He smiled back, euphorically. He neither knew nor cared.

And there was the silent city, outside. The silent tubecars and the silent Travellators, the silent people and the silent vehicles. A million silent windows, eyes of cubicles that housed a million silent Trivees. Somewhere Lupcheck drove his silent crane, mimed his silent rage; poor stupid defeated Lupcheck, who now didn't matter at all.

Work was out of the question for today. Travers threaded his way home carefully, watchful for the dizziness they had warned him might possibly occur for a time. He elevated to his room, slid the silent doorpanel closed. Beyond the walls, as ever, electronic patterns danced. He smiled at them too, a smile of benediction.

He undressed slowly, now with all the Time in the world. The worry of the night, the strain of the day, had exhausted him. He curled up on the pallet, pulled the covers round himself and fell almost instantly asleep.

The beach flicked on. And there was Deidre running, running as she had never run before. He ran too, feeling his feet stumble in the sunwarmed sand, arms outstretched. He tried to hug her, but she pushed him away. He saw then,

bewildered, the sheen of tears on chin and throat; and her eyes, the terrible accusation there. She fell to her knees, holding her throat and rocking with misery, asking again and again the same silent question, *why, why,* till understanding came at last.

Deidre was dumb.

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