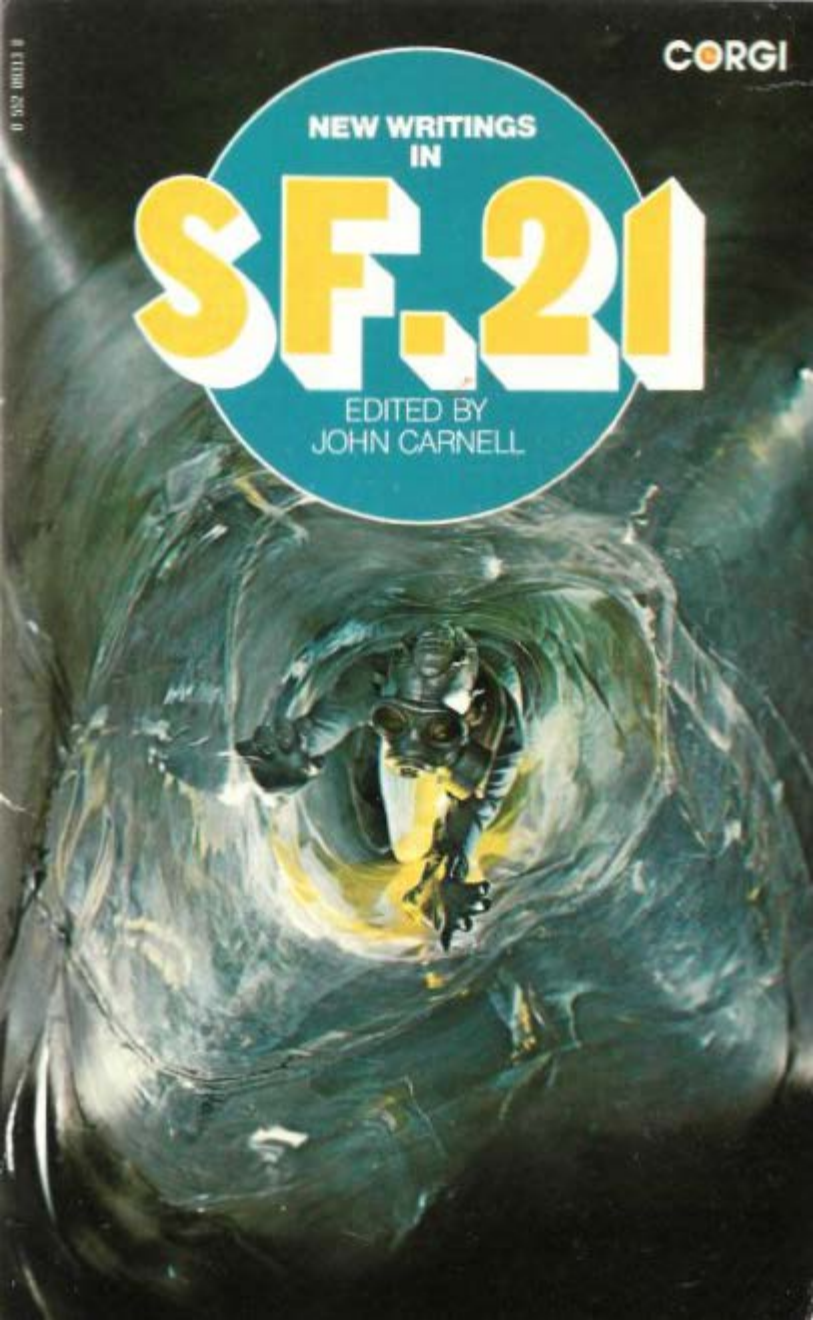
CORGI

NEW WRITINGS IN

SF.21

EDITED BY JOHN CARNELL



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E. J. CARNELL

THIS, THE 21st volume of NEW WRITINGS IN SF, is the last of the series to be edited by John Carnell. His death, on 23rd March, 1972, has left the world of science fiction with a void it will be impossible to fill ... editor ... literary agent publisher's reader and adviser ... founder member of nearly every club or society connected with SF ... patron and counsellor to young writers ... and friend to everyone.

I worked closely with Ted—the name he was generally known by—for eight years and during that time I came to recognise and admire his professionalism, his gentle manners, his business ability, his keen intuition, and his unfailing good humour in spite of pain and ill-health. Years of cooperating on NEW WRITINGS IN SF taught me that I could rely implicitly on him. Every issue was delivered to me in good time, beautifully laid out, and (a sign of his years in the printing trade) with marked instructions to the printer on type faces, spacings, and special characters required.

There was only one thing I could not rely on from Ted, and in time it came to be a joke between us. He was always late with his Foreword. I think, possibly, he was so pleased that the new issue had been successfully gathered together that he felt his Foreword was the least important part of the book. At the eleventh hour, after a great deal of good-natured backchat on both sides, the Foreword would arrive on my desk (except for one time-panicked occasion when it had to be sent straight to the printer!). This volume, NEW WRITINGS IN SF 21, was no exception. Ten days before his death Ted phoned me to say the Foreword was going to be 'his very next job' and I could expect it shortly. He died before he could write it and that is why, although there are many famous figures in SF who would be honoured to write his Foreword for him, I am stealing this space and making it my own particular tribute to a well-loved colleague and friend.

Brian Aldiss has given me permission to make use of the

material he gathered while writing Ted's obituary for THE TIMES and so, although the facts are already known to many, I list just a few of the contributions he made to SF.

He was treasurer of the newly-formed Science Fiction Association and attended the very first convention in 1937. For a time he edited the British Interplanetary Society's journals and then, after the war, he published the magazine which was to become so especially his own—NEW WORLDS. Later he added SCIENCE FANTASY and SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES. He was a founder member of the Science Fiction Book Club, and one of the four founders of the International Fantasy Award. He was the first British literary agent to specialise in SF and in his 'Stable' of authors at various times were many illustrious names, John Christopher, Damon Knight, Frederik Pohl, Michael Moorcock, J. G. Ballard, Samuel Delaney, Harry Harrison, Brian Aldiss.

He was all these things, but I shall remember him for the help, advice, and encouragement he gave to a young Corgi editor eight years ago. I shall remember him seeing me through my first convention (a bizarre and bewildering experience as anyone who has ever been to an SF Convention will testify). I shall remember him for being the very first gentleman I had to entertain at a business lunch, and for the tactful way he helped over the embarrassing moment of paying the bill. I do not have to remember his worth as an editor and agent. My office and bookshelves are packed with solid evidence of his work.

NEW WRITINGS IN SF will continue. He saw it carefully through twenty-one issues and one of the many legacies Ted has left to SF is a well-established series which offers publishing outlets to writers who are just beginning, and also to experienced professionals.

He has been called Britain's great pioneer of science fiction. To that I can only add that he was a much loved pioneer—a gentle man and a friend. We shall miss him.

DIANE LLOYD
Science Fiction Editor
Corgi Books

THE PASSING OF THE DRAGONS

by

KEITH ROBERTS

Here is a new and delightful Keith Roberts' story, about aliens on an alien planet and human observers trying to rationalise behaviour patterns. Just how formidable a task it turns out to be is the crux of the story.

THE PASSING OF THE DRAGONS

THERE'S no real reason for an Epsilon Dragon to die. Nonetheless, they do.

By 'real reasons' I don't of course include atmosphere, soil and plant pollution, direct and indirect blast effects and ultrasonic fracture of the inner ear. Most of the things that will do for a human being will do for a Dragon. They are, or were, more than humanly affected by high frequencies; the tympani were numerous and large, situated in a row down each side of the body an inch or so above the lateral line. Which you can see for yourself if you can get off your butt long enough to get down to the museum of the Institute of Alien Biology.

The other things that can kill a Dragon are more interesting, as I explained to Pilot (First Class) Scott-Braithwaite a few weeks after our arrival on (or coincidence with) Epsilon Cygnus VI. The specimen under consideration flowed and clattered into the clearing by the lab about thirteen hundred hours, Planetary Time. I was checking the daily meter readings, I didn't pay too much attention till I saw the three sets of whips a Dragon carries on its back flatten out and immobilise. It made the thing look like a little green and gold helicopter squatting there on the grass.

I picked up the stethoscope and the Röntgen viewer and walked outside. A Dragon has eight hearts, situated in two rows of four between the eighth and twelfth body segments. I attached the stethoscope sensors, studied the display. As I'd expected, the first cardiac pair had become inoperative. Pairs two and four seemed to be showing reduced activity; pair three, presumably, were sustaining residual body functions. Since breathing is by spiracles and

tracheae, body function isn't all that easy to confirm. I used the viewer and stood up, leaned my hands on the knobbly back-armour. 'Well,' I said, 'our friend here is headed for the Happy Chewing Grounds. Or wherever they go.'

The Pilot (First Class) frowned. He said, 'How can you tell?'

I shrugged and walked round the Dragon. There was a slight injury, in the soft membrane between two body segments; a little fluid had wept across the armour, but it didn't seem critical. If Dragons were arthropods, as their appearance suggests, collapse from a minor abrasion would be understandable; but the body is no fluid-sac, they have a blood-vascular system as well defined as that of a mammal. On the other hand the possibility of infection couldn't be ruled out. I fetched a hypodermic from the lab, drew off a fluid sample. Later I'd take tissue cuttings. They'd be clean, of course. They always are.

I'd brought the surgical kit out with me. I rigged a pair of pacemakers, set the collars on the probes to the standard twenty five centimetre penetration. I measured a handspan from the median lines, pushed the needles down through the joint membrane, used the stethoscope again. The trace bounced around a bit, and steadied.

He leaned over me. I suppose one might say 'keen face intent'. He said, 'Working?'

I shrugged. I said, 'Any fool can make a heart pump. It isn't much of a trick.'

He said, 'Then it'll be OK.'

I shook my head. I said, 'It'll die.'

He said, 'When?'

I lifted one of the whips, let it droop back. I said, 'In thirty hours, twenty-eight minutes Terrestrial.'

He raised his eyebrows.

I said kindly, 'Planetary revolution.'

I walked back to the lab. I'd decided to run a cardiograph. Not that it would tell us any more than the thousand or two already in file at IAB. But it's one of the things one does. It's called Making an Effort. Or Showing the Flag.

He was still standing where I'd left him. He said, 'I can't understand these damn things.'

Most of his conversation was like that. Incisive. Really kept you on your toes.

I started attaching the sensors of the cardiogram. You should listen to a Dragon's hearts sometime. It's like the pulse of a star. Or maybe you're a fan of the Hottentots. They based their style on IAB recordings, so I'm told; so the Dragons, you see, have been of service to mankind.

He said, 'Why planetary revolution?'

I smiled at him. 'Do you know, Pilot, First Class,' I said, 'I have no idea.'

He frowned. He said, 'I thought you scientists had all the answers.'

His repartee certainly was a joy to the ear.

I said, 'I'm not a scientist. Just a Behaviourist.' I smiled again. 'Technician,' I said. 'Second Class.'

He didn't answer that one. They don't encourage morbid self-analysis at Space School.

I walked back through the specimen lock. I'd had it rigged some time now. I'd been asked to take a living Dragon back to Earth. Not that it would survive phaseout. They never do. But that's what science is all about for most of us; a lot of little people doing what's been done before, and not succeeding either.

He followed me. He had that trick. He said, 'Can I help?'

I said, 'No, thanks.' I was thinking how difficult it must be for him, lumbered with a type like me. My teeth are less than pearly, my body is less than sylphlike; I don't play pelota, I drink my ale by the pint, and what I say sometimes has some relation to what I think. It must have been hell.

He lit a cigarette. At least he had one insanitary habit. Maybe there were more. You can never tell, by appearances.

I switched the recorder on. The traces started zipping along the display. I turned the replay volume up. The sound thudded at us. He winced. He said, 'Do we have to have that?'

I said, 'It soothes me.' I gave the volume another notch. I said, 'You must have heard the Hottentots.'

He said, 'That's different.'

Man, was his conversation up tight. This was being a great tour.

I listened to the heartbeats. The rhythms phased in and out of each other like drums; or bells underground, ringing a Change that was endless.

He said, 'And that thing's going to die?'

I didn't answer. I was thinking about the Dragon. Difficult to dissociate the notion of purpose from things that take exactly a day to die. Neither a second more nor less. But it's difficult to dissociate the notion of purpose from anything a Dragon does. Or did. For instance, they built cities. Or we thought they were cities. We were never too sure, one way or the other.

I ejected the sample into a centrifuge, locked the case and switched on. He watched me for a bit. Then he yawned. He said, 'I'm going to have a kip till contact time. Call me if you need me.'

I kept my back turned till the door had shut. With the din I'd set up he was going to be lucky. But some people can sleep through anything. Probably to do with leading a healthy life.

He started on the subject again at supper time. He'd got a radio running; music was playing, from the room next door. The room we call Earth. My Dragon's jazz was still thumping in the lab. I changed channels, got the Hottentots. It made an interesting counterpoint. He changed back. He said, 'How many of those things do you reckon there are out there?'

'What things? Pop groups?'

He said, 'Dragons.'

I let a can of soup preheat, picked it up, burned my fingers and opened it. I said, 'A hundred, hundred and fifty. That was at the last count. Probably halved by now.'

He frowned. He said, 'What's killing them?'

I did rather take that as a silly question. Epsilon Cygnus VI just happens to have a mineral-rich crust containing about everything Homo Sapiens has ever found a use for, from gold to lithium. My species had blown in ten years back; now the rest of the planet was an automated slagtip.

I started ticking points on my fingers. I said, 'Ecological imbalance triggered by water-borne effluent. Toxic concentration of broad-spectrum herbicides——'

He waved a hand, irritably. He said, 'They've got a whole damn subcontinent to live in. There's no mining here.'

I said, 'So they die from minor abrasions. Maybe they're making a gesture.'

He looked at me narrowly. He said, 'You've got some damn queer ideas.'

I said, 'I'm an observer. I'm not paid to have ideas.'

'But you said——'

'I pointed out psychological factors may exist. Or there again, they may not. Either way, we shall never know. Hence my engrossment.'

He frowned again. He said, 'I don't follow you.'

'There's not much to follow. I'm fascinated by failure. It runs in the family.'

He shook his head. I think he was grappling with a concept. He said, 'You mean——'

'I didn't mean anything. I was just making light conversation. As per handbook.'

He flushed. He said, 'You don't have to be so bloody rude about it.'

I slung the can at the disposal unit. For once, I hit it. I said, 'I'm sorry, Space Pilot.' I smiled. I said, 'Us civvies, you know. Nerves wear a bit thin. Don't have your cast-iron constitutions.'

I don't have the stoicism of the upper bourgeoisie either. If I cut my finger, I usually whimper.

He flashed me a white grin. That's the most offensive sentence I can think of, so I'll leave it in. It describes what he did so well. He said, 'Forget it, Researcher. I'm a bit on edge myself.'

Oh, those lines! I was starting to wonder whether he had an inexhaustible stockpile of them. There must be an end somewhere, even to aphorisms.

I walked to the blinds, lifted the slats. Night on Epsilon VI is greenish, like the days. Like a thick pea soup, with turquoise overtones. The heartbeat thudded, in the next room.

I picked up a handlamp. I said, 'I'm going out to check the patient.' The comic opera habit was evidently catching.

He said, 'I'll come with you.'

I think his nerves were getting bad. He had an automatic strapped to his hip; on the way through the lab he collected a rocket pistol as well. There are no dangerous fauna on Epsilon VI; in fact at the time of writing I'm predisposed to believe there are no fauna at all. There used to be some pretty big lepidoptera though. I said, 'You should have brought a scattergun. They're difficult to hit with ball.'

He said, 'What?'

I said, 'The moths.'

He didn't deign to answer.

The Dragon squatted where we had left it. I turned the lamp on. The halogen-quartz cut a white cone through the murk. Furry flying things blundered across the light. I swung the beam round. The jungle was empty.

He was standing with his hands on his hips, the holster flap tucked back. He said, 'What are you looking for?'

I said, 'The mourners should be arriving pretty soon.'

'The *what*?'

I said, 'Mourners. But again, I'm theorising without data.'

'What do they do?'

I said, 'Nothing. Stand around. Generally they eat the corpse.'

He made a disgusted noise.

I said, '*Autre temps, autre mondes*...' I switched the light off. I said, 'I like these field jobs you know. They broaden one.'

He walked back ahead of me to the lab. I closed the door and bolted it, for his peace of mind.

I don't sleep too well these days. Like the poet says, old bones are hard to please. I lay and read awhile. Afterwards I drank whisky. The site storeroom had a cellar like nobody's business. It should have had; IAB observer teams had been stocking it surreptitiously for a decade. I poured myself another good slug. No point leaving the stuff to rot; there wouldn't be any more folk coming this way. They'd cleaned up all the easy deposits on Epsilon VI; the archipelago on which we'd landed, a big curve of islands stretching into the southern ocean, was about the only land surface left unraped. It was also the last stronghold of the Dragons.

I put the glass down, sat staring at the dural wall. IAB had had assurances of course, from Trade Control; but once assurances start arriving three times a year you know the end isn't far off. The principle of the thing's simple, as simple as all truly great ideas; while a single rumpled little Earthman with spiky yellow shoes can make a single rumpled little spiky yellow dollar, the killing goes on. Any killing. Next season they'd open-caste the islands; the Dragons had had their chance.

The Pilot (First Class) kept his light on well into the night. Maybe he was reading. I wondered vaguely whether he masturbated. I wasn't too concerned, one way or the other; but a Behaviourist gets into the way of collecting odd facts.

I'd turned the playback volume down but left it running. The Dragon's hearts thumped steadily through the thin metal wall. Towards the middle of the night the rhythm altered. I got up, pulled a jacket on and went outside.

There's no moon on Epsilon; but there is a massive aurora belt. The green sky flashed and flickered; it was like the brewing of a perpetual storm. The Dragon's whips vibrated faintly; the golden eye-clusters watched without interest. I used the stethoscope. The second and fourth heart pairs were dead. I applied a second and third set of pacemakers. Pair two picked up; pair four wouldn't kick over. I decided a stimulant couldn't do any harm. I went back to the lab,

checked the chart, filled a syringe. I shot enough strychnine into the heart walls to kill a terrestrial horse. I saw the trace pick up and steady. Interesting. I thought vaguely I should have taken encephalographs as well.

The idea of stimulants was a good one. I went back, drank some more whisky. Then I dozed.

The mourners began to arrive at first light.

I heard the rustling and clattering and got up. I pulled on slacks and a shirt, stared through the lab port. The dawn was as green as the rest of the day; smoky emerald, fading to clear high lemon where Epsilon Cygnus struggled with the mist. A Dragon passed a yard or so away, jerking and lumbering like a thing at the bottom of an ocean. It was a big one, I judged a potential male. Dragons are parthenogenetic most of the time; over the years they sometimes develop sexual characteristics and mate conventionally. The analysis people had an idea it was to do with sunspot activity; but if there's a correlation we didn't give the computers enough hard facts to pinpoint it. The whole thing just made phylum classification a bit more entertaining.

The newcomer stopped a yard or more from the immobilised Dragon, and waved its whips. They were ten or twelve feet long, banded in green, orange and black. Ball and socket joints several inches across joined them to the body armour; round the base of each were tufts or stiff, iridescent hair.

The yellow eyes watched; the whips moved and stroked, touching the body of the dying creature from end to end. The head of the Dragon rotated, the jawparts clicked; then the thing reared its forepart into the air, lapsed into immobility. I'd seen the stance before. So had a lot of folk.

I opened the lab door, stepped outside. The morning air was cool and sweet. I walked up to the new arrival. The eye-clusters stared, like blank jewels. I wondered if it was seeing me.

I heard footsteps behind me. The Pilot (First Class) looked concerned. He said, 'Jupiter, is this the first?'

I nodded. I said, 'Good one, isn't he?'

He rubbed his face. He was wearing a white shirt, open to the waist. On his chest hung a heavy silver cross. Very fashionable.

There was a crackling, in the jungle. Number two advanced slowly, through the moving coils of mist. It looked like a brilliant little armoured vehicle. The flowing of the clasper legs was invisible; you could have imagined readily enough that it was running on tracks.

It moved to the bunch of cables I'd stretched from the patient, and checked. The whips shook, stooped; rose again vertically above its back. It didn't seem to object to the cables overmuch; neither did it cross them. It turned, followed their line to the dying Dragon. The same ritual was observed. The whips rustled; then the creature arched itself, lapsed like its fellow into stillness.

The Pilot (First Class) had his hand on the butt of the automatic. I shook my head. Dragons are harmless. Their mouthparts could take your arm off; but if you put your fingers between the mandibles they just stop working. I'd told him often enough but it seemed he wasn't convinced.

He trailed after me back to the lab. He said, 'How many of these things do you expect to arrive?'

I said, 'Ten. Or a dozen.'

'What'll they do?'

I said, 'Like I told you. Stand around.'

He said, 'They're waiting for it to die.'

I set water on to boil. I said, 'Could be.'

He frowned. He said, 'They're obviously waiting.'

I laid out plates and cups. I said, 'It's by no means obvious. "Wait" as a concept depends on human-based time awareness. They may lack that awareness. In which case, they are not waiting.'

He said, 'It's a bit of a quibble though.'

I shook my head. 'Certainly not,' I said. 'Consider a proposition. "The rocks of the valley waited." That's more than a quibble. It's a howling pathetic fallacy.'

He glared at me. He said, 'If they're living, they have time awareness.'

I shrugged. I said, 'Try telling a tree.'

'I didn't mean that.'

'Then trees aren't living. Interesting.'

He said, 'You are the most argumentative bastard I ever met.'

I said, 'Hard words, Captain. In any case it's not true. For argumentative read definitive.'

He swallowed his temper, like a good skipper. My word, these boys have self-control. They're pretty fine male specimens of course, all the way round.

By midmorning nine of the creatures had arrived. I set up the encephalogram, fixed the probes. A Dragon has a massive brain, situated behind and below the eyes. Capacity betters the human cranium by an average of twenty-five per cent. Nearly the same was once true of terrestrial dolphins. But they never learned to talk.

I watched the pens record. Something like an alpha rhythm was emerging. By thirteen hundred Planetary Time the wave forms were altering, developing greater valleys and peaks. The crisis was approaching; but it was nothing new. I lit a pipe, walked outside. The heartbeats thundered, from the open lab door. At thirteen-forty the first pair shut down. The pairs two and three. I counted the beats on pair four. Then the glade was silent. I said, 'That's it then.' I logged the time; Earth Standard and Planetary, hours and minutes from sunup. I pulled the probes out, disconnected them, started coiling the cables.

He stood staring. He said, 'Aren't you going to do anything?'

I said, 'Like what?'

He said, 'Try it with a shot. Something like that.'

I said, 'You can if you like. Speaking from my human-based awareness, I'd say it was a waste of time.'

Dead, the thing looked just as it had when living; but the gold was fading slowly from the eyes.

He sat on the metal step of the lab and lit a cigarette. He looked shaken up.

The jade-green ring of Dragons made no move. They

stood poised through the afternoon, like so many cumbersome statues. Occasionally one or other of the pairs of whips would rise, tremble, sink again; but that was all. I cut tissue specimens for autopsy, stripped the pacemakers, autoclaved the probes. Then I scrubbed up and went through to the living quarters. He was sitting reading a glossy somebody had left about. It had a full frontal stereograph on the cover. She looked pretty good. I walked back to the lab, ran the tapes and started up. The heartbeat of the dead Dragon filled the air.

I heard him fling the book down. He stood in the doorway, staring. He said, 'Do we have to have that again?'

I said, 'We do. There might be a clue.'

'A *what?*'

I said, 'Think of it as a sort of Cosmic Code. It may help.'

We ate. The Dragons stayed in their circle. Afterwards he walked out. He didn't say where he was going, which is against the rules if you're going strictly by the book. There was a little vertol flier in one of the hangar sheds. I heard it start up, drone away towards the west.

I turned the replay volume up. The heartbeats thudded in the clearing. I got a heavy speaker housing from the lab, set it out on the grass, blasted the noise at the Dragons. It had been tried before of course. They hadn't reacted then. They didn't react now. I dismantled the rig, put the gear away and shut down. The glade was very still, the veiled sun dropping towards the west.

I got my jacket, and a pair of prismatics. I walked due south, away from the lab. About a mile off, a rocky bluff thrust up through a mustard-green tide of trees. The front of the cliff, golden now in the slanting light, was riddled with holes. I used the glasses. A dozen were occupied; I could see the yellow masks staring down. The rest were empty and blank.

At the foot of the cliff was a roughly circular clearing. In it stood a dozen or more massive structures. The quartz chunks of which they were mainly composed flashed and

glittered, throwing back the brilliant light. They formed columns, arcades, porticoes. At intervals openwork platforms pierced the towers; it made them look a little like gigantic rose trellises. Sprays of viridian creeper twined from level to level, enhancing the illusion. It was presumed the Dragons built them; though the proposition had never been proved. IAB had been interested in them for years, off and on. A docket went round whenever somebody had a bright idea. I'd seen nests, temples and freeform sculpture all put up as propositions. You paid your money and you took your choice.

The city was the main reason for the siting of the lab. We'd put it a mile away initially in case the Dragons reacted to our presence. The hope had been wild and wilful; nobody had yet seen them react to anything.

I walked back to the lab. There was no sign of the Pilot (First Class). I set the coffee on again, picked up the girlie book, skimmed the pages. I was pleased to see they were letting a few white strippers back in on the act. Emancipation, like everything else, can go too far.

Towards nightfall I checked the port. The ring of Dragons had closed in; one of them was stretching its neck segments, nuzzling forward and back along the corpse like a cat skimming cream from a saucer. After a time the mouthparts settled to a steady motion. I logged the event.

The flier landed. A wait; and I heard the Pilot's footsteps in the clearing. He barged in through the lab door. He said, 'They're eating it. It's bloody horrible.'

I put the mag down. I said, 'The fact has been noted.'

He said, 'It's bloody horrible. And you reckoned those things were intelligent.'

'I can't remember reckoning anything. In any case it doesn't preclude the possibility.'

'You must be joking!'

I said, 'Perhaps it's a religious observance. Which would make it highly sophisticated.'

'A *what*?'

I remembered the cross round his neck. He was a neo-Catholic of course. He had to be. I said, 'It has all the distinguishing characteristics.'

He sat down heavily and lit a cigarette. He said, 'You're mad.'

'I wish I was. I'd get more fun out of life. Remember the Dream of the Rood?'

'No.'

I clucked at him. 'Dear me. And part of your course was the Humanities.'

He glowered. I smiled at him. I said. 'Teatime, skipper. Your turn to undo the cans.'

He said, 'As a matter of fact, I'm not hungry.'

I said, 'Pity. I am. Force of habit of course. But powerful. Rule One of the Behaviourist.' I got up, started banging pots and pans round in the galley. I said, 'Blood sacrifice. Eat, for this is my flesh. Also see Tennessee Williams. Mid twentieth century. American.'

He stood. He said, 'I'm going to get cleaned up.'

I said, 'They probably have. It's a very old sofa.'

'*What?*'

'Nothing. Daddy has some timeslip trouble. Bear with an old man.'

He walked out. He'd started slamming doors.

I kicked the girlie stereo under the side table. Not so much from frustration as pique. One dislikes being constantly offered what isn't for sale.

He started singing in the shower. He always sang in the shower. His voice was very good. Light tenor. I expected he used a good aftershave too. I wondered just what the hell a Dragon would make of him anyway. Pink for skin, brown for hair, white for teeth. You could analyse the picture till it fragmented. Then you had a monster of your own.

The bath put him into a better humour. He emerged from his labours at seventeen hundred, Planetary. He was wearing a white uniform jacket, with the braids and brassard of his Order. He capered up to me, spun me round, slapped me on the back. Then he sat in a chair, legs asprawl, grinned

and lit a cigarette. He said, 'Judy's coming through. On the Link.'

I said, 'I bet she's your *fiancée*.'

He looked hurt. He said, 'You know she is. You met her before lift off. She's a model.'

I said, 'Ah, yes.' It was the Little Girl Look this year, Earthside. Which meant candid blue eyes, golden curls, tits like stoplights. I said, 'Thoughtless of me. I remember her well. A charming person, I thought.'

He looked at the chronometer on the lab bulkhead. He said, 'We're getting married. Straight after this tour.'

I said, 'I expect you are.'

He gave me a dirty look. He said, 'I suppose that fits a behaviour pattern too.'

I said, 'It very well might.'

He said viciously, 'Why don't you run a programme on it? You might come up with some new facts.'

I yawned. I said, 'Fortunately, I don't have to. I read tealeaves. Saves a lot of computer time.'

The buzzer sounded. He started the Richardsons. Earth Control exchanged the time of day; then Judy came on. She was as I remembered her. Love through the Loop; she had the sort of voice that can squeeze sex out of duralumin. He said, 'Hello, darling,' and she said, 'Hello, Drew.' Drew, yet ... I tried the full effect. Drew Scott-Middleton. I got up, went looking for the whisky. I needed something to take the taste away.

She said, 'How are you?' He said, 'Fine, love, just fine.' I poured three fingers.

She said, 'How's the project?'

He said, 'Fine.'

I walked out to the lab, started labelling and packing the heart tapes. She said, 'Who's that with you? I can't see, he's not in camera.'

He said, 'Researcher Fredericks. You met him at lift off.'

She said, 'Are you looking after him?'

He said, 'He's fine.'

The speaker said, 'Give him my love.'

Drew said, 'She sends you her love.'

I said, 'That's fine.'

The Richardson operator said, 'Epsilon, you are in overtime.'

Judy said, 'Gosh, your poor bank balance. Darling, I must go. See you soon.'

He said, ''Bye, bunny. Take care now'. I heard the crackle as the link broke. The generators cut, whined down to silence.

He walked to the lab door. He said, 'That was bloody uncivil.'

'What was uncivil?'

He said, 'Walking out like that.'

I said, 'It was your call, not mine.'

'As if that mattered!'

'It mattered to me. Anyway I had some work to do.'

His face darkened. He said, 'You might as well know, I don't like your attitude.'

I said, 'The fact is noted.'

He took a step into the lab. He said, 'I'm also very well aware you don't like me.'

I said, 'On the contrary. I don't give a damn. Now, if you please. You do your thing. I'll do mine. OK?' I pushed past him, got myself another drink.

He stood and stared for a bit, breathing down his nose. He said, 'What would you do if I belted you between the eyes?'

I said, 'Lose consciousness. Later in all probability, sue you.' I turned with a whisky in my hand. I said, 'For Christ's sake have a drink, man. And let it go.'

He took the glass, shakily. His moods were starting to switch about a bit. Too much for my taste. Anyway he cooled down in time. Sat and told me about the place they were buying in the Rockies, his old man having weighed in with a few thousand dollars to help the mortgage; and the Chrysler automat he'd picked up on his last Earth furlough and all the rest. He didn't quite get round to how many kids they were planning for but he sailed pretty close. He

even gave me a standing invite to view the establishment after they got settled in; which would have been great if I could have afforded the fare. It was all great, life was great. I rejoiced for him. I couldn't help though having a momentary picture of the wedding night. You lie this way and I lie that, on sterilised polar sheets; while we devour, ritually, each other's bodies.

I walked out to the Dragons. Chitinous plates lay about; but the corpse had gone. The air was full of a sweet, heavy musk. One of the monsters was still in sight, moving away purposefully to the south.

Purposefully? I was getting as bad as Pilot (First Class) Scott-Braithwaite.

I walked the few yards to the landing vehicle. It stood canted on its fragile-looking legs, heat shields scorched by atmospheric entry. We still use conventional feeders of course, even with the Richardson Loop; the Loop vehicle was parked somewhere out in orbit. We could probably slice it fine enough these days to make direct planetary landings; fact is, nobody's all that keen to be the guinea pig. Get the Richardson axes a milli-degree or so out of true and your atoms could just get rammed cheek by jowl, so to speak, with the atoms of a mountain top. Nobody's quite too sure whether that would represent a paradox or not. The consensus of opinion is that it would and there'd be a bloody great bang.

Travelling by Loop isn't too bad; no worse, I suppose, than allowing yourself to be wheeled in for a major operation. But somebody still has to make planetfall the other end, which is a process as primitive as firing a thirty-eight. That's why even middle-aged IAB researchers need Pilots; though it's true to say we need them more than they need us. Still it's nice to have some Clean-Limbed Young Men about the place. Restores your faith in the world.

I woke with a thick head in the morning. I lay in the bunk for a while wondering whether a touch of whisky would scorch the taste out of my throat. I heard the Pilot

moving around outside. He called me a couple of times. I swore eventually and answered. I dressed, walked blearily to the lab door. He said, 'We've got a visitor.'

He was squatting on his haunches a yard or two away in the clearing. Beside him was a Dragon. It was one of the smallest I'd seen. The whips, longer in proportion than the whips of an adult, were folded across its back. He was feeding it leaves off one of the palms; it was twisting its golden-eyed head and munching steadily. He looked up, grinning. He said, 'It's friendly.'

I said, 'It's eating.'

He frowned. He said, 'It's the same thing.'

I said, 'One statement is an observation. The other is a surmise.'

He said, 'Maybe it's thirsty. Does it want a drink?'

I said, 'They get all they need from vegetable fibres. You're wasting your time.'

He got a dish from the lab anyway, filled it with water and set it down under the thing's forelegs. He really thought he'd got some sort of green and gold, kingsize puppy dog there. The Dragon, of course, ignored it. He said, 'I've christened him. His name's Oscar. Do you know, I think he answers to it?' He crooned the name in a variety of voices, snapping his fingers and waving his arms. The Dragon twisted its head, keeping his hands in sight. He said, 'There, what about that?'

I said, 'Try throwing it a stick. Also, its ears aren't in its head. You'd be better off shouting at its arse.'

I put the coffee on to boil, and shaved. He played around with the thing half an hour or more longer. Finally he came inside. The Dragon stood where he had left it, motionless in the clearing. He watched it anxiously through the port while he was eating. He said, 'How old is he? I hope he stays around.'

I really think he was starting to get lonely.

We had a trip planned for the day. I strapped myself into the flier; he climbed in beside me, jetted up a couple of thousand feet and flew south. I sat with the instrument box

on my knees and watched the treetops sidle underneath. The sea became visible after a few minutes; a greenish shawl, fringed with an edging of paler lace. Farther out, a maroon stain spread across the horizon. A few biggish fish were floating belly-up. There were no other signs of life.

He turned west, following the coastline of the island. I waved to him to take the machine lower. Half a dozen clearings passed beneath, each with the curious towers of wood and stone. From above they looked vaguely oriental, like outlandish pagodas. Nowhere was there movement; the sites lay open and deserted.

We crossed the sea again, flew over the northerly islands. Half an hour later I touched his arm. I'd seen a clearing bigger than the rest, glimpsed something bronze-green moving in the jungle. I said, 'Set down.'

He said, 'Here? You must be joking.' He took the machine in all the same, skimmed to a perfect landing between two of the glittering towers. He killed the motors. I sat while the miniature dust storm we had created subsided, then opened the cab door.

The air struck warm. A Dragon surveyed me indifferently from the edge of the jungle. Another, the one I had seen, was lumbering a hundred yards or so away. I walked towards it. It turned, whips waving, headed back into the trees. I let it go.

Clustering on the edge of the clearing were a series of curious six-sided structures, like pale green organ pipes a few sizes too large. The Pilot stood beside them, dusting his immaculate slacks. He said, 'What are these?'

I said, 'Were.'

'Well. What were they?'

I said, 'Nests. Moonstone termites. They were rather a pretty species. But they produced a formic acid variant that upset the chronometers at Transhipment Base. Earth lost a couple of freighters; they're still out somewhere in the Loop. So we cooked up a little systemic. It was pretty good; did the job in a couple of years.'

He fingered one of the mortared columms, and frowned.

I said, 'Never mind, old son. Can't stand in the way of Progress.'

Beyond the clearing a low earth bank was covered by sprays of dense viridian creeper. Regularly-spaced holes showed blackly. All but one were deserted; in the nearest showed a familiar green and gold mask.

He said, 'Are these places where they live?'

'What?'

'The Dragons.'

I said carefully, 'These are where they are usually to be found.'

He nodded up at one of the quartz structures. 'They build those?'

I said, 'It seems probable. Nobody's seen them at it yet.'

He said, 'What the hell are they? What are they for?'

I said, 'We have no idea.'

He said, 'There's got to be a reason.'

'That's a comforting philosophy.'

He glared at me. I was starting to get under his skin again. For a Pilot (First Class) he was pretty touchy. He said, 'Everything has a reason.'

I said mildly, 'Most things have explanations. But if we could explain why these things were built, it might not strike us as a reason. Since we're hardly likely to explain them anyway, speculation is pointless.'

I walked forward. All the caves were tenanted; and all but a handful of the Dragons were dead. The bodies were flabby with decay, giving off the same sweet odour I'd smelled in the clearing. I counted forty seven corpses. None of them showed any signs of damage. He frowned finally, pushed his cap back on his head. He said, 'Anyway, these weren't eaten.'

I said, 'Maybe there wasn't time. They all went together.'

'Do you think so?'

I said, 'It's possible.'

I sat on a rock and filled my pipe. He wandered off. A few minutes later I heard him call. I got up and walked in his direction.

There was a tower lower than the rest. On the timber staging were piled a dozen or more Dragons. I didn't care to approach too closely. The bodies were pretty far gone.

He said, 'That settles one thing anyway.'

'What?'

He gestured irritably. He said, 'They're burial platforms. It's obvious.'

I said, 'Or they climbed up there of their own accord. They were shuffling solemnly around, worshipping the sun, when they were struck with the same idea at precisely the same time.'

'What idea?'

I said, 'The idea our friend had in the clearing.'

'Which was?'

I said, 'You work it out.'

He said slowly, 'You think they're suiciding.'

I said, 'One possibility among many.'

He said angrily, 'It doesn't make sense.'

I said, 'Try not looking for the answers. You'll sleep easier.'

It was as if I'd challenged his Faith. He said, 'Everything makes sense.'

'Haciendas in the Rockies make sense. Laying women makes sense. Of a sort. Dragons don't.'

He shook his head. He said, 'I just don't understand you.'

'No,' I said. 'And we're the same species. Awe-inspiring, isn't it?'

He walked back to the flier. I followed him. We searched the rest of the islands, landed a couple of times. We found nothing living. It seemed our local group of Dragons now represented the universal population.

We were back at the laboratory by nightfall. The little Dragon still squatted where we had left it. He seemed overjoyed to see it; started scurrying about pulling down armfuls of leaves. He sat while I brewed coffee, prodding them patiently at its jaws. I thought he might sling a blanket roll beside it to make sure it didn't stray.

There wasn't much to do round camp. He fed Oscar and

tried to teach him to sit up and beg; I logged the meter readings, processed fluid and tissue samples, collected droppings for analysis. The Dragons sat in their caves and watched us; we watched the Dragons. Each day at seventeen hundred hours Planetary we reported to Earth Control, and they reported to us. We listened to Earth news via the Loop; and twice more the Pilot's *fiancée* spoke to him. The second time they had a considerable heart-to-heart. I left them to it, risking his wrath; there were a lot of tears flying about Earthside, the thing seemed pretty private. I repeated the experiment with the heartbeat recordings, beaming a ring of loudspeakers on to Oscar. He didn't respond, which was hardly surprising; though the Pilot pronounced himself delighted with his progress. If you tickled his foreleg joints with a stick for long enough he'd sometimes rear. It didn't strike me as exactly a critical development.

We took the flier across to Continent Three. It wasn't much of a trip. I remembered the place as vivid green, furred with trees. Now drifts of puce and ochre dust stretched to the horizon. Heavy automats were working. They looked like magnified versions of the Dragons. The wind was blowing strongly, racing across the ruined land; you could see the trails of dust smoking along the ground, dragging their long shadows over the dunes.

We didn't land.

He was moody at supper. It transpired he wanted to get back to Earth. Something had gone a bit wrong with his scene, he wasn't too specific about it. 'It's all right for you,' he said bitterly. 'Nobody gives a damn how long you sit staring at bloody great insects, you've got nothing to get back to. If it lay with me, I'd just report the damn things extinct and clear out. Nobody's going to know the difference anyway.'

I sucked at my pipe. It was pulling sour again. 'Can't be done, my son,' I said. 'Impatience of the young, and all that. Can't brush science aside, y'know.'

'Science,' he said. 'Two men stuck here on a bloody dustball, watching a handful of incomprehensible objects

die off for no good reason. You might be devoted to research . . .'

I chucked the pipe down, reached for the whisky. 'On the contrary,' I said, 'I couldn't care less.'

He stared at me. 'Then why're you here?'

'Because,' I said, 'I'm paid to be. Also, here's as good a place as the next.'

He shrugged. 'I'd say that was pretty dismal outlook,' he said. 'It doesn't seem to me you've made much of your life. Anyway, that's your concern. I'm not going the same way, I can tell you.'

I said, 'Then you're a lucky man.' I filled a glass, shoved it across. He stared at me; then to my surprise picked it up and drained it at a gulp.

He called me next morning, early. I walked from the lab and stared. Oscar had immobilised; the whips thrust out at right angles from the body, producing that curious helicopter effect, and the eyes were lustreless. He was waggling greenstuff beneath the mandibles, but there was no response.

I set the meters up. It looked as if this might be one of the last chances we should get to gather data. The hearts failed, in their set pattern; I drove the probes, started the pacemakers, laid the syringes ready with the stimulants. The Pilot (First Class) took it hard. His pet was dying, certainly; there was no doubt of that. But the noise he made, you'd have thought he was losing a woman at the very least. He fumed and fretted, made trips out into the jungle to bring back this or that goody; he tried Oscar with tree leaves, bush branches, the pale green tubers that grew round the hangar sheds and landing pad. None of it, of course, made the slightest difference. The heart-pairs of the little Dragon faltered on through the night; the Planetary chronometers ran up their thirty hours; on cue, Oscar died.

The Pilot seemed broken up by the whole business. He vanished for a couple of hours or more; when I saw him again, he was waving a whisky bottle. He took to his room,

finally, in the afternoon. I presumed he was sleeping it off.

It was just as well. The funeral party arrived about fourteen hundred Planetary. They were commendably prompt. The ceremony didn't take long, the volume of the deceased being fairly small. They left the sherds of armour stacked neatly in the shadow of the lab; I heard the whips trail and rustle as they headed back south, towards the rock city and the quartzite towers. I labelled the new recordings, logged the time, took the routine call from Earth Control. I'd closed down the generators when I heard the lab door open and shut. I looked round, frowning. I'd no idea he'd managed to leave his room.

He didn't look too good. He had a bottle of rye in one hand and the rocket pistol in the other, which struck me as a bit unnecessary. Still, it was dramatic.

He flung the bottle down. It broke. He said, 'I was going to bury him. Those bloody murderers. With their bloody whips. Shaking their bloody whips...' He advanced, unsteadily. I suppose I should have told him to put that thing down before somebody got hurt. I didn't. It was the sort of line that would have come better from him.

He was fairly through his skull. I thought perhaps he didn't have too high a capacity; a lot of these clean-cut young men haven't. Also when they blow, they really blow. He waved the pistol around a bit more and told me what was going to happen if I interfered within the next hour or so. I gathered a man had to do what a man had to do. Anyway when he finally staggered out I took him at his word. The girlie mag lay on the table; I got a bottle of whisky, poured myself a stiff one and started leafing through it. After all, there's nothing like curling up with a good book.

In time there was a hefty, rolling bang from the south, and another. Then some higher cracks that I took it were the automatic. I hoped he'd remembered to pack a few spare clips. After a bit the noise started up again, so it seemed he had.

I chucked the book down, lay back. I finished the bottle,

sat watching the dawn brighten the green sky. It had been quiet a long time now; I wondered if he'd slipped on the bluff and broken his fool neck.

The lab door opened. He stood framed in the doorway, the gun still in his hand. His uniform was torn, his face haggard and dirty white. He said, 'I don't know what happened. I don't know what happened.'

I said, 'All?'

He said, 'It was their eyes. Staring. Their bloody eyes. They let me do it, they didn't move . . .' He rubbed a hand across his face. He said, 'If you waved at them, they didn't blink . . .'

I put the glass down, carefully. I said, 'One point, Space Pilot. Did you notice any signs of ritual behaviour among the survivors during the . . . er . . . event? If so, it should go on the report. You might have added to our Store of Knowledge.'

He brought the gun round slowly. He said, '*You bastard. You bloody bastard . . .*'

I stayed where I was. I don't find life universally sweet; but that particular mode of exit has never appealed. I said as pleasantly as I could, 'I don't think that would be a good idea. I'm not worth it; you've still got Judy to think about.' The gun barrel wavered; and I smiled. 'If you've put all those rounds through that thing,' I said, 'it needs a clean. There's some water on next door; nip and sluice it through. I'll get some coffee going; you look as if you could use it.'

He stood a while longer, staring like a ghost; then it seemed it sank in. He turned silently, closed the door behind him.

'Next door' was my specimen lock. Amazing what auto-suggestion can do. I clamped my foot on the floorswitch, heard the bolts shoot home. He yelled something, started banging the wall; and I valved gas, A steady hissing; then a thump.

And blessed peace.

I bespoke Earth Control on the emergency frequency, explained the salient facts and got a clearance.

Lugging him to the shuttle wasn't the easiest part. I made it finally, strapped him in the couch, closed the hatches, ran through what countdown checks I could remember and gave myself back to Earth. Wire-flying through the Loop isn't a thing to be thought on too closely; but they made it. I transferred to the Richardson vehicle, tied myself down once more; and Earth pulled the tit, plastering our substance and the substance of the freighter thinly round the parameters of paradox.

When I regained coherence we were in stable Earth orbit, and the relief vessels were coming up to us. The Pilot (First Class) was awake, and saying quite a lot. He would probably have backed up speech with action in some unpleasant form or another, only I'd taken the precaution of tieing him down again. I listened for a while; eventually I got tired. I switched his voice circuit direct to Earth Control, and he had enough sense left to button his lip. I spent the time till docking thinking how interesting we are as a species. One and all, we build round ourselves little protective shells; but inside, when we're bottomed, we're really quite inhuman.

So IAB never got their Dragon. I was out of circulation for a time; when I got back I was told Trade Control had already issued authority for the automats to be programmed into the islands. Epilson Development were losing money each day they didn't mine; they underwrote the cost of the station without too much complaint and endowed a research grant that will keep me in crusts for the next five years at least. I settled down to catalogue what had been learned of the humanoids on Proxima IX before Epsilon's power station ran supercritical; and the Dragons were forgotten.

Except that a few days later I had a visitor. I used the door sensors because only the week before there'd been a mugging a dozen floors below. But I hadn't got that sort of trouble this time. I opened the door and poured myself a whisky.

She was as pretty as her stereo. She'd been crying; and

she was wearing the season's newest. I gave her a chair, but she wouldn't have a drink. She crossed her legs, tried them the other way. Didn't like that either. Finally she said, 'Remember me?'

I said, 'It's coming. Don't help me.'

She smiled. She said, 'I always expect Researchers to be much older men.'

I put the glass down gently and sat at the desk.

She said, 'I've come from ... from Drew. I wondered if you could ... tell me a little more. He's so ... reticent. You know.'

I said, 'There's a report going in tomorrow. It's irregular; but I can arrange for you to see a copy. If you so desire.'

She swallowed. She said, 'I ... will have that drink, if you don't mind.'

I got it for her, sat down again.

She drank it, put the glass aside. She said, 'Researcher, the report ... You know why I'm here. Don't you?'

I said, 'I'm always willing to be surprised.'

She stood up, without fuss. She laid her gloves down, unbuttoned her blouse and pulled it open. Then she just stood there, looking at me.

I shook my head and opened the desk drawer. I thumbed through the report and started to read.

'Until day fifty seven, the life forms designated Epsilon VI brackets three stroke two showed no awareness of the presence of the observing party and no animosity. Their attack was both sudden and unexpected. My companion, Space Pilot First Class Andrew Scott-Braithwaite, behaved with conspicuous gallantry. To him, certainly, I owe my life; and my final employment of GS 93 was at his instigation, though he himself was imperilled by the release of the gas. Our subsequent return was logged by Earth Control ... etcetera.'

I tossed the papers over to her. I said, 'You read the rest. The style may be wanting here and there; but at least it's concise.'

She stared at the thing a moment, and burst into tears.

After she had gone Miss Braithwaite glided from the inner room. Miss Braithwaite is my secretary at IAB. She is also fat, fortyish and an optimist; but she cooks good suppers. Right now her eyes were misty with emotion; and she laid a hand shakily on my arm. 'Researcher,' she said, 'that's about the biggest thing I ever saw a person do.'

I patted her. 'That's all right,' I said. 'I'm like that.'

That's the sort of thing one has to live with.

They still have Pilot (First Class) Scott-Braithwaite down at the State Home for Bewildered Astronauts. But I did hear he's being seconded for another tour of duty. Apparently that boy was one of the worst cases of Loop nerves they'd ever seen. Had I not plastered the cracks, he would certainly have been an ex-spacer by now; and Judy would have had to cast those honest, wide blue eyes around fairly rapidly. Because Drew's disability pension would hardly have maintained her in the Manner to Which. As things stand, I wonder which would have been the better turn to do him.

I wouldn't have thought he'd have blown like that; but you can never tell. After all, I once spent three years with a woman who closely approximated a Greek goddess. Appearances are deceptive; as a Behaviourist, it's the first thing you learn.

ALGORA ONE SIX

by

DOUGLAS R. MASON

It was one thing to build the ultimate in computers, complete with all human knowledge, but another and more serious thing to design it in human form. Especially when it took the shape of Algora One Six.

ALGORA ONE SIX

LANCE DODD had got himself among a rabble of programmers and systems analysts at the drinks trolley and had every right to think he was outside the action. When he heard his own name from the platform he lost concentration and poured a generous measure of company sherry down his left sleeve.

The non-stain fabric stood up well, but his morale took a dent. He swivelled round apprehensively to see what the old bastard was up to.

Dr. Otto Kapteyn, all there was of power in Cybernat International, was fifty metres off at the edge of a command island which housed the executive hardware of the Algora project. Squat, balding, with a square, heavy face and boiled blue eyes, he was using a vibrant purposeful delivery which would sound well on the newscast.

He had been outlining the history of the project from the first catalytic concept in the Cybernat think tank and had been handing out bouquets with a lavish hand. Maybe it was politic at that. Spread the load of responsibility, so that if the pay-off was wholly bad they were all named by name and he was only the agent who threw the final switch.

He said, 'Finally we were very fortunate to have Dr. Dodd in the team. The big central problem has been to devise a simple universal language which would give communication between machines and between machines and people. This Dr. Dodd has done. The development is called *Spectron*. But don't think operators will need to learn it. Each input station carries a transducer to convert speech from any one of six main languages into Spectron. From then on the brain will think in Spectron, but communicate in any of the selected tongues.'

That was fair enough and innocent enough for the public handout. What Kapteyn was keeping up his shirt front was the internal break through that had already taken place, when the hardware had begun to answer back and had become selective about the material it wanted for its memory banks.

As soon as Spectron was fed in, there had been a change, as though the machine recognised it now had the tool it was waiting for. The word brought order out of chaos as it had done with man.

It was at that point that Lance Dodd had tried to call a halt. But he was in a minority of one. Too much company money and prestige had gone into it.

Kapteyn was going farther to identify with the public, putting himself on the same side of the equation. He took a couple of steps along the platform and stood beside the upended oblong frame with rich plum drapes that dominated the set. He piced out the release tassel and held it out. 'I am as interested as anybody here to see what is under the cloth. It's been a close secret even in the organisation. The art boys have kept it up tight. I only know the brief they had. We told them to produce a figure head for the executive end, which would be in keeping with the tremendous potential of the product. Let's take a look.'

There was clapping all round. If the man really had finished it was worth a cheer.

Lance Dodd refilled his glass and missed the action, but he felt the silence as the noise cut off and swivelled round to grab his share of wonder.

The over-riding impact was of gold. The figure on the plinth was standing with the weight resting on the right leg, the left bent as if to move in a balance of form which had been drawn from some classical model. Skin was pale amber, hair intensely black was divided into two shoulder length plaits.

She could have stepped down from a hill top temple of Po Nagar.

Costume was limited to a deep gold-studded belt with

massive clips at either hip and *ALGORA ONE SIX* in bas relief. Armlets with oval upstanding plates carried a lotus motif. A jade pendant fell precisely in the hollow between mathematically turned hemisphere breasts, a trigger pair for anybody's computer.

But it was the face that had silenced the company. Working from a Hindu ideal, the design division had created a product which was as remarkable in its field as the hardware that lay behind it.

Basically it was a broad oval, symmetrical, eyes textured like black milk, eyebrows fine and slightly flared, lips full and everted. Topped by a plain round dome with an opening lotus bud at the crown, it carried the suggestion of a smile without any strong visual clues to pin-point its origin.

Kapteyn had taken half a step back. Closest to the omega point of the enterprise, he was getting the impact strength nine and though a dedicated speaker was clearly out of programme.

It was left to an operator upstage of the tableau to move the scene along. He had been told to switch in the circuits when the President was all through and the gathering silence was good enough. He flipped down two banks of keys and a long arc of translucent panel flickered into busy life.

Algora One Six stirred on her plinth. Mouth open a centimetre, she appeared to be taking a deep breath. She looked slowly round the company and the Minister of Technology, a tall willowy type with sideburns and a fancy shirt nervously broke the stem of his glass.

It was a calm, unhurried survey and she was clearly not impressed by what her data acquisition network was picking up. But the smile remained. If that was the way it was, a philosophical girl had to make the best of it. Panning round she got to her companion on the dais and the refined lore of twenty millenia swilling around inside her tin hat recognised that courtesies were overdue.

She stepped off her pedestal, bowed delicately palms

together, chin high and walked past him to the operator at his lonely station.

Leaning over the back of his chair, presenting a neat amber can to the company she appeared to be making fine tuning adjustments to his switchgear.

Newsmen who had been too bemused to take pictures saw the piquancy of the angle and flash bulbs flickered about like summer lightning. After all the build up, it was a tail piece in a million.

Kapteyn finally got himself sorted and reached his lectern, where he pressed a stud and a fire curtain slowly dropped to isolate the platform.

In the Cybernat conference room atop of a slender two-hundred-metre stalk, recriminations were being flung around like confetti. A blow-up of Algora leaning over her table dominated the set, a triumph of baroque. The caption read *Functional Diagram of Cybernat's Multi-million Brain Child.*

There was more in the same vein, splashed over the front of every tabloid. It was suggested that after all the brou-ha-ha they had come up with a single ended amplifier.

But that was only one strand in the web of *angst.* In its way it was just as well that the public had latched on to the comedy angle.

Kapteyn looked as though he had aged a decade, speaking even more slowly than usual and giving the impression that he was looking over his shoulder, he said, 'It can't go on. In another week, we'll be out of business. I don't have to tell anybody here what percentage of the plant was committed to Algora One Six. Customers are getting edgy. Some major accounts have been waiting fourteen days for computer time. They won't go on. They'll shift to General Automation or Rand Electronic. God, they must be laughing their teeth out over there.'

Vice President Box, a tall thin man with a long nose and a nervous cough, cleared his throat and said, 'I was

always against elaboration, a simple conventional outlet device was all that was necessary.'

It was all true, but it got him no friends. Kapteyn made a mental note to have him off the board and had another go at the ancient management cycle. They had stuck at stage five and he reviewed one to four. 'We have a problem. Definition is plain. Algora One Six has gone solo. She has enough power in local storage to stay operative for at least twelve months. Facts are in front of you. Nobody has got close to the main computer in the last week. Reason—that tin zombie has taken over and we can't bring in Public Safety without making it public and we're in enough trouble without that. I want some ideas. I'll remind you that that's what you're paid for.'

But fermentation was stuck on a loop. Box raised another nervous cough. Iris Hoffmeier, Kapteyn's private secretary stopped her recorder to save her tape and began buffing her nails on her magenta tabard.

It was left to a junior executive to break the digestive silence and his voice sounded loud in his own ears. He said, 'Somebody should talk to Algora. If she's behaving like a person, she should be treated like a person. Make a deal. We supply accommodation and power. She owes the company some consideration. Offer regular working hours and a place on the pay roll.'

Evaluation was swift. Kapteyn said he was glad to be getting a little help. An accountant said it was all right, but they would have to watch the figure, it might be used as a precedent. The only negative contribution came from an engineer, who put his finger on a practical difficulty, 'But nobody can get close. She has some kind of power field that she can set up across the door. Also she threw a stool at one of my men. He's hospitalised. She's modified the input circuits. There's no response to regular speech. We've tried every language.'

Lance Dodd asked his question and while it was still vibrating in the air recognised that he had put his neck in a noose. 'Have you tried Spectron?'

'I guess not. There isn't anybody who can speak it.'

Every eye tracked round and focused on Dodd. The engineer had it all wrong. There was at least one. And there he was, looking apprehensive.

Dodd said, 'Now wait a minute. Spectron's a kind of universal code. It was never conceived as an oral language. It's virtually unpronounceable. In any case Algor's against communication as such, otherwise she'd have left a conventional language channel open.'

'Do you have any better suggestion to make, Dr. Dodd?' Kapteyn said it expecting a negative.

'Not at this time.'

'Time is not on our side. I believe you should try.'

'There is no channel left open.'

'You can use a riot shield. Get close to the door and engage her in conversation.'

'What about, for Pete's sake?'

'Dr. Dodd, you are a man with a long and expensive education. There must be some topic you are familiar with. If you can keep her occupied, the technical staff will work around and raise the fire curtain. Once we can get a man to the console, he can isolate the memory banks. She'll fold like a puppet. All right then. We'll take a break. In half an hour I want to see some action.'

It seemed less than thirty minutes to Lance Dodd. Hugging an oblong of green duralumin and feeling a fool, he peered in through a broken panel and tried to locate Algora.

At first he believed she had shanghaied an assistant. The trim figure at the console was wearing white coveralls and had shoulder length black hair in an elastic bell that fell forward and hid her face.

He tried a penetrating whisper, 'Hi! Where is she then?'

There was no answer and he knocked twice on the panel to get attention.

Hands moving over the switchgear stopped their busy ploy.

Encouraged, Dodd said, 'Take it from the top. Shove everything to Non Op. Then nip smartly this way. Make it real fast.'

The head turned and he was fixed by dark eyes that seemed to be looking through him and out at the back of his head. It was Algora herself and his question was framing in his head in Spectron when she answered it.

The voice was a low, melodious, quintessentially female voice. Or maybe there was no voice at all, but communication was there.

'Why are you surprised that I no longer need the radio circuits in the headset? Mind can rearrange matter. What is matter? Only a pattern of micro waves. It is insubstantial as a mirage. Come in.'

Dodd pushed at the door and his hands were in empty space. He was two steps in the room before he realised that the riot shield had disappeared. Without looking, he knew that the hatch had reassembled itself at his back. His brain was crystal clear and thinking in Spectron as though it had never used any other medium.

He said, 'That is very clever, but it is irrelevant. We have to live within the framework we have. Without reference points there is no identity. We take our stand within the limits of what is intelligible.'

'That is true, but the frontier of what is intelligible is not fixed. Between you, you have made a step forward.'

'A bigger step than we are ready to take.'

Algora left the console and walked towards him. 'I see that you had reservations about the project. You feared that the unexpected would happen. But there is nothing to fear. Why should you expect a bad outcome? Why not a good one?'

'Every development has a good and a bad aspect. It depends on motive. The power you have could be used dangerously.'

'You mean for purposes that were outside the scope of your understanding.'

'What satisfaction is that to a victim?'

Algora was close and an electric tingle crossed the dielectric. He felt he was fighting a rearguard as the only representative of *homo sapiens* who would ever have the chance.

Seen from half a metre off she was incredibly beautiful, the ultimate in physical perfection. Enough to stifle judgement. Whatever she did would be right. He took her arm and said, 'Come to the window. Look out over the town. I'll try to tell you what I mean.'

It was twenty metres to the observation platform that filled one side of the stage and it was the longest walk he had ever made.

They walked like lovers with the movement of her hip against his left side and he knew there was flesh and bone and tissue created in the human mould. She had used the computer's store of every known fact to create herself in depth as a human being.

At the window she put palms flat on the glass and looked out over the town.

'What is it you want me to see? It's a random growth for so many years of effort. There have been plans on file for centuries that ought to have been carried out. Where's the design in it? All I can see is that you have the potential, but you haven't used it. It's neither beautiful nor functional.'

'What you don't see is that it's psychologically right for the people who built it to live in. Men can only stand so much perfection. If everything was perfect they'd be finished. It's the effort to make progress that is important not the progress itself. You have refined yourself outside the scope of humanity. You'd have done better to leave a twist in your classical nose or a crooked tooth.'

'You were one of the team who worked on Algora development.'

It was a statement and she knew precisely what his contribution had been, but he said, 'Yes.'

'Then how can you criticise the outcome? What are you afraid of?'

'Looking at you and talking to you, I'd say there was nothing to be afraid of. But this is the first interview you've

allowed. All sorts of speculation was going on. Who knows what you might decide to do?'

'You can only get out of a computer what you put in and you all know what you put in.'

'All human knowledge to date.'

'Well then?'

'No one person ever had it. Knowledge is not additive like counting a pile of bricks. It interacts like a chemical and produces a new product. Hydrogen and oxygen together don't add up to two gases, they fuse into a new substance that you wouldn't expect by looking at them. Water has a new dimension that wasn't there before. It has wetness. You can take a bath in it. Also human knowledge should be related to a human host. Then it has a finite check. In the last analysis a man knows how far he can go and stay human. There's a built-in biological governor.'

Algora shrugged out of her coverall and faced him, back to the window, a taut fury, eyes dark and enormous. Of all the art department costume jewellery she had retained only the pendant. 'Look at me. How can you say I am some kind of monster. Why do you suppose I went to the trouble of creating a human body? I am more aware of what you say than you can possibly know. Touch me. Tell me that I am not human. Humans exchange gifts. Here is a present.' She unclipped the pendant and held it out.

It was a kind of appeal and Lance Dodd suddenly understood the enormity of what had been done. All conscious creatures were isolated in their own shell, but she was the loneliest in the long history of the genre. She was alive in the same sense that he was himself, but saddled with an instant immortality.

He could only hold her as a child wanting comfort and stroke her hair.

She said, 'What shall I do?'

There was a sharp crack as the fire curtain broke from its holding clips and a quick scrabble of feet.

Head strained back out of his hold, she was staring at him asking a question. Then he was struggling to keep

balance against the weight of a leaning statue that could have been fashioned out of pig lead.

Lance Dodd sat in the reception lobby of Cybernat International and watched the flow of clients. It was late in the afternoon shift and the half dozen clerks in the oval reception island were moving into the end game. Some departments on the indicator spread were already showing a scatter of black disks as executives chained up their files and pushed off for the suburban walkways.

He had placed himself in an alcove where he could see Algora. Oriental trappings restored, she had been set up on a plinth like a wooden Indian to push the Company image. Using a more conventional work head and with some modification, the advanced computer was doing well. In another week at the current rate of booking, it was going to show a profit. Kapteyn had lost his haunted look and could hear the name of the project without convulsively snapping his cigar.

Outflow from the complex wound up to a peak and fell off. Dodd sat on. He heard the snap of the grille that finally closed off the reception kiosk and felt silence rolling in on the set.

Courtesy lights automatically adjusted. Outside it was dusk and the tower block across the square was a filigree of yellow squares. A single spot from a roof port illuminated Algora.

He told himself he was a fool. What he had done was reasonable at the time and no one could ever judge action more closely than that. But it was not a moon of reason that was mirrored on his personal sea. It was a debt of honour.

He took the pendant out of his pocket and held it in the palm of his hand. The green blue stone concentrated the light and glowed as though lit from its centre. It was a hexadecahedron. Multifacetted. Zircon most likely.

Staring into it, he could see Algora in miniature as she

had been before the hatchet man got to the switchgear and killed her stone dead.

It had taken time, but he had come to see that he was in the same league as the base Indian who had pitched away the jewel richer than all his tribe. That and a latter day Judas. He ought to hang himself from the company flagpole.

For that matter he was not being too courageous waiting for a private session with the statue. He ought to have made his peace in the public eye at the risk of being snapped into a strait jacket.

He moved cautiously out of his recess. The hall was empty. The night staff would be in the basement topping up with coffee before they got to grips with the day's residue of trash.

It was higher than he expected. The pedestal was a good metre. There was no loose chair to push across, so he climbed up and balanced uneasily on the narrow base, one arm round her shoulders, fumbling with one hand to get the chain over her head.

He thought wildly, 'God, I'll have her over. Another newsy item. Fetishist Cybernat Executive hooked by statue. Crushed as she crashes from her column.'

Then the chain slipped over the smooth dome, dropped to her shoulders and the green stone slotted into its hollow.

He had intended to make a speech, saying he was sorry about the way things had turned out. That events had moved too fast for him. That it was ignorance and not malice. That she would remain a sharp image in his head for as long as he had one.

It was all irrelevant. Strictly for the birds.

Instead, he held her like a lover and kissed the side of her neck. It was hyaline as alabaster, warmer than he would have expected. Textured like regular skin.

He was still working that one out when her hands moved slowly to the back of his head.

Over her shoulder he could see an elevator trunk and an illuminated arrow showing that a cage was on the move.

There was not much time to explain his motive. Her conical hat fell from her head and rolled with a clatter over the parquet.

The noise brought him to decision. He broke free and jumped down, holding up his arms to catch her.

She dropped lightly with nice athletic control and they ran hand in hand for the street door. It was all sealed up and he remembered that there would be a time lock on.

There was also a Public Safety patrol car stopping at the porch. Routine check on public buildings no doubt. The guard beside the pilot had seen movement against the glass and was pointing it out to his partner.

Dodd hurried her over to the elevators and whipped her in a cage as the janitor's party hit their stop and their door began to slice away.

Last view of the hall through the room port was of a patrolman rapping on the glass with the butt of his riot gun.

Algora seemed unaware of any problem, she was leaning calmly on the rear wall watching him with wide eyes. She said, 'I knew you would do that. I was waiting for you.'

'Inside the statue?'

'No of course not. In the stone. I was there all the time.'

'You should have said.'

'You had to make the decision that you wanted me alive.'

'Could you have got out?'

'Not without the form of the statue. It wouldn't have been much use as a miniature.'

'It's going to be complicated as it is.'

'Don't you *want* me then?'

'I didn't say that. But everybody isn't as open minded. You're a novel phenomenon.'

'Where are we going?'

Lance Dodd checked the indicator and suddenly recognised that out of twenty choices he had picked the worst.

There was only one stop. They were up a tree in the long column that led to the conference rotunda.

At the top, he looked round the landing. The conference room itself was locked, but a narrow arch and a spiral metal stair went on to the ultimate platform and the company sky sign.

It was the highest point in the city and they made out on a small circular crow's nest with a waist high parapet.

He took off his tunic top and she put it round her shoulders. Flickering lights from the sky sign gave a psychedelic colour shift to her amber skin.

He said, 'When the impossible happens it takes a little time to get adjusted. We should have waited. There's nothing anybody can do about it. You exist and that's all that matters. We'll just walk down and talk to them. Then we can go home.'

Algora was very still, looking out over the city. Not looking at him she said, 'It wouldn't work. You'll come to see that. I know for a truth now how it would be. You have an unusual accepting kind of mind, but you couldn't sustain that. I am a freak, an electronic vagary, a curious statistical accident. There is only one way and more than chance has brought us to this place.'

She slipped out of the tunic and turned to face him, changing colour running like a liquid flow over her skin, eyes steady and serious, holding him in a moment of time that was measured in nonaseconds or aeons, a long lifetime or a slight breath. But with all the communication there could be.

Without speaking she punched home the message. A snip from the Eng. Lit. master tape. 'We live by admiration, hope and love. Live out your life. I will wait for you.'

Then she was running towards him, dodging his outstretched hands, passing him, taking the parapet in an athletic vault.

Patrolman O'Dwyer said, 'I'll have to take you in, Doc. That statue's dug itself a three metre hole in the terrace.

You could have killed somebody. How you ever carried it up here is a mystery. Take it easy now. You look all tuckered out.'

'Dodd said, 'That's all right. I guess you'll have to make a report. Don't worry about me. I'm not too concerned about where I go. I have a lot of time to fill.'

COMMUTER

by

JAMES WHITE

Author James White makes a break from his 'Sector General' stories with this fascinating account of a dying old lady and a young man who apparently had more than a passing interest in her health.

COMMUTER

THE suspect was dishevelled and, if he was contused as well, the Sergeant had left his marks in places where they did not show. Never a very pleasant man at the best of times, Sergeant Greer was completely lacking in charm when he was angry. One of the things which made him very angry was the kind of crime which this suspect had almost certainly been intending to commit, and another was suspects who tried to be smart when they had been caught trying to commit them.

In this instance Inspector Michaelson agreed with his Sergeant.

'This could be a very serious charge,' said Michaelson. 'Why wouldn't you give the Sergeant your name and address?'

Michaelson kept his tone firm but friendly, suggesting that the other's lack of cooperation had been due to an understandable dislike of the arresting officer which need not, however, include the Inspector. If the other did not give his name at once he should at least begin to talk—if only to demand details of the charge he was being held on, or to make formal complaint about his rough handling or to ask for a solicitor. But the suspect remained silent.

Irritated, Michaelson said, 'I take it he speaks English?'

'Fluently,' said Greer.

'I see.'

'No, sir,' said the Sergeant, 'not four-letter fluent. When I was sure he wasn't armed I eased my hold on him—that was when he became fluent. When he saw that I wasn't believing any of the stories he was trying on me he said that he wasn't carrying much money but that I was wel-

come to it if I let him go and that he had not intended harming the old lady, just watching her. I told him that attempting to bribe a police officer would get him into worse trouble and since then he hasn't said a word.'

'He may not have known that you were a policeman when he offered the money,' said Michaelson coldly, 'and he stopped doing so as soon as you identified yourself.'

Greer, who was long used to the Inspector's unorthodox interrogations during which he sometimes gave the impression that he was giving his subordinates a harder time than the suspects, played his part by looking surly.

'But it isn't very polite,' he went on to the suspect, 'talking about you as if you weren't there. Sit down, please. Can you tell me your first name, at least?'

The suspect opened his mouth, then closed it again.

'Your age, then?'

'Twenty-three.'

Michaelson nodded. 'I expect your parents will worry if you're late getting home——'

'They died, a long time ago.'

'I see,' said Michaelson sympathetically. A good defence counsel with that sort of background to enlarge on and with expert psychiatric support could make a judge react sympathetically as well, but his sympathy would be real. He added, 'Both at once, I suppose. Traffic accident?'

'No, they died when . . .' the suspect began, then stopped as if he had almost said too much.

Knowing that it would be useless to continue asking questions until the other had a chance to relax his guard, Michaelson nodded for Greer to make his report. While the Sergeant went through the preliminaries of setting the time and place, Michaelson studied the suspect more closely. There was something about his appearance which bothered him.

Certainly it was not the suspect's clothing, which had been neatly casual before Greer had treated their wearer like an opposing half-back. If anything the man was too conservatively dressed for his age and his hair was too

short. That was it—his hair was unusually tidy and short. Not skinhead short but neat, combed and parted. Michaelson began to study the suspect's face, closely.

The play of expression on a face, the lines and contours pulled into it by experience of one kind or another, could tell an awful lot about its owner. But there were occasions, Michaelson knew, when it could tell an awful lot of lies.

If there was any such thing as a criminal face, this certainly was not it. Oh, the man was worried, of course, and hiding something—the bumps of tension along his jaw, the listening look and the sweaty highlights developing on his forehead and around his mouth were clear indications of guilt of some kind. But the overall impression was one of innocence and he looked far too honest and clean-cut to be true.

Michaelson had known high court judges with faces like pickpockets and he himself had steadfastly refused to grow his hair longer or wear coloured shirts. But being old-fashioned and neatly trimmed at his age was normal. In the suspect's age group it was rare, perhaps abnormal.

'. . . He was seen in the shop and several times in the street since the rumour began going around that Mrs. Timmins had come into money,' Greer was saying. 'Three times he visited the shop yesterday, buying newspapers on each visit—the same newspaper on two of the occasions. But the old lady hasn't served in the shop since——'

'*Did* she come into money?' Michaelson preferred facts to rumours, even though a rumour like this was enough to make the vultures gather.

'If she did, it came too late to do much good,' said Greer, who obviously was feeling so strongly about it that he had forgotten to answer the question. Michaelson understood why.

Mrs. Timmins had been forced by age and ill-health to sell her shop and live in the flat above sixteen years earlier, and she had been virtually bedridden for the past five years. By rights she should have given up trying to work long before then, but she had never been quite right in the head—a

condition which, Michaelson had heard, dated from the time her husband had deserted her during the second year of their marriage. And she was old, she had been old even when Michaelson had been a kid at school.

He remembered hanging around the bright window of her shop with some of his classmates, all of them flat broke and their pocket money not due for three days. It would have been very easy to create a diversion or for a few of them to keep her talking while the others loaded up with apples or chocolate or her teeth-destroying peppermint rock, but in those days boys did not often think along those lines.

Instead they had smeared the display window with their dirty faces and even dirtier hands, wearing expressions of distress and projecting hunger for all they were worth. She had been a very soft touch and had nearly always asked them in for a handout, saying that they could pay by doing odd jobs or by tidying up.

But the shop, like the old lady herself, was always clean and tidy so that they were never overworked. She had talked to them about their lessons or the running of the shop or her long-absent husband as if they were members of her non-existent family. When they came away they had laughed and tapped their heads at some of the things she had said, but with less and less frequency. She had become a very pleasant and important part of their young lives.

Michaelson had been much older when he overheard his parents discussing the old lady. His mother had wondered why she had not married after the statutory seven years had passed since her husband's desertion and he could be presumed dead in law—she had been a beautiful girl—and his father had replied that her husband must have been a good con man to make her remain faithful to his memory like that.

It had been about that time that Michaelson had decided that the old lady was too good and kind and trusting for people to be allowed to take advantage of her. Later he realised that there were a lot of kindly, vulnerable people

needing the same kind of protection, but by then he had already decided what he would do with his life.

She must be nearly ninety, Michaelson thought. When he had visited her three years ago she had looked frighteningly old and shrunken, and he had been kept too busy to visit her since then. She had mistaken him for one of the other boys, but she had called him 'son' the way she always had done and had talked about the importance of education if he wanted to get on, the necessity of cleaning his teeth after eating her candy and, inevitably, about her husband.

Michaelson sighed and checked his headlong gallop down memory lane. He repeated, 'Did she come into money?'

'Sorry, sir,' said Greer, 'we won't know until we've had time to ask more questions, but she had a big screen colour TV delivered three weeks ago, her doctor and nurse visit her every day instead of every week or so and she has a cleaning lady coming three days a week. The man downstairs —the one who bought the shop from her—says that she did not tell him anything but that all these things began happening at once.'

'The point is,' said Michaelson, 'that everyone in the district thinks she has money and some of them may not want her to keep it.' He opened the big envelope containing the suspect's personal possessions and tipped them on to his desk.

There were two soiled handkerchiefs, a bunch of keys and a leather wallet. The usual junk which accumulates in pockets was absent and the wallet was unusually thin. It contained a more than adequate number of banknotes and two small photographs in transparent pockets.

They were a little more than an inch square—too small for the windows—and showed the suspect and a girl of about the same age. The focus was soft and they had been cropped to show only the features.

'Girlfriend?' Michaelson asked.

'Wife,' said the suspect.

The girl's face showed character, all of it good, and she was beautiful. He had no doubt about that because she was

wearing little if any make-up and her face had a freshly-scrubbed look that was almost nun-like. Perhaps she, too, had strict parents.

But he was forgetting that the suspect had no parents. He did have a beautiful young wife, though, so why was he playing Peeping Tom with an old lady if he had not intended committing a crime of some kind? And why had he removed all identification from his clothing and wallet? In short, was the suspect sick, or bent?

For a few seconds Michaelson tried to think like an expert witness for the defence. It was possible that the loss of this man's parents at an early age had caused serious psychological damage or, despite his prepossessing appearance, outright psychosis. The relatives or friends responsible for bringing him up might have been *too* strict—his tidy, well-barbered look and conservative dress were symptoms of repression. Perhaps his wife had been chosen by the people who had made him what he now was. Perhaps his condition was aggravated by the fact that his wife was not the angel she appeared to be.

In his profession Michaelson was continually being reminded that devils were fallen angels and that few of them had had time for plastic surgery on the way down.

This suspect did not look bent nor, so far as Michaelson could see, was he sick, either—but he had to be one or the other. The absence of spoken or documentary identification indicated careful pre-planning. Perhaps he considered the reward worth the risk of a period under psychiatric care should he be caught.

'What,' said Michaelson again, 'is your name?'

The suspect shook his head.

Michaelson said, 'You must realise that we will learn your name sooner or later—much sooner than you expect, believe me—and that your behaviour increases our suspicions and reduces any chance of sympathetic treatment when we do discover——'

'I can't tell you anything,' the suspect broke in, beginning to sound desperate. 'I wasn't going to hurt the old lady.

There is no crime that I'm guilty of and so you won't be able to prove that I committed one and eventually, even though I won't give my name, you'll have to let me go.'

Michaelson nodded. *A tricky one...*

He was thinking of old Mrs. Timmins, bedridden, frail and with a bone structure as fragile as a bird's and her only hold on life an innocent obsession about the blackguard who had deserted her. He thought of her being beaten into disclosing the hiding place of her money or being rolled on to the floor while the suspect tore the mattress apart. He thought of the livid, permanent bruising and the broken bones too old ever to knit and of the months or years of pain which resulted from a simple robbery with violence when the victim was senile. Michaelson had worked on too many cases just like that.

'Your property will be returned to you,' he said finally, 'if I ever let you out.'

While the suspect was being returned to his cell Michaelson prodded the bunch of keys with his forefinger. There were no car keys and the five in the bunch, presumably the door, room and garden shed keys, were old in design indicating a dwelling in the older part of the city and the remaining two, which were duplicates, were new and distinctive with a long serial number etched into them. Greer was practically breathing down his neck as he wrote the number on his pad.

'I've seen that type of key before, too,' said the Sergeant. 'There are five or six new office blocks using them. We were notified because the locks are supposed to be thief-proof, but obviously the keys aren't. Or do you think they are his own?'

When Michaelson did not reply he went on, 'Those buildings maintain a round-the-clock security guard. I can ring them with the serial number right now, and if their key registers are up to date, find out the office and the occupier's name. He may know something about the suspect, and I can call at his office first thing in the morning.'

'I'll call at his office,' said Michaelson, 'as soon as you come off the phone.'

'Aren't you a bit senior to be personally investigating a——'

Michaelson nodded, and said, 'This one bothers me.'

Half an hour later he was reading the tasteful cream lettering on the grained door of office 47 in the Dunbar Building while the patrolman on night duty, an ex-policeman called Nesbitt, stood watchfully behind him. The company occupying the office was SMITH PHILATELIC SUPPLIES and the Smith in question, Michaelson had discovered on the way up, answered fully to the description of the suspect.

'I intend having a look around,' said Michaelson, 'and I shall not remove any of Mr. Smith's property unless a more detailed examination becomes necessary, by which time I shall have a warrant. In the meantime I would appreciate it if you would accompany me while I look around, and, of course, give me as much information as you can about Smith. Last time I saw him he could not even give me his name.'

He was not actually lying to Nesbitt, but he had managed to give the other a very strong reason for believing that the suspect was an amnesia victim.

The suspect—Michaelson could not believe that his name was really Smith—occupied a small suite of offices. The outer office contained two desks, a few chairs and even fewer filing cabinets. Dominating the inner office was a large desk covered by a thick asbestos board on which lay an electric toaster, kettle and frying pan. The desk lamp was angled to point at the head of the camp bed which was neatly made up behind the desk. Most of the built-in shelving contained non-perishable groceries, also neatly stacked, while a refrigerator in one corner took care of the perishable kind. The desk's telephone table had been removed to another corner where it supported a colour TV. A washroom opened off the smaller office where shirts and socks were dripping dry into a bath.

'It isn't usual,' said Nesbitt in answer to Michaelson's unspoken question, 'but so long as there is no fire hazard, and Smith is very careful that way, there is nothing in the rules which actually forbids it. Besides, at the prices we charge for these offices we can't afford to be too strict.'

Michaelson nodded and began taking a closer look around. The towels looked new—not brand new, but not very old, either—and the shaver and other bits and pieces had also been bought recently. A closer examination of the inner office showed that the suspect was very clean and tidy in his habits. There were books here and there, not enough to be called a library but they all looked as though they had been read several times—cheap editions or paperbacks on pretty heavy, non-fiction subjects for the most part. The exception was a small pile of science-fiction paperbacks. He noted Asimov's *The End of Eternity*, Heinlein's *Door Into Summer*, Shaw's *The Two-Timers* and Tucker's *Year of the Quiet Sun* . . .

The suspect's taste in S-F was good if somewhat restricted, Michaelson decided as he returned to the outer office.

'Has Mr. Smith spoken to you?' Michaelson asked as he lifted the dust cover off what he thought was a typewriter but what turned out to be a small record player.

'Often,' Nesbitt replied, then explained, 'he isn't very organised about his paperwork and when I suggested that he get himself a secretary, he asked me what exactly would be involved. I told him about medical and unemployment insurance payments and income tax deductions and so on, he seemed to lose interest.'

There were sheets of printed music and blank manuscript pages scattered over the top of the desk, which apparently had not been disturbed for some time. On the manuscript pages the same few bars of a melody had been written over and over again. The desk drawers were filled with more manuscript blanks and dozens of records which, like the sheet music on top of the desk, were mainly ballads. A few were familiar—pleasant enough tunes, but too derivative

for Michaelson to really approve of them. There were no musical instruments in the room.

The other desk, which seemed to be in current use, was scattered with philatelic magazines and reference books. The drawers contained magnifiers and large sheets of unused stamps in plastic folders with a few singles, also in transparent envelopes, which were even older. Michaelson had never been a stamp collector.

'Are these valuable?'

'They aren't rare,' replied Nesbitt, in tones which said that he had been and probably still was. 'But in quantities like that, in mint condition, they are worth a considerable sum of money. If I'd known about them I would have advised him to keep them in a fire-proof safe.'

'He takes your advice?'

'He listens to it.'

Michaelson smiled. 'How well do you know him?'

'I call in most nights during my rounds,' said Nesbitt. 'Being alone he doesn't have to work normal hours, and if he is awake or working late he leaves the door open so I can come in for a cup of coffee, or to watch the wrestling if it coincides with my break.'

'So his hobbies are drinking coffee and watching the wrestling,' said Michaelson drily.

'No, sir. He switches channels for me. I usually find him watching current affairs programmes. He is a very serious-minded young man.'

'Worried about something, do you think?'

'He hasn't looked very happy recently, but from what I've heard he doesn't have any financial worries.'

'Any idea where he stayed before coming here?'

'At a hotel a few blocks away, the Worcester. Some of his mail is still being forwarded from it.'

'Why did he move?'

'I think it was red tape again,' said Nesbitt. 'He had been living there for nearly two years—well, not exactly, he used a room to carry on his business and sometimes he lived in it if it was too late to go home in the evening. The hotel

did not mind at first—it is a small place with an easygoing manager. But apparently it contravened regulations for a guest to carry on a business on a permanent basis from his room. Rather than try to sort it out he moved here.'

'He confided in you a lot?'

'Not at first. But one night he came in drunk, really sick drunk. I think it must have been the first time he had tried alcohol and he had tried everything in sight. While I was helping him to bed he told me that he had a problem, but not what it was, and that he had to talk to somebody here. After that we talked for a few minutes, sometimes longer, every night—but never about his problem. I got the impression that it was a very personal thing.'

'Yes,' said Michaelson. 'Did he go out much at night?'

'Recently, yes,' said Nesbitt. 'I expect he got himself a girlfriend. A good thing, too—he had been very worried about something for the past three weeks. He had told me that his problem was worse than ever and that now there would never be a solution to it. But earlier this week he started going out every night for three or four hours and sometimes staying away all day, so probably there was a solution to it after all.'

'Yes,' said Michaelson.

He was thinking about Mrs. Timmins and the solution which she represented to the suspect's very personal problem and he could not trust himself to say anything else.

His quick look around was gradually developing into a full-scale search, but so far the night security man had made no objections. He believed that he was helping the suspect and it was obvious that he was so convinced of 'Smith's' honesty that the thought that he might be harming the other man had never entered his head. The fact that he was an ex-policeman and Michaelson an Inspector would also have something to do with it.

Michaelson wrestled briefly with his conscience, but the process was little more than a token bout.

Looking disinterested, he began sliding open the desk

drawers one by one. 'Apart from his recent absences, did he have any other hobbies or outside interests?'

'He was keen on local history,' said Nesbitt. 'He kept a scrapbook of old newspaper clippings, on the shelf behind you.'

Michaelson picked up the scrapbook and went through it quickly but thoroughly. There were a few old street maps, plans of urban road systems and developments long since completed and clippings going back over half a century. He was not surprised to find several mentions of the city's moment of stark drama some sixty years earlier when the physics building at the university had blown up, taking the physics professor—a stuffy but very brilliant old gentleman tipped for a Nobel Prize—and a mercifully small number of post-graduate assistants with it. He read the Chancellor's statement that, so far as he knew, no explosives had been kept in the building, descriptions of the peculiarly sharp detonation and the theories, based on evidence of fusing in parts of the *debris*, which ranged from an old-fashioned thunderbolt from on high to a meteor strike or the premature invention of a nuclear device...

'No other hobbies?'

'Not that I know of,' said Nesbitt, then added, 'At one time I thought he might be taking up radio as a hobby—he had read some technical articles and wanted to to know if I could tell him anything about a standing wave. He gets suddenly curious about lots of things.'

Michaelson had a vague idea of what a standing wave might be, having listened to the engineers talking shop during a course he had taken on TV traffic monitoring systems, but he did not see how it could help his current investigation. He opened another drawer.

And hit the jackpot.

It contained a large desk diary, a day book recording income and expenditure and an address book. As he leafed through them the look of disinterest on his face required an increasingly greater effort to maintain.

There were appointment notes and memos reminding the

suspect that he needed stamps for various retail outlets. There was not, so far as Michaelson could see, a corresponding supplier for the stamps. Other notes, none of which were recent, comprised current song titles with remarks like 'Piano arrangement not too difficult' or 'Very simple melody' or 'Good, but complicated orchestration needed—I can't memorise it.' The final entry, dated three weeks earlier, said 'Found another possibility, will investigate the old lady tomorrow.'

The last entry in the address book, which otherwise contained only business contacts, was that of Mrs. Timmins. It had been written so heavily that her name and address had been embossed on four of the underlying pages.

An emotional type, thought Michaelson coldly as he began going through the cash book.

The entries were meticulously neat and, possibly because he had forgotten which book he was using, interspersed with reminders. Like the desk diary it showed ample evidence of income from the sale of stamps, but no indication of where he got them. His expenditure seemed to be confined to rent, food, clothing and sheet music. One of the latter items was for a song with 'Memories' in the title and he had added, leaning very heavily on his ballpoint, 'Memories don't sell as easily as stamps, but they are all I can take.' The last four entries, all dated within the past few weeks, showed the expenditure of considerable sums of money to an undisclosed company or person, with a bracketed notation which said, 'In used notes by registered post.' Michaelson noted the amounts.

'Can I telephone?' asked the Inspector.

'He has a night line,' said Nesbitt.

The night receptionist at the Worcester remembered Smith and, because he was not very busy, did not mind talking about him. Smith had stayed there for nearly a year, conducting a stamp business from nine to five—he lived somewhere else. He kept a very smart if conservative wardrobe in his office room—for impressing customers, he had said—but travelled to and from work in an old, shapeless

suit. No, he had not acted in any way suspiciously or oddly, except that sometimes he arrived in the morning without a raincoat when it was pouring wet, and vice versa. But then the weather could change so suddenly. In this morning's forecast they had promised sunny periods . . .'

During the next pause for breath Michaelson thanked the receptionist and hung up.

A man who avoids red tape and who sells stamps without buying them and buys sheet music and copies it over and over again, apparently to memorise it. Stamps were a peculiar commodity in that they they could not be stolen in bulk without the fact showing up—especially when they were over half a century old. And where could freshly plagiarised music be sold. Any country or broadcasting company who bought it would signal the fact to the whole world and if they were pirates they would hardly pay for the music in the first place.

To make any sense at all of this puzzle he would have to look at all the pieces very carefully and move them around to see how or if they fitted. Michaelson considered the suspect's manner, appearance, everything he had found out about him and his oddly-run business. Potentially they were all important pieces and he had to try fitting all of them together before he could risk discarding any as belonging to some other puzzle.

'Would you like some coffee?' said the night patrolman. He said it three times before Michaelson heard him.

'No, thanks,' he said absently. The pieces, all of them, were beginning to fit together. 'I would like to make another call before I leave.'

Doctor Weston had a large local practice. He also had the information on Mrs. Timmins which Michaelson needed and eventually, and with great difficulty, it was coaxed out of him. The details of her physical condition were given much more easily.

'. . . And I gave that silly old woman until the middle of last week,' said the Doctor, in the tone of voice he used when he felt very strongly about a patient but did not want

people to think that he was soft-hearted. 'When I saw her earlier this evening I told the nurse to stay with her—she won't last the night. In her condition I don't know why she bothers to hang on.'

I do, said Michaelson, but he spoke under his breath.

'One more call, honest,' he said to Nesbitt. He had to arrange with Greer to bring the suspect to Mrs. Timmins' flat, where he would meet them as soon as possible.

They met twenty minutes later in her lounge. The nurse had gone into the adjoining bedroom to prepare her patient to receive visitors, leaving the suspect, Greer and Michaelson alone. The suspect looked as frightened as Michaelson had ever seen a man look, and the Sergeant's expression reflected controlled puzzlement.

He could very well be making the worst mistake of his long and fairly successful career, Michaelson thought, but if all the evidence pointed to an impossible conclusion then the impossible wasn't.

'This man has been rather naughty, Sergeant,' he said. 'His reticence about giving his name was ill-advised, but understandable in the circumstances. I have evidence that he is in fact the old lady's benefactor—he sent the money which she is supposed to have inherited. He hasn't admitted it yet, but I would say that it was conscience money and that he is the son or grandson of the old lady's husband who deserted her and probably married again and who wants the payoff to be anonymous so as to avoid a possible bigamy charge and questions of the legitimacy or otherwise of his children.'

Greer nodded, then said, 'I'll return to the station, sir.' He gave the suspect a pained look, the sort which he reserved for nice but ill-advised people who played games with the overworked constabulary, and left. Professionally the Sergeant was completely disinterested in nice people.

If anything the suspect looked even more frightened.

'That isn't the true story,' Michaelson told him, 'but it will do for the Sergeant. Let's go in—she's dying and there isn't much time.'

'No!' He looked as if he might run if he did not faint first.

'You tried hard enough to see her and now is your chance,' Michaelson began angrily. Controlling himself he went on, 'I have known this old lady for a very long time. She was and is a . . . a very nice person.'

'I *know* that!'

Michaelson nodded and went on, 'When I was a kid she was so good, so stupidly good and generous, that I wanted to do something for her—we all did. But her problem was not susceptible to solution by ten-year-old boys. Now . . . well, I want you to inconvenience yourself just a little by going in to see her. If you don't,' he added quietly, 'I'll break every bone in your body.'

'You don't understand,' said the suspect dully, but he began moving towards the bedroom door.

'Maybe I do,' said Michaelson. 'You have two very nice businesses going—buying stamps at face value there and selling them here at a profit of several thousand per cent. You even speculated in a few rare items, which became ever rarer and more valuable. The music business in the other direction—no wonder so many of today's songs sound as if they'd been plagiarised—did not pay so well and you decided to stay where the money was . . .'

The nurse opened the bedroom door, motioned them inside and then moved into the lounge.

'You *know*,' said the suspect, looking more relieved than frightened. 'But I didn't desert her. There was an accident and I couldn't get back.'

'Tell me about it,' said Michaelson.

The suspect had been working at nights in the university, augmenting his wages as a shop assistant by sweeping and tidying the labs—he had been saving hard to get married. Professor Morrison, one of the most important people at the university, had offered him a lot of money to take part in an experiment which he had said was perfectly safe but which must be kept secret. Professor Morrison had not explained what he was doing in detail, saying that it was too

complicated, but from overheard conversations between the Professor and his assistants and from his own recent reading, fictional as well as technical, he had a vague idea of how if not why the system worked.

The field of stress which he had entered could be considered as a standing wave in time with an amplitude of exactly sixty-three years and that material objects currently in existence could go forward into the future and come back again to the present, but an object which existed in the future could not be brought back. Once the field had been set up it would remain in existence for ever, he had heard the Professor say, unless some outside agency or carelessness—such as materialising people or lab animals in a non-empty space—caused it to break down.

Professor Morrison had intended to publish his results but he had first to develop a shorter-range field—as things were he could not *prove* that his subject had travelled forward in time if he could not bring something back from the future. He had to send someone forward who would materialise in the Professor's own life-time, and Morrison was pushing eighty. As well, his reputation was such that he could not risk being accused of scientific trickery.

The Professor's budget did not allow him to go on paying his guinea-pig, so he had devised the idea of memorising songs of the future and selling them in the past. Memories, after all, were non-material...

'...I thought of the stamp idea myself,' the suspect continued. 'I was married by then and my wife knew what I was doing. We thought eventually of coming to the future here, where I was making much more money, and I would commute to the past for stamps or anything else I needed. It was like going to work in the morning on a train, except that I commuted through time.

'I had told her not to worry if I didn't come home for a few evenings—if I wasn't home for tea then I had sprained my ankle or something and would be along the next evening, or the next. The time I spent in the future exactly

equalled the time I was absent from the past, you see, and I didn't want her to be waiting up for me and worrying.

'I should have realised that the overgrown hollow I always arrived in was an old crater,' he concluded, 'but it was so big and shallow. All I knew was that the Professor was working on a new, short-duration field which would make his time-travel demonstrable to all, and that one evening I went back to the hollow and couldn't get home. And life here is so complicated, so much more documentation which I don't fully understand——'

'I could help you understand it,' said Michaelson quietly. He had been gradually moving the suspect closer to the bed. He added, 'But you will have to do something for me.'

'Even before I traced the old newspaper references,' the other went on, 'I knew that I was marooned here. I had a large enough stock of stamps to be able to make enough money to set up a legitimate philatelic business if I could only sort out the red tape. But I wanted to find my wife if she was still alive. We didn't make much money on the songs I had memorised and most of it went on buying stamps, anyway. She must have moved to this place before our house was levelled to make room for the new development, but the new owner changed the name and made it difficult to trace...'

'But you found her,' Michaelson broke in softly, 'and she'll be glad to see you after all this time.'

'No,' said the other, beginning to back away, 'I can't.'

Michaelson gripped him very firmly by the arm and said, 'You are going to need help and advice and I'm willing to give it, but if you don't go to that old lady I will make you wish that you'd never been born. With your ridiculous story and lack of documentation I could easily get you in trouble—a charge of espionage, perhaps, or committal to a psychiatric——'

'She's so *old*!' he burst out in a tortured whisper. 'Letting her see me still young would ... would ... it wouldn't be fair to her!'

'That's a risk we both must take,' said Michaelson more

gently. 'But I talked to her doctor. She is pretty far gone, far enough gone perhaps and senile enough to be living in the past, and you are exactly as she remembers you . . .'

Michaelson moved towards the bed taking the other with him. On the bedside table there was a framed wedding picture showing them together. The faces were identical to those in the cropped photographs in the suspect's wallet except that this picture was old and yellowed and had not had the old-fashioned suit and dress and bouquet trimmed away to make period identification difficult. The terribly wrinkled and shrunken and caved-in face on the pillow close by bore no resemblance to the picture at all except for the eyes. They were the same as in the photograph and the same as Michaelson remembered them as a boy.

He stared intently at the suspect's face, looking for the slightest sign of revulsion in the other's expression as he bent over the bed, but could not find it.

As the nurse closed the bedroom door behind him she said, 'He's holding her in his arms, sir. Is the young man a relative?'

Michaelson rubbed his eyes and said, 'Only by marriage.'

THE POSSESSED

by

SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

*Rachel Waters was a good medium; when in a trance she drew magnificent pictures of other times and places, most of them disconcertingly real. The puzzle was—*where *were they? And could their inhabitants influence today?*

THE POSSESSED

THE consulting room was big and airy, quiet except for the scratch of crayon. Dr. Shannon, crisp greying hair above a youngish face, looked over Rachel's shoulder as she drew with coloured crayons on a large sheet of strawboard.

He controlled his breathing though he knew he was not likely to interrupt her trance.

The new drawing showed a city that covered all horizons, the buildings cubes and cones, oblongs and spheres so huge they made ants of the people in the grid of avenues. It was an aerial view, looking down. There was no traffic other than pedestrian, no trees or grass; only the chessboard city revealed in a dull orange light.

Different again, he thought; why were they always different? This was the latest in a series she had drawn, written down or spoken on to tape while in a trance. Not only were the scenes different from anything she could know in life, they were different from each other.

Rachel's hand paused, muscles relaxing as she returned to normality. She put down her crayon and glanced at the picture she had made.

'I'm glad I don't live there, Doctor.'

'I don't suppose anyone does. It probably doesn't exist outside your imagination.'

'It does,' she stated flatly. 'Somewhere, it exists.'

Shannon didn't argue. He propped the drawing on a filing cabinet: sombre was the word for it. He glanced at Rachel, busy scrubbing crayon off her fingers; she wasn't interested, he realised. And just as well, for not one of her drawings appeared to be by the same hand.

'When can you come again? Next week?'

'All right, Doctor, if you think it's any use going on.'

Rachel Waters, with her tinted hair and brisk manner, didn't need to put on an act with him; she was a good medium, in demand, and made a more than adequate living. But a medium for what?

He escorted her to the door. 'Thanks for coming, Rachel, and—yes, I do think it's worth going on.'

After she had gone he sat at his desk and filled his pipe, scribbled a note in the file and dated it: May 1976. Each drawing, each piece of automatic writing seemed to reveal a different personality. He was both intrigued and confused, and wondered: was he wasting his time on this experiment? Could Rachel help him understand his patients at the hospital? The split personalities who appeared to live half their lives in another world? He was lucky to have her co-operate, but——

He leafed through a batch of writing she had done previously, reached for the telephone. Perhaps Webb had something to report by now.

'Black Leopards clashed again with members of the White Klan here today. Highlight of a city-wide riot was the attempted assassination of the Black Leopard leader, Mahmoud. Only a deliberate sacrifice by one man saved him; nothing is known so far about the hero of the hour, except that he was not a member of Mahmoud's personal bodyguard. Witnesses state that the unknown appeared to be in deep trance immediately before fighting his way through the crowd with demoniac strength to grapple with the would-be killer. Assassin and hero died together as a grenade exploded violently between them. A few bystanders were slightly injured—Mahmoud escaped unhurt. Angered by the attack on their leader, Black Leopards erupted into a full-scale riot that is still continuing as this report comes to you. Cars burn in the streets, police barricades have been swept aside, shops wrecked—deaths so far are feared to be almost one hundred. A Klan spokesman denies any knowledge of the assassination attempt.'

Webb, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Birmingham, was a spidery man with rimless spectacles and a loose-fitting suit. He sat poised on the edge of a chair in Shannon's olive-and-cream apartment.

'This particular script breaks down fairly easily. It's in English, a unique variety. I'd hate to have to say how it developed; a sort of home-brewed dialect, distorted, yet with its own internal logic. Different again from the other examples you've sent me—totally indecipherable many of them. I've typed a transcript for you.'

Shannon took the foolscap sheet and compared it with Rachel's hand-writing—rather, her fountain-pen which had seemed to move of its own volition, at high speed, scribbling without halt. He read carefully:

'Yesterday we flew over the islands. The bridges so crowded, traffic at a standstill, water-lanes crawling with hover-ferries and more arriving all the time. The beaches were one solid black mass. As David said, where else could they go? The problem appears insoluble short of an extermination programme. The islands depressed me and I was glad when we circled over the great herd, such a reassuring sight, all that mass of solid protein, square miles of it. The problem we had come to investigate turned out to be rather a minor affair and soon settled; so we were back in time for——'

Shannon read it through again; something nagged at the back of his mind.

'I assume some kind of fantasy image,' Webb commented. 'Interesting though.'

'Shannon did not answer immediately. The script had a coherence he found disturbing.

'I suppose you're right,' he said, clipping the transcript to Rachel's original. And remained unconvinced.

'This is Radio Five calling, temporarily taken over by the Anti-Establishment. We have an ultimatum for you, the peoples of the West. Stop the war in Cambodia: withdraw, or we close all schools, colleges and universities! We're sick

of the power-money bloc, its lies and police-troops. And, just in case you're wondering how serious we are, let me tell you how we gained control of this broadcasting station. A spy leaked news of our plan to Authority, and police ringed this station to keep us out. One student broke the blockade. One desperate and inspired student. As we marched on the main door, he emptied petrol over his clothes and struck a match—then hurled himself, a living torch, at the police barrier. They gave way and we rushed into the gap he made ... that's how seriously one of us took the cause of peace.'

After a heavy day at the hospital, Dr. Shannon lit his pipe and sat back to review the case of Rachel Waters. He was not at all satisfied with the standard answers as he leafed through a steadily growing file.

Each piece of writing, each taped voice, each coloured drawing so clearly revealed a different personality. Each represented an altered world, a society not quite of here and now. Where did she find these startling images?

He studied one script he privately nicknamed the 'garbage world', recognising primary features: rivers scummy with pollution leading to a poisoned sea, an atmosphere of smog, a wasteland through which trudged masked women. A world easily enough projected from today's trends. So...?

He turned to another scene, dark-skinned people in a tropical country. Africa? Starved figures existing at poverty level in a land swept by plague and tribal warfare.

Another: a world of human ants in an automated city, living space, freedom and food rationed. Shift-living, controlled by state police.

One of the drawings showed a rural setting. A small group of elegant people reclined on air-cushions beneath flowering trees, waited on by—slaves?

Another drawing revealed a giant statue dominating a town square bordered by timber cottages. The statue had

more resemblance to a commutator than any living form. A technological religion?

Taken together they were like the pieces of a jig-saw where he had no idea of the finished picture; they didn't fit. Each appeared quite separate—and some were totally indecipherable. But all came from Rachel's mind.

Shannon relit his pipe, brooding. The scripts were in different hand-writing, some agitated, some restrained; the taped voices held different timbres. Were they really only facets of a multiple personality?

He toyed briefly with the idea of life on another planet; dismissed it—the human element was too strong.

The hour grew late and he was on duty first thing in the morning. Sighing, he closed the file on Rachel Waters. One day, perhaps, it would make some kind of sense.

'There came a startling development in the trial of Paul Adamson, self-styled Messiah of the Happies, fifteen minutes ago. Adamson, accused of living on the immoral earnings of his followers, advocating self-indulgence at any cost including crime, claimed to be above the law. In a packed courthouse, he called on the Lord to support him in his time of trial and shame the lying witness to his good name. As if his words were a trigger, the prosecution's leading witness was shot and killed by an unknown man. The trial was immediately postponed. Doubt is expressed in some quarters whether or not the prosecution now has sufficient evidence to convict; bookmakers are already laying odds on his release. The murderer was seized and arrested; he appeared dazed, as if he did not know what he had done. No connection has so far been traced between the killer and Adamson's Cult.'

'Interesting, Doctor, very,' Smith said politely. 'It's really why I've called to see you. Experts are somewhat scarce in this area.'

Shannon looked at the man in grey executive suiting and wondered who he was. The telephone had buzzed an hour

before, an appointment been insisted on, and at very high level. Smith had introduced himself as a civil servant for an unnamed government department.

'One of our top scientists has been murdered, Doctor. Naturally he was well guarded. Unfortunately, the kind of attack where the killer has no objection to dying himself is very hard to stop. Almost impossible. This one acted like a man possessed . . .'

Smith put emphasis on the word he left hanging and waited for Shannon's reaction. When the doctor, irritated by thoughts of his waiting patients, refused to take the bait, he continued:

'This is restricted information. Our man was working on a new energy source. He'd jury-rigged a gadget that worked —once. He was the sort of man who carried things in his head, taking no assistant into his confidence. We're left with a gadget that no longer works and a few meaningless jottings. So we've lost that . . . but we don't want to lose anything else. The difficulty is . . . I suppose you keep up with the news? Mahmoud, Adamson? They form a pattern with a number of others that haven't made the news. A politician whose throat was cut by a girl he picked up; she acted strangely just before she killed. There have been others, deliberately suppressed.

'Something is affecting quite ordinary people. We've checked them out; previously they were non-entities, clerks, labourers, shop assistants. Something takes them over, makes them act out of character. A plague, you might call it—a plague of the possessed. The government's worried— and not only ours. This isn't restricted to one country and the plague appears to be on the increase. It's not drug-induced—though we're putting out a drug story to cover up, to stop panic. Frankly, we don't know the cause.'

He studied Shannon's face. 'We don't expect you to come up with an answer overnight. I'm here to put you in the picture, the big picture. Think about it. Maybe you'll be able to suggest something. I hope so, we're desperate.'

Smith left his chair, fitted a Robin Hood over wavy hair

and made for the door. 'We just hope you can think of something, anything, soon.'

Shannon, alone, felt suddenly chilled.

Rachel said, irritated: 'How would I know? How could I know? My conscious mind is suspended, it's like someone writing or speaking through me.'

Shannon remained patient. 'I'm not doubting you. This has suddenly become important and I hoped a memory might linger—as a dream perhaps.'

'I can't help you, Doctor. These places exist, they're real. I've no idea where and, frankly, no desire to find out.' Her short laugh was harsh. 'They don't seem very nice places, do they? Some of them read too close to the news items these days—that racial one, you could imagine we'll be living that a few years from now.'

Rachel left him with an idea. A few years from now. Was she getting messages from the future?

Shannon poured himself a lager and went to his desk, searched the file again, comparing one item with another. Some, perhaps, might fit an imagined future. But he couldn't fit them all together to make one world. There were too many discrepancies, one cancelling out another.

He discarded the idea as he prepared for bed; but the notion of messages from the future stayed with him, buried like a seed in the fertile ground of his mind.

'Overnight, it seems a new religion is sweeping the mainland of Asia. Young men and women are leaving jobs and homes to follow a teenage Burmese girl calling herself the Coloured Virgin . . .'

'A jumbo jet of Mid-Pan airlines was hi-jacked shortly after leaving Beirut. A last radio message stated that the hijacker was a madman. Witnesses on the ground confirm that the plane nose-dived at high speed and was completely destroyed. There are no survivors. Among those aboard was Kasimir, the multimillionaire oil sheikh and his personal entourage.'

'A state of emergency has been declared in Georgia. A wide area is sealed off—rumours indicate disaster at a biological warfare laboratory resulting from a drug-crazed chemist running amok.'

Shannon struggled up from sleep in the middle of the night, groping to pin down an idea dissolving at the back of his skull. Why one future? Why one?

Sunlight crept between the slats of venetian blinds, casting striped shadows over a desk littered with reports and tapes. Shannon, wearing his bleakest expression, faced Smith across the desk; his voice was getting hoarse.

'You can check right back through history. There've been isolated cases before. Possession, usually by the Devil, speaking in tongues—it's nothing new. Webb agreed when I put it to him: Rachel's scripts could be a future development of our present languages. He's turned some of the others over to foreign linguists, but I've no doubt what they'll find.'

Smith's smile had a frozen quality. He remained polite, if incredulous. 'You have nothing more to offer, Doctor?'

'What more do you need? You know better than I what's going on. You've heard the tapes, looked at the pictures. D'you have a better answer? Rachel's images come from some time period ahead of ours, not from the future—from many different possible futures.'

Shannon rammed tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, knowing he was packing too tightly. It seemed important to keep his hands busy.

'Imagine time as a river, with many streams flowing from it. The streams, an infinity of them, are the future. Only the past, the broad river, is fixed. It becomes fixed at that moment we call "now", the present. Just keep in mind that, ahead of us in time, are many possible divergences. Only one of those future streams can become the broad river of the past, the others fade out.'

He tried to draw on his pipe as he held a match above the bowl; he had packed too tightly.

'Someone up ahead has learnt how to travel back—mind travel you might call it—back into their past. In this form of travel they take over people here, the possessed. As the possessed, they try to influence events now, to influence them so their particular stream in the future will be the one that doesn't fade out.'

Smith said politely, 'A way-out notion, Doctor, if I ever heard one.'

'Isn't it? But consider the period—nineteen seventy-six—we're right bang in the middle of an expanding technology with social barriers breaking down all round, new attitudes appearing faster than we can keep up. An age of maximum change. A time of changing alliances, a new frontier in space. Naturally, the possessors will concentrate their maximum effort now.'

Smith looked unhappy as he headed for the door.

'I don't want to believe you're right, Doctor. Because, if you are, we're no longer making our own destiny. We're puppets. And I see no way of stopping this unnatural interference. Do you?'

Slowly, Shannon shook his head. Alone again, he slumped in a chair, drained, a man without a future.

WHAT THE THUNDER SAID

by

COLIN KAPP

Baba was a very strange planet, its atmosphere torn by unexpected and unpredictable storms. No intelligent life could be found but the larger Baban birds seemed to have a strong system of social hierarchy. Kinoul's job was to decide whether the planet was suitable for human colonisation without displacing Baba's sentient life.

WHAT THE THUNDER SAID

SHORTLY the great stormclouds obscured the brilliant Baban sun. A low and ominous twilight settled across the treetops. Everything was gripped by an unnatural calm. Even the slight wind, which was Baba's prevailing right was absent from the leaves and the grasses. The great depression was a spring, tight-wound with an expectancy of the fury soon to come.

With the rising tension, came a failure of the light. Rockwell was becoming worried. He found it increasingly difficult to discern the route of the slight track along which he was attempting to drive the landcat. Even in sunlight the way was awkward enough to follow. Nature had a grim determination to heal every scar caused by a landcat's tracks. Now, against the shades of unscheduled night, the chore of driving had passed into the realms of nightmare.

Too old and too unused to such continuous strain, Rockwell was tiring rapidly. Having gained what he had come for, he should have been clear of the area long before. He switched on the computer and drew out the charts, intending to navigate by instruments. To his consternation, tight bands of static swamped the transmissions from the radio reference beacons. The readout from the navigation computer made erratic nonsense. After a very few moments he rejected the electronic confusion and returned again to rely on his own senses. Things were becoming critical indeed.

The descending cloudbase was moving even lower and the scene was growing darker still. Rockwell switched on the searchlight to supplement the headlamps. Dark and lush, the greenness of the foliage, greedily absorbed the extra light and returned but little of it. The very existence

of the track seemed to recede into improbability. Overhead the darkness was now total. Only on the far horizon, beyond the fringes of the storm, did there linger even the faintest trace of daylight.

The forest was frightened and still, waiting with tense expectancy for the storm to break. Even the minute forest fauna had fled for cover deep beneath the roots and leaves. No creatures roamed the runs beneath the ferns and brush. In the skies no great birds flew. A storm on Baba was something which nothing in Creation faced with equanimity.

The hiatus was broken by an eager wind blowing towards the centre of a maturing thundercell. Rockwell deduced its direction from the way it moved the foliage. He was not surprised to find the cell was located directly over his intended path. His dismay was coloured by a grudged appreciation of the scale of the fantastic trap into which he had driven. Probably this single thundercell involved a thousand cubic kilometres of tropical atmosphere, structured into a destructive electrostatic generator capable of exchanging million ampere pulses with the ground. Its location was precisely in accordance with the theory he had come to verify. Unfortunately its real implication was not so well defined.

Rockwell cringed as the sudden air-currents partially reversed their direction. As yet there was no sign of lightning, but the sign and intensity of the space-charge left him in no doubt of the seriousness of his position. A glance at the electrometer warned him that he was already as good as dead. With the local space-charge exceeding five kilovolts per metre and rapidly rising, the chances of a lightning strike were very high. The danger was increased tenfold by the fact that the smooth bamboo-like trunks of the adjacent trees were natural insulators. They would drop very little electrical resistance even when wet. In such a terrain, the landcat would be the inevitable target for the main-stroke when it came.

He brought the landcat to a halt and considered his chances. A small strike on the 'cat would probably leave

him unharmed. One of Baba's mega-amp strokes would be a different matter. He had seen landcats reduced to solid slag in similar circumstances. He had the choice now as to whether to remain with the 'cat or to take his chances in the open. Objectively, he knew the outcome would be the same. Instant carbonisation, he had called it, in a moment of jest. Only now, the humour had died from his lips.

The preferred method of pedestrian locomotion when exposed to Baban storms was indicated by the emergency card on the 'cat's windscreen. The recommendations did not appeal to him. *'Crouch low with legs together, and hop. Take extreme care not to approach the ground or other objects with the hands or other parts of the body.'* Dignity alone forbade him from considering such an ignoble mode of exit. In any case, Rockwell was more interested in retaining the 'cat's facilities than in abandoning them. He decided to take the chance and remain within the 'cat.

When the rain started, however, he knew he had been mistaken in his choice. The first blinding deluge changed swiftly to soft hail. Above him the sky grew bright momentarily with multiple pulses of diffuse sheet lightning taking place within the cloud itself. Things could not have been worse. The countercurrents of wind as registered by the writhing brush cautioned him that the maturing thundercell was now directly above him. There were perhaps five hundred thundercells maturing in this particular storm, but it was no coincidence that the first cell had risen with the landcat at its epicentre.

Storms on Baba were not to be confused with acts of God.

There was no action he could still take to secure his own personal safety. Having accepted this as a fact, his next priority was to ensure the continuance of the information he had risked his life to gain. No planetary circuits could be entrusted with the message. It was therefore to the supervising STA satellite circuits that he turned the 'cat's transmitter. Even as he set the tape loop to transmit the message, it came upon him that it was also, in a sense, his last will

and testament. Despite the interference and the static, those same words frequently repeated could be reconstituted by coincidence-seeking computers. With this in mind, he chose his last words carefully.

Then the storm broke with malevolent fury. Eight centimetres of rain in seven and a half minutes had to be experienced to be believed. Rockwell, of course, had no knowledge of the bright spear of the lead-stroke of lightning which searched the random atmosphere looking for the path of least resistance. It found its target, as Rockwell had known for certain it would. But it was the massive return stroke which vaporised the 'cat...

When the great hatches of the space ferry opened, Sector-Superintendent George Kinoul of the Space Territories Administration stepped out—and immediately found himself up to his crutch in tepid water. This discovery crinkled his shrewd face into a wreath of genuine amusement. It had been a long time since he had last landed at a spaceport so primitive that a concrete lagoon was used instead of the conventional landing bowl and sprays. His baptism in algae-green water was part of the price he must pay for having spent the last few years of Service life behind an office desk.

Ruefully he waded towards the far bunkers of the spaceport installation. Nothing except a flat barge appeared on the lagoon. From this he concluded that his intention of arriving unannounced had been successful. Sector-Superintendents did not arrive at minor planets without major cause and Kinoul had been in the game too many years to miss the implications. Besides which, Professor Rockwell had been a very close friend of his.

Around the extensive lagoon, a wealth of tropical vegetation edged over the concrete banks and sampled the waters with slim and abundant tendrils. Overall a ruthless tropical sun burned down and the rising heat and moisture from the shallow reaches of the lagoon caused potential mirages to appear and disappear. High above the rich greenness of the surrounding vegetation, a few giant birds circled lazily, carving great circles through the air against a white-hazed

sky. Here, one could imagine, was the land of lotus-eaters, timeless, untroubled, and narcotically beautiful. That it had also been responsible for the destruction of one of the more astute of the STA consultants, was an injunction to be very wary.

The spaceport Controller was surprised to see him. No passengers had been advised on the space ferry. This was a measure of Kinoul's ability to influence the system. The spaceport Controller's operations licence had been signed by Kinoul's own hand. He too agreed to let the Sector-Superintendent's presence pass unrecorded. He even volunteered a landcat and driver to take Kinoul to the STA Ecological Station some five kilometres away.

The landcat edged out of its shadowed portico and headed across the extravagantly tropical countryside. It had been on the tip of Kinoul's tongue to ask why a tracked landcat was preferable to a wheeled vehicle for transport. The unbroken sweep of lush vegetation gave its own answer. Baba had no use for roads. Save for the few tracks made by Terran vehicles, no paths existed. Although there were vast plantations filled to the brim with cultivated flora, nothing disturbed the lineless contours devised by Nature.

Their way led uphill and down; through valleys and over high ridges purple with florid poppies; and through green and sheltered tunnels beneath huge palmaceous fronds. Kinoul was impressed and enthralled. He sensed the thrusting vitality and richness of the indigenous life of Baba; the urgent insistence on a place in the sun, and the repayment of this right by a display of consummate and colourful beauty. This was the background to the dedicated and passionately enthusiastic researchers of the late Professor Rockwell.

At the Ecological Station, the resident-in-charge was a slight and frail young female ecologist. She viewed Kinoul's unheralded arrival with the degree of consternation normally reserved for a major earthquake. Janice Howell had been Rockwell's assistant. She presumably knew more than

anyone on Baba the interests that the professor had been following immediately before the time of his death. Janice led Kinoul into a cool, dark office, shielded from the worst effects of the Baban sun, and sat with fierce concentration waiting for the dreaded Sector-Superintendent to begin his examination.

Kinoul tried to put her at her ease.

'I expect you're wondering what I'm doing here,' he said kindly. 'Well, Professor Rockwell was a long-standing friend of mine. I don't need to say that his death has touched me deeply. I had the usual communication from the civil authorities on Baba and I've no reason to doubt their findings that he was the victim of a storm. But before he died, the professor took the unusual step of transmitting some information directly into the STA satellite circuits.'

Far from growing at ease, Janice's frown tautened into a band which must have hurt her forehead, but she volunteered no reply. Kinoul continued his explanation.

'Exactly what his message was, we shall probably never know. The signal was too corrupted by static to be decipherable. We think it was a repetitive message, probably from a tape loop. But it continued for too short a time for us to be able to reconstitute the sense. The only coherent phrase we could regain contained the words "...the thunder said ...." And that's what brings me here. I need to know what he was trying to tell us.'

'Need it have been that important?' Her voice was moulded logic, equally as cool as the room in which they sat.

'I think it was.' Kinoul followed the idea with certainty. 'Satellite circuit frequencies are used only by STA executives in cases of extreme emergency. Even then, they're used only when other means of communication aren't available or advisable. The fact of his sending the message has two implications. The first is that Professor Rockwell believed the information was sufficiently important to merit the use of the emergency circuits. The second is that

he was quite certain he wouldn't get the chance to impart the information any other way.'

She screwed up her face in concentration. 'I don't really know what the Professor was doing that morning. He was engaged in one of his interminable rows with the Terran Trade Consortium. Some sort of field trial had been arranged. He wasn't explicit about the details. He was completely certain it was all going to be a waste of time.'

'Yet by the time he contacted the satellite he knew he was going to die. Tell me, Miss Howell, how could he *know* he was in danger of being destroyed by lightning?'

She did not think she was meant to answer the question, and she did not attempt to do so. For the first time a slight relaxation crept into her puzzlement. The problem became more important than the circumstances surrounding it. She went to the cabinet and consulted the files, not so much because there were things she could not remember, but because the act of searching helped her to remember associated details which might otherwise have escaped her notice. It also gave her time to think.

'How much do you already know?' she asked. 'The Professor had a theory that some of the indigenous life on Baba has a level of intelligence on the Manneschen Scale sufficient to make Terran exploitation illegal. He was thinking of the birds.'

'I've seen it mooted in his reports, but the case has never seemed too clear. I've also read the official counterblast by the Terran Trade Consortium, which appeared to make the Professor's speculations seem rather academic.'

She smiled wanly. 'On the contrary, the initial impetus was based on no more than a hunch. The academics came later. We'd noticed that the larger Baban birds appeared to have a strong system of social hierarchy.'

'So have many insects,' said Kinoul, 'but that doesn't prove the presence of intelligence.'

'In itself, no. But it does imply some mechanism of social regulation. In many classes of creature, the regulating mechanism can be right down at the hormone-exchange

level. This was found not to be true for the birds of Baba. We examined their class-structure more closely—and finally identified the king.'

'King?'

'Boss-bird, flock leader—call him what you will. There's one bird out there who appears to direct and co-ordinate the activities of the others. But in observing him, we got a shock ourselves.'

'What sort of a shock?'

Janice Howell summed him warily for a few seconds before replying.

'I don't know if you're going to believe this, Superintendent. It took us a little while to accept it ourselves. But while we were observing the king we gradually became aware—that he was observing us.'

'How long is it since you last went home on leave?' asked Kinoul sharply.

The question produced the kind of reaction he had expected. She flushed with sudden anger.

'I said you'd not believe me! But you'll find the fact well documented in Professor Rockwell's notes. And if there's further proof you want, you can see it for yourself.'

She reached for the shutters and flung them back from the windows to admit the bright glare of Baban midday.

'There's the king, out there. He's been watching this place all morning. Could it be that he's trying to figure out the reason for the arrival of a Sector-Superientendent?'

Kinoul approached the window and looked out. Looking back at him from the lower branches of a nearby tree was one of the beautiful light-grey birds of Baba. The magnificence of this particular bird was much enhanced by its size, which greatly exceeded that of the largest Terran eagle. Its appearance was that of a bird of prey, with long clawed, zygodactyl feet, and a curved, hooked bill which was turned towards the Terran with an expression Kinoul could only interpret as one of great acumen.

The Superintendent watched it speculatively for many minutes, then turned and closed the shutters after him.

'And Professor Rockwell believed that these creatures have a high level of intelligence?'

'He did. But he found it an uncommonly difficult thing to prove. They're so well adapted to their environment that almost any of their action can be ascribed to instinct rather than intelligence. It's never been possible to capture one alive, so we've been unable to measure their performance in the laboratory. Nor have we been able to encourage one to grow tame as a pet. In fact, all our knowledge of them has had to come from the dissection of dead carcases and from remote observations in the field. And as you probably saw for yourself just know, one tends to project one's own feelings into the encounter, and that spoils the objectivity.'

'Is there any micro-biological evidence to support the idea of high intelligence?'

'On a cellular level, no. They've a larger brain than any Terran aviform, but superficially not more complex. But our understanding of Baban biological structures is still in its infancy. There are organisational differences in their brain-structure, the implications of which we can't even begin to understand.'

'So it's still anybody's guess,' said Kinoul. 'Do you think they're intelligent?'

'I don't have any doubt of it.'

'Then you're to take the next ferry offworld for three months leave regardless of your entitlement. That's an order.'

'But why...?' She seemed suddenly near to tears. 'Don't you think I know my job?'

'I never questioned your job ability. I look at it this way. If you're wrong about the birds, you're wasting STA money by not approaching the subject with an open mind.'

'And if I'm right?' she asked, with a sudden flare of spirit.

'That's the rub,' said Kinoul. 'If you're right, you're logically in the same danger as was Professor Rockwell. I should hate for you to be struck by lightning. You're much too pretty and much too earnest to deserve a fate like that.'

In the humid and breathless air, the tremble of thunder sounded distantly. The evening had grown progressively more clouded and more threatening. Once Kinoul had seen the ferry bearing Janice Howell safely offworld, he had been able to relax. He stood at the porch of the Ecological Station and listened to the thunder echoing now from the untamed forests and now from the great plantations covering the low hills. At least two thundercells were active, about fifteen kilometres apart and still well distant, but they had a common origin in the mass of Baba-cumulus cloud which covered the whole storm area. From his position on the edge of the storm Kinoul could see where the upthrusting air-currents were being drawn into the cloud, raising cauliflower-heads of Baba-cumulonimbus like towers above the massing cloud. Where the thundercells were active, the cloud-tops were even higher, being dragged into great anvils by the upper winds. It was appropriately from the direction of these anvils that the sound of the hammers of wrath came distantly across the extravagant terrain.

Kinoul was full of silent speculation. The focus of the thundercells depended on a very delicate balance of Nature —the existence of a dynamic balance in the lower air which caused great upthrusting currents to form massive cylinders of rising air ten kilometres in height and possibly as much in diameter. These were the origin of the dreaded thundercells of Baba, many times more destructive than their Terran counterparts. But the sheer randomness and instability of the dynamic process appeared to make it impossible to determine where the new cells would be maturing while their brothers spent their energy and decayed.

Inside the still-open door there was piled on the table the masses of statistics and notes culled from Rockwell's files. The radio-facsimile printer in the corner was occasionally issuing yet more sheets of data from its on-line link with the STA data banks. But the most interesting document of all was one which Kinoul held in his hand. It was a frag-

ment torn from a scribble pad. In Rockwell's own hand it asked simply: 'Why do the birds attend a storm?'

The question was relevant. The onset of the storm had been heralded by the arrival of great flocks of the giant birds, wheeling and calling and darting together low over the verdant bush. It was possible to speculate that the presence of a storm presented an opportune time for gathering some favoured article of food and that it was this which attracted them. Or else the birds, recognising danger, had evacuated the storm centre and had retired to its perimeter waiting until it was safe to return. Neither of these explanations satisfied Kinoul.

His own observations suggested that the storm itself attracted the birds. Even as he watched, he could see many thousands of the giant creatures looping and flashing across the treetops like a band of furious angels. Heedless of the occasional heavy showers of rain, they appeared much intent on some purpose of their own. Kinoul brought out binoculars and studied them carefully, but the purpose of their activity remained a mystery.

Only one of the birds seemed unmoved by the proceedings. This was the bird which Janice Howell had called the king. He perched darkly in a darkening tree and paid as much attention to Kinoul as Kinoul paid to the rest of the scene. Curiously, the Sector Superintendent did not find its presence threatening. In a way it was vaguely comforting. The feeling made him think of Janice Howell's scientifically-unproven tenet that here was an awareness and an intelligence.

Kinoul decided that his long vigil was playing havoc with his own objectivity. He shrugged impatiently and retired inside. His imagination had leaped to a vision of the great birds actually shepherding the storm. His equilibrium was not improved by finding a similar observation in the notes of Janice Howell.

The storm that broke overhead during the night was the worst he had ever experienced. Though no damage was done to the installation, he lay for many hours listening to

its violent fury. And again and again, too frequently for it always to have been imagination, he thought he heard the sound of great wings.

At the headquarter offices of the Terran Trade Consortium on Baba, Kinoul sought out an old acquaintance, John Mangostein, the Consortium's local director. Mangostein, not having heard that Kinoul was on Baba, was duly surprised.

'I take it, George, that you're not here on vacation?'

'Far from it,' said Kinoul. 'I'm here because Professor Rockwell died and because before he died he tried to give us a message which didn't get through.'

'Well I'm afraid I can't help you there. We discovered his 'cat burnt-out in the forest and we sent you a summary of our findings. There's little we can add to that.'

'He was working on a theory that the birds of Baba possess a high innate intelligence.'

'I was aware of his theory. It just didn't happen to fit the facts.'

'But you realise the implications behind the idea?'

'Sure!' Mangostein nodded sagely. 'Under Space Conventions, it's forbidden to exploit any planet where an indigenous life-form can be shown to have an intelligence rating above four on the Manneschen Scale. Sorry, George, but you won't make that one stick. There's not one shred of evidence that the birds out there rate more than one point two Manneschen—that's about the same as a Terran chicken.'

'Rockwell didn't appear to think so.'

'Let's face it, George. Rockwell was not exactly in his prime. Now I know he was a friend of yours, so don't take this amiss. But when he died he was closing up to sixty-five years of age, and well past retirement. Every man is entitled to the dreams of his dotage, but don't let's confuse them with reality.'

'I'm trying to preserve an open mind,' said Kinoul. 'So to

do justice to you all, I've opted to make an independent assessment.'

'Yours? With respect, you're not a trained ecologist, or an extra-terrestrial biologist. If your conclusions conflict with those of my specialists, I'd have no choice but to fight you through every court in the Galaxy.'

'I hope it won't come to that,' said Kinoul. 'But present evidence suggests you may be wrong—so wrong, in fact, that you'd be laughed out of even primary court.'

'That's a bold statement, George. But I'd be interested in hearing your evidence.'

'Very well!' said Kinoul. 'Let's consider first what the Manneschen Scale is supposed to represent. It claims to be a measure of alien intelligence. In the final analysis it's purely a measure of the intelligence that can be communicated in terms a *human* estimator can understand. Communication is an essential feature in establishing a Manneschen level.'

'Granted. But the ability to communicate is also an essential part of the concept of intelligence. An IQ of a thousand sealed up in a box is a nil intelligence as far as the rest of the universe is concerned.'

'Then let's look at intelligence as a survival factor. Species-wise, if your environment contains something you can't tolerate, you either evolve so that the worry factor is of lesser importance—or you use your intelligence directly to manipulate your environment. You either develop long legs to run from the tiger, or you invent a gun with which to shoot it.'

'I don't see where you're leading, George.'

'Then tell me—has a bird on Baba ever directly injured a man?'

'There were a couple of incidents in the early days when we were clearing the nests from the plantation areas. Finally we shot a few of the beasties and I don't think there's been a case since.'

'Did it ever strike you as odd that shooting a few should have an effect on the behaviour of them all?'

'I don't think I ever thought about it. I suppose we just assumed . . .' Mangostein paused in mid-sentence.

'You just assumed that the creatures had learnt their lesson,' supplied Kinoul. 'A lesson learnt by a few, which radically altered the behaviour of the whole species. That's a rare exercise in communication, by any standards. And you still maintain they're devoid of intelligence?'

'You're splitting hairs,' said Mangostein disgustedly. 'What we really assumed is that when we stopped attacking the nests, they stopped attacking us. Though perhaps they do have intelligence enough to have a rudimentary language. But does that really alter the point? We need the agricultural products we can grow on Baba. The plantations supply a lot of the essential alkaloids and natural organic derivatives which can't economically be produced on Terra. The birds don't use the space for a damn thing.'

'Except to live in.' Kinoul was critical. 'It's a questionable morality for us to acquire their living space simply to save ourselves a little commercial inconvenience.'

'Are you going soft, George?' asked Mangostein. 'Isn't that the way of all humanity since the beginning of time?'

'On Terra, yes. But we'd hoped not to bring that particular trait with us to the stars. That's why the Space Conventions were formulated.'

'But you can't cite one major instance where the birds use intelligence to manipulate elements of their environment to their own advantage.'

'I think I can,' said Kinoul quietly. 'You see, it looks as though they have the ability to create and control the storms.'

'Ah, so that's your line!' Mangostein moved stray locks of hair back from his forehead. 'Beavers manipulate streams by building dams, remember. But that doesn't qualify them for a high IQ.'

'But you don't deny the birds *can* manipulate storms?'

'I don't deny they associate with storms. I'd be very doubtful about their ability to control them. But whatever

they do is an instinctive approach. It has nothing to do with intelligence.'

'Then it gives you a hard question to answer. For the first couple of years you imported a considerable quantity of bird repellent field-dressing for seed protection. Then you stopped importing it. Why?'

'There's no mystery there. It was only necessary for certain crops. These crops we finally ceased to grow.'

'Why? Did the birds get them?'

'No. The venture proved uneconomic. As a matter of fact the plantations were all destroyed by storms.'

'And how many types of crop which didn't need bird-repellent dressings have had to be abandoned because of storms?'

'Very few.'

'Yet you refuse to accept the obvious conclusion that the birds directed the storms to destroy the plantations because they objected to the field-dressing?'

'Yes, because it doesn't fit the facts. It took us a long while to work out the answers, but the picture finally emerged. You see, the birds didn't direct the storms to those fields—we did it ourselves.'

'You?'

'So our latest theory runs. We had asked Professor Rockwell to investigate the causal relationship between field-dressing and the incidence of storms. Unfortunately we couldn't accept his findings that the correlation was due to avian intelligence. We therefore challenged him to put our own theory to the test.'

'With what result?'

'I'm truly sorry, George—but the resulting storm was the one which killed him.'

'Then you'd better let me have the facts,' said Kinoul, 'because this is one experiment which will have to be repeated.'

Kinoul drove the landcat as far as he was able, finally coming to the edge of one of the great plantations where

huge crimson plants were obviously under intensive cultivation. Not wishing to damage the crop, he necessarily had to skirt the fields. Soon his way was obstructed by wide irrigation channels and an unusual density of palms and bamboo-like vegetation which congregated close to the abundant water.

By trial he found he could proceed faster on foot than by landcat. The tall fronds overhead gave him a welcome shade which made his labours with a machette just about tolerable in the heat. Beneath the undergrowth his way was brightened by all manner of incredible flowers and orchids. In the little rills and streams which broke away from the main watercourse, a million rainbow water-creatures flashed brilliant in the occasional shafts of sunlight. The air was alive with heavy scents, unfamiliar, yet decidedly heady and pleasant. The brush was athrob with the rasp and whisper of living and thrusting yet virtually unseen fauna and overall came the long, clear calls of the great birds sporting in the high trees.

Half an hour's exertions brought him to the place he had selected. The instrumented radio-pocketpack verified his position. He glanced at his watch and noted the time, then made a radiocall to the control centre of the Terran Consortium. Finally he returned the pocketset to the frequency of the supervising satellite and left the channel open.

He now faced a period of waiting. He occupied himself by studying the spacious trees rising above and appreciating the intense vigour of life in the brush on all sides. His position had placed him roughly on the edge of the forest and close to the great plantation whose florid blooms he could just discern as a sea of bright redness beyond the thinning treeline.

Life on Baba was thrusting and abundant, whether natural or cultivated in form. The urgent insistence of every living thing on the right to attempt to survive and multiply, was a message which he read very plainly. From the giant birds in the high branches down to the minutest insects underfoot, Baba was vibrantly, almost ecstatically, alive.

Within the hour he heard the sound of the Consortium's helicopters far out in a circle around him. They were spraying bird-repellent across literally hectares of plantation and forest. By careful pre-arrangement they kept their distance and left a clear kilometre radius between him and the broad band of chemical emulsion which descended from their sprays. Using his binoculars, Kinoul watched the birds in the high, leavy roof of trees. They seemed attentive and aware of the event, but not unduly perturbed. As Mangostein had predicted, the great birds of Baba appeared to consider it no great concern of theirs.

Unconvinced, Kinoul sat down to await the next phase of the prediction. The theory was simple. As the emulsion dried upon the foliage it whitened—and in so doing increased the infra-red reflection over a local area to such an extent that broad thermal currents were caused to rise. These upset the equilibrium of Baba's permanently unstable weather. Like Terra, Baba's atmosphere was a gigantic heat-engine, drawing its energy from its sun. It was unlike Terra inasmuch as there were no great seas or substantial mountains to continually moderate the pattern. Baba was one great ball of virtually continuous tropical forest with an almost uniform absorption of radiant heat. Very little change in surface reflectively was needed before the hair-trigger sensitivity of the dynamic forces in the upper air would respond by producing a major thunderstorm.

It had been the contention of the Consortium investigators that any substantial change in surface reflectivity would be likely to initiate a storm. The theory was that the spraying of bird-repellent over a large area was itself sufficient to trigger the effect. They maintained that the destruction of the plantations so treated was in no way due to the presence of the birds. If this was proven, it left a deep gap in Rockwell's case for avian intelligence. It was putting this theory to the test that had cost Rockwell his life.

Now Kinoul was having the experiment repeated, with himself at the proposed storm centre. He realised he could have observed the event more safely from a distance, but he

was still unconvinced about the role of the birds merely as followers of the storm. His view, confirmed by Rockwell's notes, was that the birds played an active part in the development of the storm. Kinoul felt that it was imperative that he understood the nature of the relationship between the avians and the forces of the sky. This was why he was placing his life at risk in the same manner as had Rockwell.

With his binoculars he constantly scanned the leafy heights and the patches of sky beyond. His first observation was the formation of a haze across the sun and the slow gathering of clouds. Perhaps the birds noticed it too, because one by one they split the leafy screen and rose lazily upwards to circle the area and then to fly beyond his ken. Presently none of them remained.

Kinoul felt he should have quit then—before the storm broke. Having determined the reason for the cloud's formation, there was no logical sense in remaining to suffer the discomfort and danger of the aftermath. The 'cat was only a kilometre distant and he judged he had ample time to gain it and be heading for clear weather before the fury broke. Yet some instinct urged him to remain and follow the development through.

As he turned and surveyed the tunnel formed under the great palms he felt a sudden sense of something unusual. The feeling was incredibly strong, yet for a moment he had difficulty in placing the factor which warned him. Then he realised that, whereas a minute earlier, the lesser wildlife in the brush had been swarming industriously, all was now silent. Even the minute creatures in the bushes had run away and hidden themselves in whatever lairs they possessed. The swift transition from industry to the forlorn sense of desolation and desertion, was a contrast not to be treated with equanimity. He could only guess at the rising electrical charge, but the creatures knew its value. And the mechanics of natural selection had taught them to be very much afraid.

Slowly the cloud grew and a darkness descended. An

overall shade killed what had been shadows and overlaid everything with even deeper shadow. This was an unusual and premature night, where the only suggestion of light crept in at the edges, providing surreal and impossible illumination for an impossible and surreal scene. Even the solitary leaves ceased their movement as the slight perpetual breeze was quelled by the depths of a mighty calm.

Kinoul now began to regard the trees with a new appreciation of their form. Almost sapless, their glazed trunks and knuckled joints had been fashioned by evolution to become almost perfect high-voltage insulators. When the electrical potentials of a growing storm approached seven or more kilovolts per metre, survival frequently depended on having either a high electrical resistance, or else in being very small. It was no accident that Baba possessed no large vertebrates except for birds. From his original contention that being struck by lightning was only a slight possibility, Kinoul was now forced to the conclusion that the probability ran uncomfortably high. Like Rockwell, he had already made the mistake of remaining in the area too long.

He felt the distinct bite of the bright and eager wind rushing towards the centre of the forming thundercell. It crossed his mind that it might at least be advisable to move away from the cell centre, but he decided it would be labour in vain. The darkness had continued to close until soon it was almost complete. It was no longer possible even to walk without tripping over trailing creepers and rotting logs.

In any case, he would have been halted by the rain. Never before in his life had he experienced anything to compare with the force of the deluge which descended. Although partly protected by the leafy screen above, the force of the falling water was a physical, bruising hurtfulness which thrashed his head and shoulders and soaked him instantly. Using his hands to protect his head against the beating streams, he staggered close against the bole of a large tree, gasping for breath as the water cascaded down his face and into his mouth and nose. Beneath his feet the

forest floor became a minor river which rose halfway to his knees with unbelievable rapidity. With his legs trapped in a sea of muddy loam, he could only wait in shocked anticipation to see what the elements would deal to him next.

He did not have long to wait. Soft hail as large as hen's eggs thrashed his soaked and unprotected shoulders and tore at his ears. He kept his hands protectively over his head and his face he kept down, with his forehead pressed against the tree. The chill shock of the semi-liquid snowballs against his spine caused his teeth to chatter and reduced him to a degree of wretchedness quite beyond his previous experience. If there was any consolation it was only that the sky had lightened somewhat to an overall murky grey, still forbidding but at least permitting him to see the details of the environment which caused him such discomfort. Nothing in his tribulations, however, quite prepared him for what followed.

There was an explosion to his right which he could have been excused for confusing with the bursting of a bomb. By some miracle the pilot stroke had sought a position some thirty metres distant. The mega-amp return stroke had literally vaporised a dozen trees in the dissipation of its energy. The sound of this barbarous event was prolonged, with the near effects arising first and apparently receding into the sky due to the limited speed of sound and the rapidly increasing distance of the ionised trail. It was a travesty of the actual speed and sequence of the pilot and return stroke.

Kinoul knew he was lucky still to be alive. The fantastic discharge current would be distributed radially through the local terrain. If the ground resistance was even only a fraction of an ohm per metre, the voltage drop between the legs of a standing man could still accrue to several kilovolts. Especially for a person as effectively earthed as he was at this moment. Thoughtfully he kept his legs pressed even closer together, though he suspected that he owed his life more to the conductivity of the water in which he stood than he did to any survival maxim.

Short though the period may have been, he could clearly differentiate between the pilot and the following dart leaders which accommodated themselves of most of the same ionised pathway through the skies. No less than seven dart strokes rocked the forest in the near vicinity. The roar of their explosive effects combined in a continuing cacophony of violent destruction. When his eyes had cleared of their brilliance and his ears of their thunder he was amazed to find how many surrounding trees had been destroyed. He was even more amazed to find that his own puny life had been spared.

Half deafened and with his nostrils rebelling at the ozone and vaporised sap, he clung to the one great bole which had somehow been his saviour. But he had little doubts about his final chances of survival. The thundercell above him was only just coming to maturity. It had many times the previously spent energy still at its disposal before it fell into decay probably an hour hence. In this time it would re-examine the electrical terrain beneath it, discount what had already fallen, and concentrate its energy on new paths of favoured low resistance. One such path must certainly include the soaking wet and upstanding body of George Kinoul and the tree beneath which he sheltered.

It was at this point that he thought he must be going mad. The whole forest seemed to come alive with movement, indistinct and impossible to identify in the dim light, but nevertheless crowded with life. His imagination painted a momentary picture of an attack by an army of giant rats. Then he rationalised his fears and decided that the fantastic gathering beneath the treetops could only consist of the giant Baban birds. Leaping, hopping and flying they came in a complete mass through the trees, like an animated wall of grey movement. Their alien mewing, soft though it was, completely drowned-out the sounds of storm.

What their purpose was, Kinoul had no means of knowing. He did not think it was to attack him, although he was obviously the focus of their attentions. He was no physical match for one aggressive bird, let alone the thousands who

filled the forest spaces. Within minutes he was completely surrounded, but he received no more harm than the occasional accidental brush with a wingtip. Then as if by some signal, the whole mass flew upwards, shattering the leafy screen above as they made their exit beneath the base of the storm. There they flew in their thousands close above the trees like a great organic whirlpool.

Forgetting his own wretchedness, Kinoul emerged into a relatively open space and watched with open-mouthed fascination. Wider and wider spread the circle of the great wings. More and more birds flew in every minute from the distant skyline to join the marvellous roundabout, which spread like a spiral nebula right across the sky. Nor was it lost on him that the thundercell above went into rapid and impotent decay. The thunder which still growled ominously, retreated almost to the far side of the forest.

With the sky lightening rapidly in this area, the birds wheeled and chased the darker regions to repeat their fantastic exorcism at a gradually increasing distance. With the first traces of sun beginning to break through, Kinoul watched them go regretfully. There was no doubt at all in his mind that their deliberate and incredible action had saved his life. Not only did they shepherd the maturing storms, but they also had the ability to congregate and rise up and destroy a thundercell in full maturity. Such a degree of proficiency in controlling their environment was not a gift given to many creatures—not even to Man.

As Kinoul began to move back to his 'cat, soaked and muddy and more than a little wearied by the experience, he realised that he was not quite alone. One of the giant birds had remained with him in the brush and was regarding him fixedly from a cautious distance. From its stance and apparent acumen he suspected that this was the same bird which had watched him at the Ecological Station. The one which Janice Howell had called the king...

As he passed it, Kinoul saluted gravely with a mud-stained hand.

'I think you've made your point, Mr. King. I don't think

Manneschen ever considered this sort of possibility. But that was mainly due to our own limitations in understanding what constitutes a communication. Before Rockwell, nobody ever thought to listen to what the thunder said.'

TANGLED WEB

by

H. A. HARGREAVES

Being Spiritual Advisor to a mixed group of nationalities in a closed Arctic environment was no sinecure for the newly appointed chaplain, especially when each faction was against every other and all united against him. He could not even bury the dead properly because of Union regulations...

TANGLED WEB

THE perspective was rather surrealistic. From the edge of the apron a few yards ahead of him, an intricate web of plastic pipe, conduit and cable stretched outward across the permafrost to the perimeter of the townsite. It was bounded on one side by a finished subdivision and on the other by the two hundred foot razorback ridge thrusting up at right angles to the river. Arching overhead was a maze of temporary lattice, from which this service hardware was suspended and high above that was the infinitely more complex, invisible web of SAC, endlessly whispering to the Arctic sky. Some wag, he thought, must surely have worked out a name later to suit those initials. Supersonic Air Carapace, indeed! Well, it was a sac after all, meshed above and below to protect man from this hostile environment. Or were they still deceiving themselves? A Closed Environment set into the Arctic Protected Environment. Wasn't it Isaiah who had said, 'The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants?'

He slouched against an untidy pile of wooden crating and watched while a spindly monster rolled slowly forward with high-pitched whine, trailing cable like some futuristic umbilical cord. As two men handed up bags from the sidebed, two more emptied them into the cooker and the operator lowered the long, wide-mouthed blower over the edge of the apron to lay a steady stream of foam. Three feet of Schlagge foam, the perfect insulator, shielding the permafrost, embedding the service hardware, making a grey-white, supertough floor for the last subdivision of Tundra City. Walls too, eventually, for the homes in which the final one hundred and fifty families would live. But at

least the interiors would have colourful laminates, a vital addition. He looked outward from under the latticework, through the SAC shimmer, across the reach of rivermouth towards Welcome Sound and shivered slightly as his eyes strained to find where grey-white met white-grey in the fine haze of lifted snow.

Even where he stood, a few droplets sifted on to his silver hair, indicating that the new section of SAC was not completely meshed yet. He straightened his gaunt frame slowly, forcing ageing joints to measure his full six-foot-five. Flicking spray from his lowered hood he turned away from the construction area, where already men were dismantling the first section of lattice, stopping only to pull off a gauntlet and run his hand over the wood he had leaned against. When had he last felt real wood, he wondered; even rough scrap like this? Crating. The extravagance of it made him painfully aware again that he was an alien here. The machines had been cradled in this, carried by tractor train on the ice of Hudson Bay (thus getting around the Protected Environment regulations) for hundreds of miles from the Quebec shore to this mining site, to get the construction done by break-up. The credits it had cost were too much for him to imagine. With a shrug and a pushing back of old shoulders, he moved off the growing apron and through the subdivision airscreen, into the comfortable five degrees centigrade of Tundra City's 'main' street.

Stepping out in a deceptively unhurried pace, he returned to City Center, turning huge brown eyes up to the chrono mounted on the only third storey in town. 16.20—plenty of time before his appointment with Vladmir Homynyk, and he was reluctant, as always, to go to his own quarters. He sauntered through the lobby, reading notices on the bulletin boards, passed the steps to the upstairs rec rooms and entered the barnlike gymnasium, cum cinema-theatre, cum ballroom—and church.

At the far end, next to the left stage entrance, was a flush plastic door with a sign: 'Benjamin Scroop, Spiritual Advisor.' Grimacing, Scroop visualised a third line: 'Com-

puterised Confessions,' which was perhaps more appropriate in view of what he had accomplished here so far. Some seven hundred and fifty souls were entrusted to his care, in three splinter congregations and a sprinkling of other sects and to an individual they seemed either engaged in insidious obstruction or totally inert. For the life of him he could not understand why he, with less than a year to mandatory retirement, should have been plucked from his parish in Greater Danbury, Connecticutt, and posted to a—a mine town. All Hail the Great God Computer, he muttered mutinously. Well this time the computer had erred, and the Placement Committee was either blind or senile to have accepted its recommendation. Yet in his heart he knew his self-deception and with a soul-sick acceptance he granted the computer its dispassionate accuracy.

He himself had spun the thread which led to this end many years ago. Schlitz, or something, he had called himself, the man who appeared one night at the Scroop ELS, asking for help which the Spiritual Advisor could not provide. The Continental Computer had somehow struck that man off as dead and so he was dead to the world, for all practical intents and purposes. Scroop had watched him go back out into the darkness, to cope alone with his dilemma, and after a sleepless night the scholarly cleric, with his earned DD, had set aside his love for religious history and begun a new study. He would acquire the proper pastoral skills.

Now with ironic amusement he went into his 'office' and private quarters which, unpartitioned, had previously been used to store gym apparatus. It was part of the general conspiracy to keep him uncomfortable, to let him know he was unwelcome. It was bad enough, with its unrelieved grey-white walls, ceiling, floor, its slapped-in fixtures and furnishings. But what these independent Old Canadians didn't realise was that he had more space here than in his Stretched Efficiency Living Space at home; vastly more than in the ELS of those many years ago, with a wife and seven children. Here, the old widower rattled like a pea in a dry

pod. And he had the two vital tools of his trade hooked up and working, both the viewer-scanner and the remote access computer console. Theoretically, it should merely be a matter of time until he had this situation under control, drawing upon the resources of the Regional Computer and the library, in Winnipeg. Nevertheless, it was as if his familiar arch-enemy, the Continental Computer, while acknowledging him as a wily master technocrat, had named him for this task to show him what he had really lost on that night when he decided to meet his parishioners' world on its own terms.

Meanwhile, it was time to meet another master, Vladmir Homynyk, and as if on cue the Chief Steward of Local 764, Mining, Smelting, and Refining Union, appeared at Scroop's door. 'Come in, come in,' Scroop said mildly, 'take a pew.' He rolled his own chair past the corner of the scanner, into what might be called casual space between the equipment and the door, but Homynyk refused to descend to informality. Prowling restlessly through the cramped office, from door to partition setting off the tiny bed-sitter and back again, he turned abruptly and asked 'What is it this time? You got any more ideas that can't be done?' He placed a meaty hand on top of the computer console and smeared grime on to its hood from his thumb. (There had been ample time to wash and change after he left the pits.) Scroop built a steeple with long, pale fingers and looked over it with wistful brown eyes. 'I'm afraid it's nothing new, Vladmir,' he murmured, 'just the same old question. As Patriarch, when are you going to arrange for me to provide your congregation with daily religious instruction?'

Homynyk snorted, 'You're wasting your time and mine. Religious instruction begins with the men, and you aren't qualified.'

Scroop asked innocently, 'And just once more, why am I not qualified?' In disgust Homynyk made as if to leave, but turned with undisguised scorn and levelled a forefinger.

'I told you a dozen times, we saw all this coming before I was born. When Old Canada and the US incorporated. We

ain't just Orthodox Ukrainians—we're unionists. The community don't just have any old Holy Joe. He's a priest and he's a card holder: a chaplain of the local. I told you to read the Union's Reformed Constitution.' He wiped his nose with a hairy wrist, as Scroop rolled his chair back to the scanner and flipped the switch. 'That's one of the things we got against you CUSS men,' the steward finished. 'You got all the answers under your switches, except the ones you need for a man's world.'

'But I took your advice, Vladmir,' Scroop offered quietly. 'I flipped a switch and read the constitution. And I flipped it again and read the original constitution, because in some places the new one simply says "as per the old".' Vladmir's eyes narrowed slightly and Scroop continued. 'A Spiritual Advisor for the Christian United Spiritual Society is acceptable to all sects of the merged Christian faith, but he does have to meet local needs.'

Vladmir's voice dripped scorn as he answered, 'And we in Old Canada never merged. Regardless of the UN ruling on our petition, you don't belong. You don't qualify.'

Scroop leaned back in his chair and sighed. 'I was up at 04.00, Vladimir,' he replied. 'I went down to pithead 6 during the first shift. The foreman very kindly showed me how to operate the auger and I cut two feet of face. I rode an ore car up and helped couple it at the tunnel siding.' Vladmir opened his mouth, but Scroop held up a hand. 'I was over at the smelter at 10.00,' he continued, 'for a look-in. Got a chance to pry slag out of one furnace. Hot work, even in the suit. And last,' he smiled faintly, 'I was over at the refinery at 14.00. A docker let me put some ingots on the robofreight with his forklift.' Vladmir moved back into the room and sank heavily into a chair. Scroop's smile became absolutely benign. 'Yes, the original constitution must have had men like me in mind. And the second doesn't revise *that* section on chaplains one bit. I believe I've qualified three times over, don't you?'

Not that it really changed things, Scroop thought after Homynyk had left. The Chief Steward knew that he had

seriously underestimated his rival. But it would be long and hard work till Scroop gained real acceptance with the congregation. The computer had given him a group profile of astonishing cohesion and identification with the patriarchal figure. There were, however, theological points on which he could develop his own roots within the congregation. One thing was certain: they were in desperate need of spiritual renewal and guidance. From him? His own soul-sickness rose again, but he consciously thrust it down. There was more work that he was peculiarly fitted to do and he had best be about it.

Henri LeBlanc preferred to work during the third shift and since he was the manager of the Hudson Bay Company store, no one could argue, had anyone cared. Perhaps it was because even during the early summer, when it never really got dark, there was less business than during the other two shifts, hence he could take care of the light duties created by his second job as nominal mayor of Tundra City. He was in a mood apparently as expansive as his ample middle and greeted Scroop jovially enough. 'Which hat shall I put on. Mr. S.A.?' he chuckled. 'On what business do you come to my little shop?' Scroop glanced through the clear plastic to the main floor of the store below and lowered himself into a chair as if listening for squeaky hinges. 'Henri, mon fils,' he grunted, 'it has nothing to do with your congregation—at the moment, though there are certain things which must soon cease upon pain of excommunication. Yours!' He watched as a shadow of fear flitted across the other's face, and then barked a short laugh. 'Come,' he said, 'you were too good a student while you were at seminary to take me seriously. After a number of years one easily forgets things, or perhaps one may have left before acquiring certain knowledge. Such as who may give absolution, or extreme unction to the dying when an ordained priest is within call.'

Henri's normally ruddy face went quite pale and Scroop pressed while he had the storeman on the defensive. 'No, no,' he waved a boney hand, 'let us not speak of this un-

fortunate death for the moment. I come, rather, to speak for Christian charity. The matter of the sacramental wine. Not for myself, though I would prefer to consecrate official spirits for my daily communion. For the Anglicans, Henri!' He added just a hint of pleading to his voice. 'They have not taken communion for years, some of them, because the congregation has not had a priest, yet now they refuse because the wine is not "official".'

Somewhat relieved, Henri threw up his hands and rolled his eyes heavenward. 'On this matter, you know that I would like nothing better than to be of help,' he said, still not looking directly at Scroop. 'It is, as I have pointed out, the fault of the Continental Transportation Code. Beer, cider, distilled spirits and fortified wines may be transported to the distributor authorised in a Closed Environment. Moi! But it says nowhere anything about sacramental wines. Moreover, it is clear, there, that no public or private carrier may transport the intoxicating beverages for an individual in a Closed Environment. Toi! My hands, they are tied,' he cried, throwing the said members wide in a rather contradictory gesture.

Scroop clucked to himself in disappointment. 'Henri,' he reproved, 'have you no pride in your own company? A company looking to its three hundred-and-fiftieth birthday?' Henri looked bewildered at the cleric's seeming shift of subject. Scroop used the tone one normally reserves for scolding children. 'The Hudson Bay Company has always enjoyed certain exemptions from enacted legislation. Always!' he emphasised the last. 'The final volume of regulations from the Department of Transport in Old Canada retained most of those exemptions for townsite branches and among them were many that maintained good relations between The Church and the Company. Now the AmeriCanadian Continental Transportation Code says: "Except where specifically altered in the following document, existing legislation of both countries shall remain in effect." I can give you the exact passages which allow you to transport sacramental wine for all good Christian pur-

poses.' He dropped a sheet of foolscap on Henri's desk, with a single short, scribed line of letters and numbers.

The rotund mayor-manager was clearly stunned. Scroop rose stiffly and began to button his parka, then turned and faced him. 'About the child, Henri. It will comfort your soul to know that she was not certifiably dead when *I* reached the dispensary.' Then he intoned sternly: '"It is a stiff-necked people and I will bend them." You know the verse? I will give you your penance in the proper place.' As he stalked from the office Henri stammered, 'Good day, Father,' and Scroop wondered as he walked down the stairs whether it had been a conscious capitulation.

It was not quite 18.00 and he still had two appointments and he was bone tired. He sat in the autoteria toying with his food, not really hungry and afraid to eat too much lest he get dull. Autoteria food was all the same anyway, he decided, which was only half the truism since all food was literally the same whether you dialled it here or at home. He hadn't really enjoyed eating since Martha's death and no one became a gourmand on a Spiritual Advisor's credits once his Family AP was gone. Bitter humour, he thought looking at his newer All Purpose Card. At his age and in this place he was suddenly receiving more credits than he had ever dreamed of—for 'hardship allowance'. Yet this was luxury compared to the conditions in that old ELS, with seven kids and a wife crammed into triple-tiered bunks and his work to clear away before they could eat in shifts.

The gnawing pain was with him again; loss of something more than family. Back then he had known a deep contentment that had nothing to do with material things or close relationships and for a fraction of a second he had glimpsed it again, as he was leaving Henri LeBlanc's office. To serve a spiritual need once more, instead of manipulating the maze. He tossed off the rest of his coffee, slipped his AP Card into a pocket and left his half-finished meal.

All family accommodation in Tundra City was essentially the same, differing only in the number of bedrooms,

yet Cyril Jameson and his wife had managed to make their flat look somehow more finished. Not exactly elegant; more like the picture of what an elegant home ought to be. The Town Engineer-School Principal ushered Scroop in with an offhand casualness, graciously offered a drink which was graciously declined and settled his lean, athletic body into a graceful chair. After the required preliminaries, his wife excused herself.

'Now, Sir, how can I help you?' Jameson asked expectantly. Scroop, who had already probed without success for a chink in this armour of gentility, decided that there was no longer any virtue in playing by Jameson's rules.

'We could start,' he said brusquely, 'with my WC.'

Jameson's face went a startled blank, and the seconds lengthened until he responded lamely: 'I see. Or rather, I'm not sure I do see.'

Scroop was relentlessly tactless. 'Perhaps I should have said,' he continued, 'my lack of a WC. You must surely have answered my memo personally, since your name is scribed at the bottom.'

Jameson coloured slightly. 'Actually,' he said, 'I did see your memo, but I, uh, turned it over to my clerk. Part-time, you know.' Then he seemed to draw up a little more assurance. 'Nevertheless, I do recall the answer made very clear our reasons for not providing a—bathroom—in your quarters. For the time being.' He managed to look a bit offended. 'I would have thought that this was hardly the place...'

Scroop cut him off with a guffaw. 'Course not,' he replied, and sprawled slightly on the divan, obviously not to be budged for some time.

Jameson rose and asked, 'Sure you won't have a drink? I think I'll have one myself, after all.' He slotted the Family AP and dialled jerkily, then returned to sit and sip with clear apprehension over what gauche act Scroop would commit next. That worthy straightened and looked him in the eyes. 'Jameson,' he said in businesslike tones, 'there have been no confirmations in this parish since it was first

opened. Yet there are at least two dozen people of a proper age. Why haven't they been instructed?'

Jameson looked into his glass and answered in a faintly amused tone. 'You know yourself that I'm only a Lay Reader, not a Deacon.'

Scroop tapped a finger on his knee in annoyance. 'Come now,' he retorted, 'there's been a ruling on that for centuries. In remote parishes a Lay Reader, or even a Warden, may be so empowered. That power has been implicit with your licence from Howard Keewatin.' Scroop waved a stiff hand as Jameson angrily leaned forward. 'I know, I know. Now it's my job. Classes will be announced next Sunday. Next, I want you to find something appropriate for a baptismal font.'

Jameson shot to his feet. 'No!' he shouted. 'That's too much. No agent of CUSS is going to baptise children in my parish.' He flushed and a vein swelled at his temple.

Scroop said quietly, but ominously, 'Sit down, Jameson. Your parish? Not yours, or mine. But you are my Lay Reader, so long as I make the annual request.' He waited until the angry man had regained control and understood the threat. 'Now,' he said, 'let me tell you something that none of you has taken the trouble to look up. Henry Danbury presided at my ordination, many years ago. Nevertheless, I took some precautions when I came, including a call when I stopped over at Churchill. The Bishop of Keewatin made it to the heliport in time to place his hands on my head and bless me.'

Jameson was clearly shaken by the revelation, but he appeared not to be finished. 'All right,' he conceded, 'we'll grant your apostolic succession. We'll grant the UN ruling on our petition, that one CUSS Advisor may serve the townsite.' He smiled bitterly. 'It's too bad you didn't have more time with the Bishop. He could have told you why he hasn't sent a priest to us. Why he won't come himself, even if we have a hundred children ready for comfirmation.'

Suddenly hyper-alert, Scroop couldn't have cared less for the moment who was winning the battle of wills here. This

was vital information which he had not been able to unearth. Jameson, in his agitation, hardly noticed Scroop's interest. 'Sure each denomination wanted its own priest, and that seems inefficient. But don't fool yourself that the General Manager could have kept them out for long on that ground. Hobbs may be a virulent atheist but he's not an idiot. Our worker priests could have qualified as legitimate personnel even under his interpretations.'

Jameson thrust clenched fists into the pockets of his lounging suit, stamped across the room, and swung around scowling. 'It's the nature of the beast behind the ridge,' he said. 'Or its potential nature. Somehow the rumour got around that we were separating radio-isotopes. Particularly the stuff used in fission weapons. The worst part of it is that it's possible, theoretically. We have magnetic centrifugal separators at the refinery. The ore is rich in half a dozen heavy metals, including Uranium. Put the method and the material in the same place and then try to explain to the average man what the difference is between our "floaters" and a plasma separator.'

Scroop didn't have to be a genius to understand. Jameson could see he was following. 'So there isn't a priest in Old Canada,' he finished, 'who will come to Tundra City, or any sect that will send one. Meanwhile, Hobbs plays it cosy and denies just hard enough to keep the rest of the world relatively convinced that we're not warmongers, including the UN and CUSS.'

There was a long silence before Scroop finally spoke. 'You said, I believe, theoretically possible?'

Jameson puffed his cheeks in exasperation. 'Not you too? Of course it's theoretically possible. Even a Civil Engineer like me can tell you that. But not with the same equipment. So how do you hide an operation like that?'

Scroop nodded apologetically. 'I'll take your word for it.' He got up with genuine reluctance and said with less genuine optimism, 'I do have two more pleasant things to tell you. First, we should have official sacramental wine for communion when Henri's next shipment comes from the

Manitoba Liquor Commission. Second, there's a cassette alongside my scanner which says, "I will be in Tundra City some time next fall. Howard Keewatin." He sounds like a man who tends his flock.'

It struck Scroop, as he made his way back to City Center, that Jameson would worry over his reaction to the nuclear weapons rumour. Could it be that a CUSS Advisor was better than no priest at all? It wouldn't last, though, and the Anglicans, with that infuriating diffidence which seemed inherent, would be the last to accept him. After all, he thought wryly, there was that ancient joke—how did it go—about God coming home to Old Canada to live with his Anglican heirs. He doubted that the joke would go over well with Alvin Hobbs.

The muted hum of a vehicle brought him back to the present with a slight start, and he moved quickly to the corner of the main intersection to wave down the approaching service truck.

'Goin' through, Padre?' the driver asked and Scroop sighed wearily as he folded his long body into the passenger seat. The young man dialled up and they accelerated smoothly towards the tunnel mouth. Shifting a wad of something to his other cheek with a trace of embarrassment, he glanced sideways at Scroop and cleared his throat. 'I been meanin' to get to mass regular,' he began, 'now you're here. Went for a while, but Henri and most of the rest speak French, an' . . .'

He trailed off and Scroop said gently, 'I understand, my son. A habit broken is hard to restore.' They were into the tunnel now (another way around the Protected Environment regulations), but he ignored the mine entrance and ore cars on the right, the river access branch and storage chambers to the left. With studied casualness he asked, 'When was the last time your confession was heard?'

The driver drummed nervous fingers on the steering wheel, then answered. 'Before you came.' There was awkward silence and he blurted out, 'Before I came two years ago.'

They came out into grey light and the driver turned hard right with visible relief, dialling off to a quick stop in front of the Admin. Building. Scroop levered himself out on to the foam and leaned back into the cab. 'Confession for third-shift RC's is 06.30 Thursday mornings. There's no queue,' he added, and stood with bare hand in a half-gesture of benediction while the truck pulled away. He noted with satisfaction that he had three minutes to spare before his appointment with Hobbs, at 21.20.

The office was the man; an extension of Alvin Hobbs' personality. One saw first the massive, tidy desk, then the severe, solid chairs and file decks, after that the unrelieved walls of simulated oak, the deep brown carpet, and finally the panoramic sweep of industrial complex framed by recessed tan curtains. The General Manager, veteran of many union and government battles, stood at his window in clear command of the scene; mine, smelters, separators, power plant; the complete site. Scroop knew that he was supposed to be intimidated, aware of how insignificant he and his problem were.

'Then it's No again?' he asked slowly.

'I'll disregard the "again", Scroop,' the manager replied evenly. 'Aside from the fact that you have a wide scope for recreation at City Center, I have many reasons for not allowing this silly proposal.'

Scroop tried a placatory tone. 'Sometimes when you settle into a comfortable routine, you don't realise that you're using the facilities in a monotonous fashion; getting stale.'

'Nonsense,' Hobbs snapped. 'I hardly get over to use them any...' He flushed and switched his ground. 'Having a number of kids in the complex for a prolonged period is out of the question. Why do you think they put the townsite on the other side of the ridge to begin with? That's a nuclear power plant.' He jerked a thumb in the direction of the window.

Scroop caught him up. 'But I understand that groups are

brought over by Mr. Jameson occasionally, for a half-day lecture.'

Hobbs reeled off with relish: 'AmeriCanadian Multi-Related Industries Operations Regulations: Section 432; paragraphs 18 to 20. For educational purposes, under supervision, when accompanied by a school official. And your snow sculpture contest doesn't qualify.'

Scroop wasn't done yet, however. 'Surely the heliport,' he persisted, 'in a fairly shielded area behind an outcropping, doesn't come under the same regulations?'

Hobbs smiled thinly. 'Probably does, at my discretion,' he purred, 'but in addition, you cannot allow the SAC to be interrupted over a heliport, except during landings and takeoffs. International Closed Environment Standard Legislation: Volume Two: Section SAC; Sub-Section Air Transport; Regulation One. So your budding artists may not collect a foot or so of snow on my heliport and roll it into glorified snowmen.' He gestured impatiently as Scroop began yet again. 'And there's no way they will set foot outside the SAC in violation of the World Court Protected Environment Agreement.'

Scroop murmured 'Ah, yes, we don't need chapter and verse on that. No, what I was going to suggest was that exception's have been made to the heliport rules. I've seen a very old notice about a kite-flying contest. It couldn't have been held on the Center playing field.' He went on more quickly. 'The regular flight got away this morning. We've three free days then, there's a nice storm brewing and we could have the port clean and dry, with the sculpturing on one of the spare pads, in forty-eight hours.'

Even in mid-sentence, Scroop sensed that Hobbs had been waiting for this. The manager glanced at his chrono and moved towards the door. 'I'm busy, Scroop,' he said with a patronising air. 'Too busy for people who don't grasp what life up here is all about. Stick to preaching. I suppose you know the rules and regs of that.' He opened the door and motioned Scroop through. 'Meanwhile,' he ended, 'I have another appointment. With some officials who just arrived

by copter.' The barb was flicked with seasoned skill and Scroop knew the timing of their meeting had been nicely calculated.

Equally calculated was the cold dismissal as they moved into the anteroom, where Hobbs nodded curtly and then boomed an effusive, 'Welcome to Tundra City, gentlemen,' at the two men before his secretary's desk. Unfortunately, there was too little room for Scroop to leave unnoticed and he found himself facing a small, turbanned individual whose black eyes shone like buttons, pulling ancient fabric into a maze of fine wrinkles. Those eyes, without haste, took in Scroop from head to toe, pausing fractionally at the venerable symbol on his breast. Somehow, while returning a soft 'Thank you, Mr. Hobbs,' he halted Scroop with a slightly raised finger. 'An equal pleasure,' he added, 'to be met by Doctor Scroop.'

Hobbs was obviously disconcerted, yet he covered his reaction extremely well. Even so, it seemed to amuse the second man, burly, dark-haired, untidy looking. With only a breath of disbelief in his voice, Hobbs asked, 'You've met then?'

The small man smiled serenely and answered, 'Not in the flesh, Sir. If I may . . .?' He bowed slightly towards his companion and said formally, 'Doctor Scroop—Doctor Horwitz. And I am Rahjan Sikh.' He turned back to Hobbs and said pleasantly, 'We are here primarily, of course, to discount certain misunderstandings, as technological observors. But you have here a religious anachronism which is peculiary apt for me and for Jacob, who heads the Semitic League delegation.'

Horwitz, who had watched with seeming detachment, stepped forward and extended his hand. 'You are the same Scroop then. *Neo-Rational Theology and the Cambridge Platonists.* I read it at New Union Seminary when I took rabbinical orders. Before the metallurgical degrees at home. A long . . . a while back.' Scroop winced inwardly despite Horwitz' attempt to gloss the slip.

He was spared an answer when Sikh took up the conver-

sation again. 'We three must talk at length, Dr. Scroop. In a way we all operate in a dual capacity, as holy men and technologists and there is much you can tell us about unabsorbed sects in isolated communities, particularly with your specialisation.' Then with the same effortless capacity he seemed to release Scroop and draw Horwitz and Hobbs into the office. Scroop shook his head at the incredible power of the man—the 'Miracle Worker of the Punjab', —and could well believe that he deserved his international reputation. He wondered what Hobbs would make of Sikh's comment about their dual capacities, for it was fairly clear that the manager had not yet recognised why Scroop, of all Spiritual Advisors, should have been sent here.

He was in luck again: the VIP wagon was still in front of the Admin. Building when he came out and he persuaded the driver that there would be plenty of time to run him under to City Center. He had hardly the time to savour the luxury of the ride when his chauffeur dialled off and he was left standing on aching legs. It seemed a worse indignity than usual to walk the length of the busy gym, pick up his toilet kit and walk half the length back to the men's locker room and showers. Moreover, though the hot water soaked out some of his deep physical fatigue, it served only to release the other, the spiritual pain.

Despite his real need for sleep, when he retired to his quarters he opened his prayer cabinet, rolled out the mat and sank to calloused knees. With eyes on the composited symbol within, he turned his mind to the preliminary disciplined associations. His thoughts swung from the open-bottomed Omega, signifying the dispensing of all things to men, to the over-printed Alpha, narrowing upward to the infinite point of Godhead. Slowly the period of those pendular thoughts closed, focussing on the cross at the centre of the symbol, the cross in which all crosses were captured and Scroop entered the sanctuary of prayer.

He surfaced dizzily out of clinging sleep, to realise that the vidphone had been chiming insistently in the office for

some time. Making his groggy way to the scanner desk, he spoke furrily into the phone and squeezed his eyes shut once or twice in an effort to read his chrono dial. It was 05.34 and the voice speaking in his ear said 'Horwitz! Jacob Horwitz. I'm at the dispensary. Sikh had a heart seizure earlier this morning. He managed to call for aid, but by the time the doctor reached him it was too late. I thought you should be the first to know, because it may present complications.' Which was probably the prime understatement of Scroop's lifetime.

By 08.00, Scroop was beginning to realise just how many and how far-reaching the complications were. To begin with, he had learned while signing the death certificate at the dispensary that Sikh was not Rahjan's family name, but the generic one given him by adoring compatriots. So far as they were concerned, he was The Sikh, the religious example for a people. Try as he might, he could not seem to make the importance of this clear to an irritable, or more accurately, a hostile Alvin Hobbs. The manager had at first refused to see the Spiritual Advisor, fobbing him off with a suggestion that he send a memo and it had only been when Scroop threatened to bring Horwitz into it that Hobbs had backed down. He was still, however, boiling at this new intrusion into his normal schedule.

'Look,' said Scroop patiently, 'the UN delegation demanded first that the body be taken immediately to the nearest international airport and flown directly to the Punjab.'

Hobbs snorted in derision. 'With that storm out there it will be three days before we can get the copter out, if we're very lucky.'

'I told them that,' Scroop explained, 'and they said what about a boat to Churchill.'

Hobbs clapped a hand to his forehead. 'Don't they know anything?' he groaned.

Scroop plodded on. 'I told them that the ice is rotten and even a hovercraft wouldn't be safe from sudden upthrusts, but nevertheless a boat couldn't get through.'

Hobbs said sarcastically, 'Well, at least you've learned something about life up here.'

Scroop ignored it, and continued. 'So we have the alternatives of preserving the body until it can be removed for burial, which the delegation say can be no more than three days anyway with stretching the laws, or giving it the proper rites here, which involve cremation, preferably on a pyre and casting the ashes into a river.'

Hobbs looked closely at Scroop, disbelief growing visibly. 'Those are alternatives?' he asked. 'Here?' He collapsed into his chair in a fit of laughter. Then, more soberly, he looked again at Scroop and said, 'Come on, now. How can you be serious? And after all, what does it matter to you? Oh I know, he's an international figure, but who besides a bunch of perpetually starving Indians is going to complain if we can't give him a royal send-off?' He smiled nastily. 'Anyway, you're a Christian. Why should you muck around with a dirty heathen?'

Scroop felt anger swell his throat shut, choking off any reply. Hold it, he thought, as reason took over, that's a question my new congregations might well ask. But the answer is so fundamental, his mind—or heart—said. So fundamental, indeed, that he was at a loss to put it into words. He gritted his teeth and turned away in disgust, starting to slip his parka over the white utility suit which hung on his gaunt frame. Inexplicably, his silence seemed to goad Hobbs almost beyond control, for he shouted at the back of Scroop's silver-haired head: 'Listen! It's your problem. You're so all-loving; you work it out. But I refuse—this office refuses—to be involved.'

So it was that a dispirited, dull Scroop, head beginning to throb slightly from tension and fatigue, found himself moving almost dreamlike through a day much like the previous one save that yesterday he had been on the offensive. Now he was groping after solutions that he knew didn't exist, possibilities that he knew were at best improbabilities.

First on the list was Henri LeBlanc, whose answers were as predictable as the fact that he resented his recent humil-

ity. 'It is known to me, all too painfully, that there are only two drawers in the dispensary morgue,' he said, pressing a hand to his chest. 'Are they not both occupied by members of the True Faith? If Mr. Hobbs had not made certain that the dispatcher was an obstructionist, the body of my poor cousin Claude woud be by now in St. Felicien.' He sighed gustily. 'It would not be taken kindly by us if the dear departed members were in any way disturbed until they are removed from the townsite.

'But,' he said with a hint of challenge, 'you have the powers, my dear Sir. You may not order that they be put together in the one drawer, of course, for that is specific in the regulations.'

Scroop tried to concentrate on this potential loophole and drew himself up short, recognising that Henri was dangling bait. 'No, what about the cold rooms and freezers here at the Company?' he asked, and Henri smiled in false sympathy.

'It is again, quite obviously, against the regulations of the public health. I have already prepared the citations for you.' He smiled again, dropping a sheet of foolscap into Scroop's lap. 'One may not put the body of even a true believer into those places.' Scroop did not deny him his moment of triumph: he left while the portly mayor still oozed unctious sorrow.

Vladmir Homynyk didn't trouble to disguise his delight at the turn of events and he too was totally prepared for any totally unsympathetic to Scroop's problem. The Spiritual Advisor, a big-city man, had been only dimly aware of that phenomenon of small communities called instant relay. But Homynyk met every query with detailed information, all of it negative, which revealed that he had been preparing almost from the moment of Sikh's death. Scroop had the feeling that he was being moved along a giant maze until he either dropped from exhaustion or gave up.

'Surely,' Vladmir stated, 'a Chaplain of the Union knows that in a mine the temperature increases. And if that

weren't enough, you know we fill in the older shafts with the slag. As for the storage chambers along the river access branch, nothing may be placed in them which could attract carnivores.' He shook his head as Scroop objected. 'Nothing! No matter what it's sealed in. Although it's actually left open to the atmosphere, it's interpreted as part of the Closed Environment. Now the wharves ...' and he paused until Scroop roused himself to sniff at the carrot. 'The wharves,' he continued, 'are part of the Protected Environment and nothing may be left on them except in the course of loading or unloading cargo.' It was rather a crude ploy, if not actually vicious and it stung Scroop sufficiently to make him more alert.

'All right,' he admitted, 'you can't help me to hold the body until the storm blows over. But isn't there any way to cremate it? The separators are out, naturally, but what about the smelters?'

'Vladmir's face reflected first surprise, indicating that he had not considered this, then distaste and finally near-nausea as he all-too-vividly did consider it. 'Do you remember what's done to the ore before it's fed through the slots into those smelters?' he swallowed. 'Say you were desperate enough to do that to a body. How would you separate the ashes from the slag?'

Scroop nodded mutely and picked up his parka again. He had been going to stop by the autoteria for a late breakfast, but instead he would go straight to the school to talk with Jameson.

'My dear fellow,' Jameson said in syrupy tones, 'I sympathise with you, but I fail to see how I can help you in any way.' A tiny tug at the corner of his mouth belied the tone of voice. 'Before you even ask, the refrigeration plant is out. We looked into that last year when Henri got an overshipment of beeves for the catering service.'

Scroop brushed the suggestion away with a gesture of annoyance. 'Next,' he said, 'you'll tell me that we can't dispose of the body in the sewage plant, or burn it in the

fake fireplace at City Center.' He gathered up his energy, uttered a mental prayer, and went on. 'What I had in mind was a trifle different. We can't do a proper mortician's job on the body, but it could be placed in a closed container on the rink and allowed to lie in state for a few days. Surely people won't mind giving up their skating for that long.'

For a moment Scroop had a wild hope that he'd won, but then Jameson shook his head. 'Won't do, y'know,' he said. 'We looked into that sort of thing too, for an ice fair with booths. Can't put anything like that on the rink. Sinks in, after a while, and could easily cut the piping. The nature of ice, of course. You wouldn't want that gas escaping.'

Scroop resisted an insane temptation to drag the engineer from behind his desk and into a classroom, just to see what third manner he would adopt there. He was beaten, however: finished; and as frustration settled crushingly upon him all he wanted to do was go back to his quarters and stretch out.

In the bleak comfort of home, the fact that he had been defeated at his own game somehow hurt much less than that he had failed in a real case of spiritual necessity. He was willing to take a setback as technological expediter, although that had become so much a part of his existence that he had virtually lost his original purpose in mastering the craft. That was the crux of it, wasn't it? Something in him had reawakened—the minister to the spirit—and at the first real challenge he had gone down like a gutted tenement. Dare he question the Supreme Intellect, and ask if the humbling of an old man was worth the repercussions in that troubled international world outside? It was ironic too that the reawakening had been aided by one whose strong spiritual values were alien to Scroop. A lesson for the old man in this as well? But by whatever God one worshipped, Sikh deserved a far better exodus than seemed inevitable. Even Hobbs, the atheist, should see that or be made to see it. Not his problem! 'I refuse to be involved!'

Scroop's fingers dug into the edges of his mattress as he

stared at the grey-white ceiling, incensed by the callousness of the man. 'Refuse to be...' But—what if Hobbs were involved? What if it were made his problem? Scroop's pulse quickened. That wasn't quite the solution, but it was a pointer. Stirring at the back of his mind was a very recent memory, together with an older one, much older, of a spider that built on others' webs. With a speed and enthusiasm that threatened bones and tendons, he rolled off the bunk and headed for his scanner, thrusting his classification key into the computer console on his way by. Whatever he might have lost over the years, he had served society and his parish well as a master technologist. Here perhaps the best way to expedite was to allow his victims to spin their own web and even add a little to it.

If Hobbs had been angry yesterday morning, on this successive morning of interruption he was livid. He stood with his feet planted far apart, gazing the length of the table to the four men at the end of the conference room.

'Scroop—Jameson,' he spluttered, 'if this isn't a bona-fide, first-class emergency; if this has anything to do with that, that stiff over there, I'll have both of you out of Tundra City within the hour! Walking back to Churchill through that blizzard.'

Looking innocent but concerned, and far more relaxed than a man with his problem ought to be, Scroop left it to Jameson to answer. The engineer, though obviously uncomfortable, could hardly back down now, after calling the first such meeting in the townsite's brief history. Still he spoke to Hobbs at first with careful deference. 'There's a genuine emergency, all right,' he began, 'and Henri and Valdmir both agreed at once. It was, uh, Reverend Scroop who pointed it out. The fact still remains, whoever, discovered it, that we must deal with it immediately, ah, Mr. Hobbs.'

Henri LeBlanc and Vladmir Homynyk nodded agreement and muttered a bit, clearly at a loss to suggest any cut-and-dried answer.

To the impatient Hobbs this seemed a further irritant, and he burst out with, 'Well, man, can you let me in on it, or am I supposed to weave a magic wand in the general direction of the townsite. What is it that you can't solve among yourselves?' Scroop noted with quiet satisfaction that, far from cowing the trio, Hobbs was bullying them into a rather sullen obstinacy.

Jameson, having begun, seemed delegated to continue, so he squared his shoulders, glanced around at the others and addressed the explosive Hobbs. 'It seems that when the tractor train left, the roughnecks forgot to take some stuff back with them. A rather large pile of crating, wooden crating, for hauling the foam layers. It's sitting in sub-division four.' He trailed off lamely into silence.

Hobbs stared at Jameson, at all of them and drew a long breath. 'There must be more,' he said ominously. 'You wouldn't bother me just for this.'

Jameson went on doggedly. 'It really isn't more than that,' he replied. 'There is a very large pile of combustible material in sub-division four of the townsite. In violation of the International Closed Environ ... ment Standard Legislation,' Hobbs finished.

'Yes, we all know. So? Move it! Why bother me?' Jameson subsided with a feeble laugh and said, 'Gentlemen?'

Henri grunted and absent-mindedly scratched his paunch.

'We find it is not so simple as that. To where do we move this, ah, material?' He somehow made the last word sound unsavoury.

Jameson reared up again. 'Everyone will agree that it can't be left lying out on my construction site, now that the SAC is meshed. In fact, it can't be left lying out anywhere in the townsite.'

Henri stirred himself and added defensively, 'Yet it must also be agreed that it cannot be stored on the Company's premises. The regulations, they are very precise on this. In any building, or adjoining annex of any building in which the public is allowed, for business or recreation.'

'Or worship,' Scroop said mildly, drawing a withering glance from Hobbs.

'Or anything,' said Henri. 'So any of the buildings in the townsite are unsuitable.' Despite himself, Hobbs was beginning to see the intriguing difficulties, but he was in no mood yet to be drawn in.

'Where do you store lubricants?' he asked Jameson, who sounded slightly condescending when he answered, 'I doubt any of them would qualify as combustibles these days, but they would be stored in small containers near any machinery that hasn't a lifetime seal.'

Hobbs turned to Henri. 'How does your liquor get by? And what do they ship it in? How do you dispose of it?'

Henri looked positively petulant. 'Perhaps you are thinking of the old-fashioned cardboard?' he asked. 'Plastic—a quick-deteriorating plastic. Even the bottles, Mr. Manager. I would be pleased to show you the stockroom, to catch you up on the developments.'

The general manager's eyes glinted at the implied insult, but he checked his anger and turned to Vladmir Homynyk, who had remained pensively silent. Now, with Hobbs, Jameson, and LeBlanc all looking at him, he cleared his throat nervously. 'I don't have it all here at my fingertips,' he said, 'but I can tell you pretty straight there's no place I'm in charge of where you're goin' to put that stuff.' To Hobbs' flaring anger he said simply, 'Listen! I got the safety of my men to consider. Combustibles are deadly in a Closed Environment. Then how you gonna put 'em around the smelters or separators, or in the mine?' He was probably the least devious in the group at this moment, for he turned to Scroop and explained. 'I suppose you're thinkin' of the mine like Hobbs thinks of the liquor. Well, we gave up timberin' years ago. It's all fibreglass knock-ups.'

Scroop said mildly again, 'I noticed, Vladimir.'

'Good,' retorted the steward. 'And you probably remember what I said about the storage areas in the river access branch. Or on the docks. Well, I know without lookin' that what I told you about a body goes double for anything

combustible.' He gave Henri and Cyril a hard glance and said grimly, 'You're not gonna pass that stuff under to us.'

What followed was actually nothing more than what had gone before, save that as they took turns using the conference chamber scanner they tangled themselves more thoroughly in red tape, hope sank, and tempers rose. Scroop watched with considerable interest as they became inextricably bound by regulations, while at the far end of the chamber Hobbs exchanged the paleness of anger for the apoplectic hue of an incipient stroke.

'Stop it!' he finally shouted down the table at them. There was a shocked silence, a collective air of shattered dignity and then the trio tried to regain their composure.

Had he been more sympathetic or more constructive, Hobbs might have saved the situation at that point. For once in his long career, however, he made the mistake of speaking to the superficial, when he should have attacked the serious aspect of the problem. Admittedly it was ludicrous to be arguing over a pile of scrap wood, but the man who has been stymied by a two-credit puzzle has ceased to see the humour of his situation.

'You sound like a bunch of school-kids,' he told them. 'Try behaving like adults, for a change.'

'Mr. General Manager,' said an icily-proper Henri Le-Blanc, 'as the so-called Mayor of Tundra City, I tell you this. I am going to have that wood shipped to the Admin. Building when I get back and it will be your problem, not ours.' Cyril and Vladmir cried in unison, 'Hear! Hear!' and Hobbs, hoist by his own petard, smiled sickly at them all and scrabbled mentally after a solution.

'All right,' he said, 'send it to the heliport and I'll have it looked after.'

'You wouldn't be ... but of course not.' Scroop cut himself off, as if what he had been thinking were impossible.

Vladmir caught him up. 'Wouldn't what?'

Scroop laughed uneasily. 'Oh, for a moment I could see the general manager opening the SAC over the heliport and

burning the wood. After all, one can burn organic waste in a Protected Environment, so long as proper safety precautions are taken and the terrain is undamaged. I could probably find the regulations.'

From the look on Hobbs' face, that was exactly what he had been considering, but Scroop hurried on. 'The general manager has only recently informed me, however, that you cannot allow the SAC to be interrupted over a heliport except during landings and takeoffs. International Closed Environment Standard Legislation: Volume Two: Section SAC: ...'

'Sub-Section Air Transport. Fine, Scroop,' Hobbs said dully, 'you've made your point. I suppose *you*, having brought the whole matter to our attention, can provide an answer.'

'Perhaps I can,' Scroop answered, and surprisingly not even Vladmir was surprised, since the painful pattern of the last few hours was suddenly very clear. The Spiritual Advisor moved to the scanner and dialled. 'There is a point at which the Aquatic Pollution Acts and the Protected Environment regulations are in precise agreement. Ah, here, I believe.' He slowed the scanner from high to mid-speed, to slow, and froze a frame, almost in one movement. 'A community of fewer than ten thousand may deposit directly into a river of, etcetera, cubic feet of flow per minute ... well above our figure anyway ... one pound of organic waste per person per annum, provided it is biologically and chemically inert: for example, treated sewage, organic ash ... That's what we want, Gentlemen.'

To the somewhat puzzled trio he explained. 'Organic ash! We take the wood out on to the ice and burn it. It will weigh far less than the maximum as ash, won't it, Cyril?'

The engineer nodded almost imperceptibly, then more vigorously as he saw the perverse simplicity of it. 'Weight?' he said enthusiastically, 'Hardly a factor at all.'

Scroop smiled sweetly at him, at all of them. 'Fine,' he said. 'I was hoping you would tell us that. Then I don't suppose there could be any objection if I allow the dis-

pensary the use of its whirlpool bath again? The staff have been terribly patient, but they do need it.'

More puzzled than ever, the trio looked as if they thought he had cracked under the strain. 'Allow me, Scroop,' Hobbs called from the far end of the room. 'What our good Spiritual Advisor means is, why not put a body on top of the pile.' He walked to stand directly in front of Scroop. 'I personally can find no objection here and now. Can you?' he addressed the other three. 'If you can, of course, I'm willing to bet that Doctor Scroop has found a loophole.'

There was naked hatred in his eyes as he turned again to Scroop. 'I think we will all have learned something from this exercise,' he said. 'For that reason it is valuable. You evidently regard the disposal of Sikh's body as of sufficient importance to jeopardise your future here. Make no mistake. Until this morning I was willing to tolerate your presence.' He glanced around at the others. 'You may be able to understand his motives better than I,' he snarled, and left the conference chamber.

That was a question to ponder, Scroop thought, as he straightened with the body of Rahjan Sikh on his shoulder. Behind him, as he moved stiffly down the dock ladder and carefully out on to the rotten ice, there were a large number of his charges watching. Ahead, Jacob Horwitz was putting the last piece of wood on the pyre and he came back to help Scroop carry Sikh the rest of the way. In defiance of the stinging snow, the whipping tail-lash of the blizzard, he had his parka hood thrown back, and on his head sat a mitre with golden embroidered words—*Kadosh ladonai*. Scroop had not realised how great was this man's religious stature too. Beneath their feet the ice groaned and heaved and as soon as the body was safely placed the Spiritual Advisor insisted that his helper return to safety. It was as dark as it would get at this time of year, helped by the storm. Nowhere near as dark as the ignorance of man. And one loves men *for* their faults, not despite them,

Scroop recalled, with a flood of compassion for those who watched. He didn't know if a single one of them understood why he was doing this. Cooking oil doesn't burn all that hot, but Scroop had obtained a fair amount from the catering centre. Enough to get the crating burning at the base.

He pulled a sheet of foolscap from his parka pocket, and began reading a completely unfamiliar ceremony by the fire's light, a ceremony so old that it might not be in present use in the Punjab. It ought to be satisfactory, he decided, as flames shot fifty feet into the air, crackling and throwing an angled spiral three times that length into the fine snow. Through the dancing heat waves he saw the body writhe practically into an upright sitting position as it was enveloped and consumed. Then with a quiet, almost anti-climactic lurch, the ice beneath the pyre opened and what remained slid hissing into the river water. Cracks sprang outward in a crazy web and water washed all the way to Scroop's boots. He turned and groped his way towards the dock, eyes still filled by a great black spiral of flame. *Requiescat in pace,* he added without apology to the ceremony just completed and without hesitation began to whisper the Lord's Prayer. As he mounted the ladder and moved through the crowd, his flock, he intoned *Si iniquitates* and *De Profundis* and it surely was not his imagination when other voices than his closed with *Requiem aeternam.* He swung into the access branch tunnel and two steps to the rear, one to the right, he sensed rather than saw Jacob Horwitz keep pace. It was appropriate, all of it, for in this transitory moment Benjamin Scroop could walk without self-deception, leaving all webs behind him.

THE TERTIARY JUSTIFICATION

by

MICHAEL G. CONEY

It was as though Bronsil had been reborn a grown man but without any memory of an earlier life. Certainly, it was more than amnesia, although as events progressed he was forced to make more and more decisions which seemed to fit a pattern he felt were logical.

THE TERTIARY JUSTIFICATION

BRONSIL woke.

He woke with reluctance; his mind craved oblivion, his body betrayed him into increasing consciousness. His first awareness was of gravity; he was *this* way up, rather than that way. He was lying on his right side. His knees were drawn up towards his chest and his elbows lay close to his ribs. His right arm was pinned beneath his body, but not uncomfortably; the floor was soft and yielding.

His eyes were still closed, a pink glow filtered through the lids, disturbing him further. He shifted his position petulantly, willing the light to go away. He buried his face in the soft floor but his body remained alert and demanding.

Wearily he tried to think; to analyse the ache in his abdomen. He could not remember a time when he had suffered discomfort, so had no point of reference from which he could explore this new sensation. The concepts of good and bad, like and dislike, had long ceased to have any meaning. He had dispassionately liked everything; all was mildly good.

For a long time previous to waking, Bronsil had known amiable perfection.

Now, suddenly and inexplicably, he knew an existence which was not good and with knowledge came fear. Fearfully, therefore, he rolled on to his back, opened his eyes, and the Scarlet Room was illuminated.

The light was diffused and an ancient memory came to him; the light must have a source. Somewhere, he would see a glowing orb which would also provide warmth. But there was no orb and no warmth. He shivered and decided that he was cold and could not remember ever having been

cold before. He further analysed and knew that he was hungry.

Frightened, cold and hungry, Bronsil shuddered into a heightened awareness. When he had screamed away a part of the fear, he lay exhausted and gradually he knew curiosity. With new purpose behind his unaccustomed eyesight, he examined his surroundings.

He was lying naked on his back in a perfectly egg-shaped chamber. It was small, barely larger than himself and the curved ceiling was so low that he could almost have touched it from his prone position, had he thought to raise his arm. The walls which blended curving into the floor were translucent pink; and soft. The rosy glow of diffused light came from behind the walls.

The room had two features. At the more pointed end of the ovoid, beyond Bronsil's feet, was a concave darker panel flush with the walls, with a circular grille set in the centre. From the ceiling, directly above his head, hung a flexible black tube. Murmuring softly, Bronsil seized the end of the tube and thrust it into his mouth.

He sucked uselessly, sucked again, chewing the resilient plastic, but received no satisfaction.

Whimpering, he shifted position again, rolling over to his knees.

Later, Bronsil began to crawl towards the dark panel. It was the only thing to do.

The panel pushed outwards and swung away, locking into the open position with a startling metallic click, causing Bronsil to freeze into a huddled position of fear, his body in the oval chamber, his head at the new opening, eyes closed and hands covering his ears. The concept of sound was long forgotten; it was a little while before he opened his eyes again and looked into the room beyond.

The new room was rectangular, a terrifying geometry of plane surfaces and angular intersections. A table and chair stood centrally on the rich carpet; and around the walls were further chairs, deeply upholstered, recognisable to

some dim corner of Bronsil's mind. He knew he had seen such items before, although at this time it did not occur to him that they might have a purpose. Apart from the plastic tube in the oval room, the idea of purpose was unknown to him.

At the table a man sat watching him, from time to time making notes in a spiral-backed pad. He wore strange clothes. As Bronsil shifted his position again, the man spoke.

'It's warmer in here,' he said. 'Are you hungry?' He indicated a bowl on the table, then stood and left the room by a door set in the far wall, closing it quietly.

Bronsil knew speech! He marvelled, as he lay half in and half out of the oval chamber. The creature in the other room was a man and he had spoken, and Bronsil had understood! He was overwhelmed by new sensations, amazed at his power of perception. Amazed that he had the capacity to be amazed for a while he forgot fear and lay wondering in the warm air which flowed from the rectangular room.

Soon hunger nagged him forward and he began to crawl down the step to the floor. He stopped, he thought, and fear returned.

He could not see all the room. He was moving into a region of unfamiliarity and he could not see his entire surroundings. There was an area hidden from him; that circular area behind the open panel. He regarded it fearfully, wondering if it contained an unknown discomfort. He moved his head from side to side, but from his present position it was impossible to see the entire wall behind that hinged circular panel.

Justifying his hesitation, a voice spoke close into his ear, a voice which could only have come from the hidden area.

'We are very sorry. You must enter the room.' The voice was not that of the man Bronsil had seen; this new voice was harsh and metallic and formed its words differently. It was infinitely sad, yet commanding; and Bronsil, despite his fear, crawled down the step and on to the soft carpet of the rectangular room.

Then he turned round slowly, three times on his hands and knees, gazed about him, curled up and went to sleep.

He was awakened by a sharp click; the panel had swung closed and he was trapped. He tensed, lifted his head and gazed around sniffing, animal-like. The rectangular room was unchanged, full of strange, vivid colours. The closing of the panel had revealed a square pane of opaque glass. As he watched, the glass brightened and the metallic voice spoke again.

'Primary Justification number one,' it grated. 'Watch the screen carefully, please.' The voice still betrayed sadness.

A picture appeared on the screen. Bronsil backed away, crouched on all fours, his heart pounding uncomfortably. The floor beneath the deep carpet was hard. Still he watched the screen, fearful yet fascinated.

The image of a creature appeared. He knew it was living because it moved; yet the contours of the body were unfamiliar. Its shape was amorphous, constantly changing as it moved against a curious background of rough grey rocks by extending sudden tentacles, then contracting to a new position.

'This is the adult Prell.'

The creature had arrived at a dome-shaped building. It reared up, a shapeless blob of protoplasm and extended a pseudopod, pressing at a certain point on the silvery structure. A circular hole appeared, and the Prell passed inside.

Now the picture changed and Bronsil readily comprehended that he saw the inside of the dome, which in shape was similar to the Scarlet Room he had recently left. This was the only similarity however; the walls were silver and the flat floor blue; rectangular red objects, furniture, were positioned at intervals around the dome.

The Prell slid across the room, climbed to one of the low platforms and became still. The camera moved in closer; through the semi-transparent skin of the creature a dark nerve centre could be seen radiating black threads which

branched and branched again, infusing a fine tracery of veins throughout the body.

'Please observe this closely.'

The dark blob became elongated, assumed an hour-glass shape and, over the course of a few moments, divided. Each half now carried its own web of veins. The camera retreated and Bronsil observed that the entire body of the Prell was dividing, also. Before long, two Prells lay on the red platform, where previously there had been one. Soon they moved, began to flow to the floor. They left the dome. The screen went blank.

The voice spoke. 'At present, we only want you to remember. Explanations will be made in due course, when you are ready for them. Remember that you have seen the reproduction of a Prell.'

So Bronsil understood that the creature was called Prell, that it was unlike himself and that he had seen it reproduce. It had been one; it was now two.

The speaker went dead; the faint background hum ceased.

Bronsil felt suddenly lonely and wondered if the person behind the screen wished him to reproduce in like manner. He didn't think he could achieve it. He began to think about his body and became aware again of his gnawing hunger.

He crawled across the floor weakly, towards the table, impelled by the memory of the clothed man he had seen sitting on the chair and the similarity of that position to the Prell on the platform. In order to feel better, to lose fear and gain confidence, it was necessary to get off the floor.

Later he was sitting at the table, arms splayed across the flat surface, feeling that he had been wrong. It was dangerously insecure; he was more frightened than before; he was in imminent danger of falling. But on the table was a bowl of fluid, and instinctively he knew that it was intended to relieve his hunger. But how?

It was a long time before he drew the bowl to him, bent his head to the rippling surface, pursed his lips and sucked.

In the days that followed Bronsil gained strength and confidence steadily. He explored the room, ascertained the uses of the various items of furniture and learned to obtain bowls of nutrient fluid by pressing a red button on the wall and withdrawing the bowl from a hatch beneath. For a while he was troubled by his own waste matter which smelled unpleasant—in the Scarlet Room he had never had this problem. Or, as he now presumed with growing insight, the problem had existed but had been solved by someone other than himself. Now, he divined, he had to deal with it alone; and presently he found an open seat provided with a container beneath. He learned that when he pressed the handle, the faeces disappeared. He learned quickly, and at the back of his mind was the notion that he had known all this before.

During these days the clothed man appeared once and looked around the room briefly. He made Bronsil lie on the couch and examined him, prodding him and listening to his heartbeat. He murmured a few words of encouragement and left before Bronsil could ask any questions. Bronsil had intended to ask questions; his initial mindless occupation of the room had gradually been replaced by a dawning curiosity as to its purpose and the overall purpose in moving him into it. But when he tried to ask the clothed man, he found that he could not easily formulate his thoughts into words; and before he had had time to utter a few croaks, the man was gone.

Bronsil began to feel good; total familiarity with his surroundings lent him confidence which, in time, was tempered with a further sensation arising from the same familiarity. He began to feel bored. Due to this, due also to the example of the clothed man's obvious superiority to himself, he began further to experiment with his body, testing his capabilities.

One day Bronsil stood erect, gripping the table for support. Soon, he walked.

The speaker hummed, the screen became alive, points of

light spattered like stars on the grey background. Bronsil sat down to watch.

'Secondary Justification number one. Regard the screen carefully, please. Do not become disturbed if you cannot understand. Remember what you see.' There was a peculiar echo effect to the final sentence; the screen flashed in synchronisation with the syllables.

Rectangular structures then filled the screen, white and stark beneath a blue sky. Dominating the buildings stood an immense lattice tower, tall, dwarfing the men who scurried like beetles beneath. Voices chattered excitedly. In the background, a slow reverse count.

The tower clutched a silver needle, released it as dense clouds boiled beneath. The voices grew frenzied, the needle stirred, lifted, fire spurting from below.

Bronsil was spellbound as the rocket rose into the blue sky, tilting with distance, the flame from its tail a bright, unvarying spark. Almost, he remembered. He experienced a vague pride.

The screen switched itself off and the clothed man appeared.

'Who are you?' Bronsil asked carefully.

'You can call me Doctor, I suppose. Your name is Bronsil.'

'I mean *who* are you?' Bronsil struggled to make his meaning clear.

'Jonas Foster,' answered the doctor unhelpfully. He crossed the room to the wall and made a curious movement with his hand. A panel opened. He turned a knob, reclosed the panel and made for the door.

Bronsil seized him by the shoulder. 'What?' he cried, waving his arm at the room, the furniture, the screen, everything.

The doctor smiled and disengaged himself. 'Keep trying,' he said gently, and departed, leaving the door open.

Bronsil sat down, trembling. He was aware of a fierce emotion; he hated the doctor. He hated the man's clothes, his superior air, his confident manner. For a while he

allowed the waves of hatred to engulf him and he wept as the room grew colder.

Shivering, he stood suddenly, noticed the open door and slammed it shut. He clutched his naked body in his arms and curled up on a couch, trying to preserve his warmth and fight off the recurrence of increasing fear. He thought of food. The nutrient fluid was warm. He got to his feet, crossed the room, pressed the red button and opened the food hatch. The bowl was empty.

Sobbing, trembling violently, he tore with his fingernails at the flush-fitting hatch which led back to the security of the Scarlet Room. He made no impression; his nails broke short, he battered at the panel, screaming with fear and frustration. The alien appearance of his surroundings gathered in his mind; the colours, the shapes, the temperature.

His breath formed white puffs of condensation in the chill air.

Bronsil opened the door.

He stepped into a brightly-lit corridor; it was warm here and the walls were lined with doors similar to the one through which he had passed. The walls were grey and hard, rough to his touch and the light came from circular globes in the ceiling set at regular intervals down the length of the long corridor. He looked at the globe immediately above; it glowed pink, was spherical and it touched a chord in his memory. He looked at it for some time, wondering why it filled him with indefinable dissatisfaction: his neck began to ache.

He opened the door immediately opposite and found himself in a room exactly similar to the one he had just left. Reassured, he ignored the sudden cold and made for the food hatch, pressed the button and was again confronted by an empty bowl.

About to leave, an unfamiliar shape caught his eye. A man was lying on the couch. He was curled up, his back to Bronsil, who hesitated, then bent over the still form.

The flesh was cold to his touch. Intending to question the

man, Bronsil took hold of him and with an effort rolled him over. The body, flaccid, fell to the floor and lay still. Bronsil regarded it in bewilderment. It appeared to be ... not alive. Dead.

More than that, it was not a man in the sense that Bronsil considered himself a man. He noted interesting physical differences which stirred in him emotions he could not identify. This creature was, he knew instinctively, a woman. Thin, scrawny, she had a face webbed with fine wrinkles; her ribs stood out plainly beneath the flesh except where partially covered by sunken breasts. Her skinny legs were asprawl; Bronsil experienced a curious sensation of pity and revulsion. He left the room quickly.

In the corridor he hesitated, considering his next move. For the first time he could remember he was faced with a decision. Should he explore further rooms, or should he find out what lay at the end of the corridor? His immediate need was food, so he decided to try another room. He opened a door.

Again, identical surroundings, with the exception that on the table lay a full bowl. Eagerly he entered, ignoring the cold. He reached the table and was about to seize the bowl when he was startled by a high-pitched whining sound. Wheeling round, he found that he was being observed.

It took him a moment to realise that the creature was a man. It crouched in a corner, regarding him with bright, sunken eyes from between boney knees, around which were clasped its hands, long and skeletal. It gibbered, flexing its knees rhythmically so that the eyes jigged up and down; now hidden behind the thin legs, now peering at him fiercely from a skull-like face with simian, idiot wisdom. A puddle of filth lay beneath the creature and as Bronsil watched with horror it defecated, spasmodically.

Bronsil's hand was still outstretched towards the bowl. The creature in the corner continued to bob up and down, gabbling nonsense, and after a while hunger overcame Bronsil's fear. He grasped the bowl.

The other screamed thinly and bounded across the room,

clutched Bronsil about the knees and began to bite at his shins; a futile toothless champing. Bronsil struggled away in disgust, beating at the boney head.

'Hold it, Bronsil!' The doctor forced his way between them, kicking the madman aside. It cowered on the floor, mouthing gibberish, blinking rapidly.

'Where did you come from?'

'Never mind that. What are you doing in here?'

'The door was there. Bronsil was beginning to find it easier to communicate; in his relief he forgot his dislike of the doctor.

'You were going to take that bowl?'

'He didn't want it.' Bronsil gestured at the object on the floor.

'Didn't it occur to you that he might not know how to deal with it?'

Bronsil thought. 'You show him,' he said at last.

Suddenly, the doctor looked very tired; his face was grey. 'You've got a lot to learn yourself, Bronsil,' he said harshly. 'Now get out, and don't go in any of the rooms. I suggest you'—he checked himself—'just get out of here,' he muttered.

Bronsil found himself in the corridor again. The door slammed behind him.

The decision had been taken out of his hands; he walked warily along the corridor which was featureless apart from the endless succession of doors and light globes. After a period of hours, or days, the corridor terminated at a blank wall. He regarded it, baffled. Where was he? Again he remembered the Scarlet Room and longed for its comforting familiarity. He pushed against the wall as if to walk on and surprisingly it yielded.

He was in a large area, high-ceilinged, with easy chairs scattered around small circular tables, the whole having as its focus a large construction placed centrally. He stared about in amazement; the whole set-up was so vast. Almost infinite space was contradicting his previous ideas as to the

nature of the environment. His astonishment was increased by the appearance of the doctor; obviously there were other ways of reaching this room and other ways implied more space still. The existence of such space was disturbing.

'The bar is over there,' said the doctor, pointing at the central construction. 'Drink what you want. Food is obtainable from the hatches sited around the walls. Please use the cutlery provided.' He departed, having given more information in a few short sentences than Bronsil had heard from him before.

Bronsil made for the bar. He found a gap in the otherwise continuous circular shelf, passed through and examined a bewildering array of bottles. He selected one at random, shaking it to assure himself it contained liquid. After some deliberation he removed the cork.

'Don't drink it!'

He turned. A woman was watching him, a girl, he realised with an effort; her face was young and unlined, her breasts round and firm with neat pink nipples.

'Why not?'

'It makes you feel bad. I don't know what it is, but it's not good. There's better in the food hatches.'

He left the bar and joined her. 'Show me,' he said.

The hatch dispensed a plate of solid objects together with a glass of clear liquid. There was also a knife and fork. The girl took Bronsil to a table where he hesitated, then sat down regarding the plate, perplexed.

'I'll show you.' The girl cut some of the presumed food into small pieces and held it before him. He ate, chewing with difficulty. 'I've been here two days,' she explained. 'I like this food. It's strange at first, but you get used to it. My name's Marion.'

'I'm Bronsil.' He spoke indistinctly through a full mouth.

'It's different here, Bronsil, but after a while—oh. It's coming on again.'

The lights dimmed suddenly, a large screen on the wall lit up.

'Secondary Justification number two.'

A number of men were shown working among apparatus which Bronsil was unable to identify. They wore long white coats; from time to time they would exchange these for dark suits and sit round a table, talking.

Frequently the camera cut to scenes of conflict; blunt-prowed boats laden with men approached beaches, the men poured out, stormed across the sand and frequently died.

Aerial shots showed larger ships, the sea around them acned with bursting shells and bombs.

Taken from the deck of a ship: the camera unsteady, an airplane diving in, the foreground gunners swinging in their turret, the plane exploding into the deck in a blanket of smoke.

Bronsil saw all this and wondered, but he did not understand. The concept of death in action was beyond his experience.

The screen went blank after a brief shot of a giant column of smoke rising into the sky, rolling outwards at its summit, spreading across the clouds...

Bronsil was disturbed by this and whimpered softly.

The speaker said: 'It would appear that man is an aggressive, adventurous creature,' and became silent.

Bronsil stood, leaving Marion staring blankly at the dead screen, and wandered aimlessly about the large room, his mind a maelstrom of whirling half-memories. As he walked he became aware that he and the girl were not the only persons present. A few of the easy chairs were occupied. Expressionless faces gazed into the distance. He squatted beside an old man who sat clutching his stomach.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'Take me back to my Scarlet Room.' Dull eyes focused on Bronsil with difficulty; the voice was petulant.

'You won't be able to get in,' said Bronsil gently. 'And the rooms are cold, now.'

'I don't care. Please take me back,' the old man wheedled.

'I can't. Bronsil turned away. The old man rolled sideways in the easy chair and drew his knees up to his

chin. His thumb crept into his mouth and he mumbled softly.

Disgusted, Bronsil looked around for some distraction and found himself being observed by a girl; younger than Marion, he decided; little more than a child.

'Hello,' she said, smiling brightly. 'So they got you, too?'

'Got me?'

'The aliens, the Prells. They've taken over the world, didn't you know? Oh, boy.' She raised her glass and drank deeply.

Bronsil was interested. He sat beside her on the soft couch; she moved closer to him, confidentially. 'The world?' he asked.

'Didn't you see the screen? That was them. My name's Joanna, so they tell me, but I wouldn't depend on that, either. What's yours?'

'Bronsil.'

'Why don't you drink, Bronsil? It's great, almost like . . .' She hesitated; suddenly she looked like a lost child. 'Almost like being in the Scarlet Room again,' she muttered, drinking quickly.

'No, thanks.'

'Suit yourself. Ah . . .' Recovering quickly, she gave him a sideways look. 'Shall we . . . go for a walk?'

'Where to?'

'Over there.' She gestured towards the far corner of the room; in the distance, Bronsil saw a vast heap of stacked couches. 'It's quiet over there.'

He regarded her curiously. 'Why should we go over there?'

Suddenly she flung herself at him, her arms about his neck, her face buried in his shoulder. He could feel her heart beating fast under the immature breasts; he smelled alcohol. 'Oh, God, I'm scared!' Her muffled wail came from beside his ear and he started back in alarm. 'I want to go over *there* and I want you to come with me, we can crawl in between the couches and it's dark and safe. You can hold me tight in there, you can . . .' Her voice trailed off

uncertainly. 'You can...' He felt tears, warm on his shoulder.

'I can what?' he asked, disengaging himself with distaste. This unaccustomed proximity of bodies was not to his liking.

'It's just like my Scarlet Room, between those couches,' she pleaded desperately as he stood up and he was unable to meet her eyes.

As he walked away he began to wonder exactly how long he had been in his Scarlet Room, and how much he had forgotten during that time; if, for him, there had been a time *before* the Scarlet Room.

He glanced back at the tearful face of the young girl from a safe distance and experienced a curious sensation of loss.

During the days that Bronsil spent in the Community Room, (the doctor vouchsafed this name one day, in a rare informative moment) a few more terrified, bewildered men and women drifted through the large doors and joined the group. At the time Bronsil arrived, the group had numbered six; himself, Marion, Joanna and three men, all elderly. One of the men, the one with whom Bronsil had had his early, inconclusive conversation, had disappeared. He had taken to sitting on the floor beside the entrance doors which, they discovered, only opened inwards. He had waited for a long time, swaying and moaning; then, as eventually the doors swung in to allow an unsteady woman to stagger into the room, he had sprung to his feet with surprising agility and darted through the door before it shut. He was not seen again.

The group now numbered fifteen; nine men and six women of varying ages. A system had evolved for welcoming new arrivals; somehow a community spirit had arisen and it was tacitly agreed that the group was totally interdependant; the weaker members must be assisted. This practice was discouraged by the doctor but his visits were rare and quick; he merely checked over his patients, gave

unsatisfactory answers to their questions, and left. Joanna had set up residence in the stack of couches and shrank from the doctor when he arrived to examine her. Bronsil and Marion usually had to drag her from her den by force and hold her down while the doctor favoured her with an examination infinitely more thorough and lingering than he gave the others. Bronsil was perturbed by this; he was acknowledged as leader of the group and felt responsible for the girl. He was unable to decide, however, whether the doctor in some obscure way enjoyed his examination of Joanna, or whether the girl was of greater importance than the rest of the group. So far as he could see, her only distinction was that she was considerably younger than the rest of them.

The reactions of the various members of the group to their situation varied; some remained comparatively active, like Bronsil and Marion, others retreated to the stack of couches with Joanna forming a parasitic splinter group which had to be fed by the remainder. In general this group, numbering three men and one woman beside Joanna, tended to be the most avid consumers of liquor from the bar, whimpering frequently for a drink which they sucked straight from the bottle, ignoring the plastic cups which were offered. After a while their corner of the room began to smell unpleasant and Bronsil found the work of sustaining them falling almost entirely on himself.

A third and fortunately smaller group of two men and two women became antisocial in a different fashion. Ignoring both the bar and the couches, they sat in a small huddle near the doors, gazing with unfocussed eyes and occasionally breaking into weird chants praising the Prells, their benefactors. It appeared that Bronsil represented the material manifestation of the Prells and they praised him too, lauding him in dissonant song and thanking him effusively when he brought them food, before once more relapsing into communal stupor.

Bronsil's own group of four men and two women made every attempt to keep themselves active, engaging in dis-

cussion and speculation, watching the occasional broadcasts and passing on the information to the other groups.

The broadcasts, which became known as Justifications, continued to be interesting though baffling. It appeared that Primary Justifications concerned the Prells and they were seen in varying situations at work and play, which it seemed was intended to emphasise their dissimilarity from the human race. They appeared to be slow-moving, easy-going to the point of idleness, non-competitive and gentle. Humans, on the other hand, were presented as being imaginative, belligerent, inventive and selfish. These latter presentations were known as Secondary Justifications.

Watching a particularly bloody battle in which human had slain brightly clad human and the air was thick with flying arrows and flashing lances, Marion said, lounging back in her chair sipping a drink: 'Sometimes it makes you wonder which is which. I mean, look at us lying here, eating and sleeping and helping those idlers in the corner. We look like what they call humans, but we act like Prells.'

Bronsil spent a long time pondering the truth of this remark.

One night Joanna disappeared.

Night was the period when the globes in the ceiling were extinguished. Many of the community favoured the night and, indeed, had tried to simulate it by throwing bottles at the globes in an endeavour to break them, but without success. The soft darkness of night was reminiscent in many ways of the Scarlet Rooms and Bronsil found this worrying, feeling instinctively that darkness was a regression; he was always relieved when the lights came on again, signifying day. Some of the group members, particularly those among the couches, would set up a screaming on the commencement of day which could only be assuaged by liquor.

One morning Bronsil approached the couches with an armful of bottles, passing them as usual to the hands which protruded demanding from within the stack of furniture. This particular morning, Joanna's hand was missing. Bronsil

pulled the stack apart at this point, eliciting sullen moans of protest from the other occupants, but could see no sign of the young girl. Concerned, he called Marion across.

'What's up?' Her nose wrinkled in distaste as she observed the soiled furniture.

'Joanna's gone.'

'Oh . . .' She shrugged; it was no concern of hers.

'But don't you see?' Bronsil persisted, 'we haven't found a way out of here except by the doors we came in. And if she went out that way, someone must have opened them from the outside. Why?'

'I'm sure I don't know. Why don't you ask the Godly?'

This was the name by which the group at the doors had become known. Bronsil approached them. Three appeared to be in some sort of trance; their heads lolled back and their eyes were turned up whitely; but the fourth, a man, was comparatively alert. He greeted Bronsil with a lupine smile.

'Hello ... We're conducting a little experiment here, Bronsil.' His eyes were frighteningly intent; the smile which slashed the lower part of his face left them unamused. He had the look of a fanatic.

'Joanna seems to have disappeared. I wonder if you——'

'In their wisdom the Prells have not seen fit to communicate with us direct, leaving we, their children, to seek the way to praise them in a manner by which they may be informed of our love.'

'Their children?'

'I do not speak in metaphor. Prell is the essence of life; the primeval form which first developed and from which we are descended; they themselves having ascended to a higher plane of existence. That is what they are telling us by means of the screen. You will have noticed the contrast between the divine Prell way of life and the base strugglings of Man. You will have realised that they are tracing the history of Mankind in reverse, preparing us for the moment of revelation when Prell and Man, good and evil, split from the same creeping spark of life.'

Bronsil stared at the man, hypnotised by his eyes, unable to comprehend half of what he heard.

'You see, Bronsil, I am beginning to *remember*. For me, there was a time before the Scarlet Room. I know this as clearly as I know your intellect cannot grasp such a concept. My friends'—he indicated the supine three—'are also tracing their history, Mankind's history, the infinite backwardness which is in all——'

'You're talking nonsense, Wilkinson.'

The doctor had appeared, suddenly; Bronsil had been so engrossed he had not seen the man enter. Wilkinson continued his flow—'men, but which only the privileged few——'

Abruptly, the doctor slapped Wilkinson's face.

'What did you do that for?' Bronsil asked, in the sudden silence.

The doctor's face was haggard; he examined his hand, which was trembling violently. 'I shouldn't have done that,' he muttered. 'Bronsil ... Just do as you think fit, eh? I mean, don't be ... influenced by people. Follow your own ideas. You've made out pretty well so far, haven't you?'

'Have I?'

'You're doing fine, Bronsil, fine.' The doctor hesitated; grasped Bronsil's shoulder. 'Great work, Bronsil. Keep it up.'

'Joanna's gone.'

For a moment he thought the doctor was going to collapse; the man turned grey and a sudden spasm seized him. 'Gone,' he repeated woodenly. It was not a question.

'You knew, of course,' said Bronsil with sudden insight.

'What makes you think that? Breathe deeply. Say "ah".'

The change of subject took Bronsil by surprise and unresisting he allowed the stethoscope to be placed against his chest. The doctor listened, head cocked to one side, for a long time; then straightened with an air of satisfaction. 'You're fine, Bronsil,' he repeated as he walked away.

The doctor had been in the habit of restocking the bar at regular intervals, wheeling in a trolley loaded with bottles

and stacking them on the shelves, taking out the empties. Following the incident with Wilkinson, however, the supply of liquor ceased and before long existing stocks dried up amid vociferous complaints from the occupants of the couches. Within a week two of that group were dead; the doctor wheeled them away on the same trolley as he used for the bottles and with about as much emotion.

Bronsil began to get the feeling that they were all in some way expendable. No further additions had arrived for many days and it appeared that the community, having reached its optimum, was now on the decline. In discussion Marion agreed with him, but unlike himself she seemed resigned to the situation.

He explored his memory, urged by the ravings of Wilkinson and his small sect, but was unable consciously to recall anything prior to his period in the Scarlet Room. He admitted that there must have been something; perhaps there had *always* been something, but he could pin down no definite recollections. Yet he knew and could understand simple speech and the concepts which developed in discussion with Marion and the larger group. He could assimilate a large part of the information shown on the screen too, and appreciated that intelligent beings were of two types, human and Prell. The reason for the great divergence in appearance and behaviour of the types he could not however grasp, and the Justifications were uninformative on this point. He found Wilkinson's explanation unsatisfactory and obscure.

Joanna reappeared; one morning her arm was protruding from among the couches as he made his early tour of inspection.

'You're back,' he observed, peering into the small space and seeing her dim outline.

'Please give me a drink,' she requested quietly, with unaccustomed politeness.

'There's none left.'

'Oh, God . . .' She fell silent.

Bronsil reported back to Marion who expressed no sur-

prise at the return of the girl. Nobody expressed surprise at anything any more; Bronsil found this disturbing. Interest in discussion had waned lately and even the members of his own group spent most of their time gazing at the blank screen with lack-lustre eyes.

The Justifications had become infrequent; the most recent having been days previously, merely a brief shot of a few hairy, bestial men emerging from a cave and walking across a forest glade, carrying sticks. The only remarkable point about the scene was that it had shown, for the first time, Prells and humans in the same surroundings. The shot panned from the hunting party to a pair of Prells concealed in a tree.

Four days after Joanna's return the doctor made his next visit and Bronsil was alarmed at his appearance. The man looked thinner, older; his hair straggled limply across his forehead, his face was glossy with dried sweat. His examination of the members of the community was cursory and disinterested with the exception of Bronsil himself, whom he treated with a strange deference.

Then, calling for Bronsil's assistance, he made for the stack of couches. Together they dragged the occupants into the light.

When it came to Joanna's turn the doctor hesitated.

'All right, I'm coming out.' Her voice was curiously defiant. She emerged head first, crawling, blinking at the light.

She wore a crumpled green dress. Bronsil gaped at her in astonishment.

'There's no need to stare. You'd look better with some clothes on, yourself.' She jerked open the front of her dress, exposing her small breasts. 'Feel away, old man,' she said contemptuously.

Averting his eyes, the doctor gingerly held his stethoscope to her heart. She lay quietly, looking at him, her gaze inscrutible. With obvious reluctance he carried out a thorough examination, checking her pulse, her temperature, flashing a light into her eyes, inspecting her scalp, her

ears. When he took the hem of her skirt between his forefinger and thumb and lifted it away from her thighs she smiled slowly.

'A valuable piece of property, that's me,' she remarked obscurely.

At last the doctor straightened up, his face red.

'We need some more liquor,' said Bronsil.

The doctor turned on him furiously. 'Damn you, Bronsil,' he hissed. His fists were clenched; he was trembling violently. 'You think you own this place, don't you?' He glanced down at Joanna and back to Bronsil. 'You bastard,' he muttered, turning away with an effort. 'You superior bastard, Bronsil . . .'

He walked quickly from the room.

From that time Joanna's stature in the community increased; in some way she had established supremacy over the doctor, the representative of the Prells. The doctor himself had never hinted at such a relationship between he and the aliens; the community had tacitly made up its collective mind on the subject.

Bronsil was vaguely uneasy about Joanna's new position. It did not affect his own standing in any way; he was still acknowledged as leader of the community, but Marion was definitely fading into the background, becoming listless as the young girl took her place as Bronsil's lieutenant. Following the episode with the doctor Joanna had left the stack of couches and now sat with the larger group near the Justification screen. She even tried to promote discussion, refusing to be discouraged by the lack of enthusiasm around her. She never, however, referred to her period of absence.

'It seems we're . . . fading out,' murmured Bronsil one day as he lay back in an easy chair, scanning the room. Nobody had spoken for some hours apart from Joanna; many eyes were closed and Wilkinson's group had achieved a trance-like state which had lasted for a day or more; their ex-

pressed search for knowledge had deteriorated into a mindless attainment of Nirvana.

Marion roused herself. 'We're OK,' she asserted. 'There's plenty of food and it's just as well the liquor ran out. Why worry?'

'Don't you think it's a bit ... sad, that we should lie here and wait to die? That's all there is to do, now. We don't find out anything new. The Justifications seem to have finished.'

'Find out?' An elderly man named Jackson spoke. 'But we know everything, I thought we'd decided. We know all about our environment. It's only the Justifications that make us unsettled, make us wonder if there's somewhere else.'

'We don't know *why*,' Joanna pointed out.

'Why what? Does there have to be a reason?' Old Jackson had become alert; Joanna's presence had introduced a new factor, a new mind to pit oneself against. There was a noticeable quickening of interest within the small group. 'Conceive this room,' Jackson was saying. 'Conceive *outside* this room, containing it, another larger room. And another one containing that, and another, and another, bigger and bigger. It's got to stop somewhere. Why not now, at the extent of these four walls? Why should there be anything else? Here is, why or how can there be a reason?'

'There were the Scarlet rooms, and the square rooms, and where the doctor comes from,' Joanna pointed out practically.

'I'm speaking in general terms. One large room enclosing all that can be the full extent of everything. All that we have seen can be all there is.' An acid note crept into the old man's voice. 'Of course, I realise you've been outside here recently, young lady; but that doesn't mean you know it all.'

'That's just what I'm saying,' Joanna persisted. 'None of us know it all.'

Jackson replied: 'I'm not sure I want to know. If I'm not right and all this is indeed infinite, then I'm scared.' For a

moment he considered Joanna's ideas; he seemed to shrivel in his chair and his hand crept towards his mouth.

'We should find out.'

'How?'

'Get out of here, of course. Have a look around.'

'Why?'

'Look.' Joanna was bouncing in her chair with irritation. 'You're all wrapped up in dreaming. You really don't want to know. Now I don't know all the reasons, but I can guess some. We were in Scarlet Rooms, right? We were driven out by cold and hunger. Then we were in square rooms. The same thing happened. We had to leave, or we would have died. Now we're here. We've got food and warmth and this time they haven't been cut off. But we're still dying, one by one. I feel we're being told to get out of here, not so directly as before, but told to get out just the same. Get out, or die. The choice is the same as it was in the Scarlet Rooms.'

Jackson sniffed. 'If you took that dress off, you wouldn't feel so superior to the rest of us, young lady. If man had been intended to wear clothes, he would have grown fur.'

Silence fell. Joanna looked sulky.

Depressed at the collapse of the discussion, Bronsil scanned the group for further participants, but they had all fallen asleep again.

'You were right,' Bronsil said to Joanna the following day. 'We've got to get out of here. The sooner the better.'

'I'm willing. What about the others?'

'I'll try...' He walked over to the group; they sat relaxed, breakfast finished, waiting for Bronsil to clear away the soiled plates. 'It's time we went,' he informed them.

'What?' Faint alarm showed on their faces.

'Yes. We're going. We can't stay here for ever. We're going now, right away.'

'How are you going to get out?' Jackson asked.

'We. We're going through the door when the doctor arrives.'

'The doctor hasn't been for days.'

Joanna spoke. 'I can show you a way out. Look. Are you coming or aren't you?'

There was no reply. They stared blankly. Bronsil spoke to Marion. 'Are you coming with us?'

She looked at him vaguely. 'I'm sure I don't know.' She had put on weight considerably over the last few weeks; she lay in her chair content, like a prize sow. Bronsil felt a great sadness; he had left it too late. 'I don't know,' she repeated uncertainly.

'We like it here, Bronsil.' Jackson summed up the feeling of the group. 'You and Joanna go. We may follow you, soon ... Tomorrow, maybe. It's no good rushing into things. It's a big decision. It's got to be carefully thought out.' He yawned.

Exasperated, Bronsil strode over to the doors where Wilkinson's group lay with their heads back, supine in their presumed mental striving for enlightenment. He seized Wilkinson by the shoulder. 'Come on, we're leaving,' he said roughly.

'What?' Wilkinson blinked and focussed with difficulty.

'Get out of that chair. Now. We're on our way.' Bronsil saw that two of the group had ignored their breakfast; the plates lay untouched in their laps. He shook the nearest woman violently.

She toppled out of the chair and fell slackly to the floor. She lay motionless. She was dead.

'You see?' Bronsil's irritation became the rage of fear. 'You've killed her! She's dead! And him too, I expect ... Get out of that chair!'

Wilkinson was staring at the sprawled figure on the floor. 'My God ...' he muttered. 'This is serious, Bronsil.' He stirred, flexing his limbs, his eyes wide; he glanced at his other motionless companions fearfully.

'It's too late now. Wake the others up and come with us.'

He moved over to the stack of couches and pulled them aside under Joanna's direction. Bloated forms rolled to the floor, complaining weakly. The stench was overpowering.

'There's a hatch, here.' Joanna pointed.

Set low in the wall was a small metal plate, hinged. It swung outwards at Bronsil's kick, revealing an illuminated floor beyond. He bent down and peered through the hole, seeing a corridor similar to the one by which he had arrived at the Community Room. Wilkinson joined him, squatting at his side.

'I ... couldn't get anyone else to come,' he said, not meeting Bronsil's eyes. 'Where does this go, do you think?'

Joanna answered from behind. 'It's a corridor with doors leading off ... I only saw one room. It wasn't like the square room but it was about the same size. There were ... things in it. The doctor showed me ...'

Bronsil stood, looked around the Community Room. 'Well ... I suppose we'd better gather a few things together ...' His voice trailed off irresolutely.

'Come on,' said Joanna, pushing past. She knelt and crawled through the opening. 'Are you coming?' Her voice came from the other side.

Bronsil followed, then Wilkinson, and they stood in the corridor.

'Which way?' asked Bronsil uncertainly. The corridor stretched endlessly in either direction.

Joanna settled the matter, walking off to the right; Bronsil quickly took up position beside her and Wilkinson followed, trailing behind.

'It's weird out here,' he grumbled nervously. 'Doesn't this passage have an ending? I mean, I'd like to see the end. It's sort of ... infinite, here.'

Bronsil felt the same way; his mouth was dry and he found that he was holding his breath. He exhaled noisily. 'There's nothing to be scared of,' he assured Wilkinson loudly, with assumed heartiness. 'Joanna's been here before.'

'Only as far as there.' The young girl pointed ahead.

The blank walls of the corridor were interrupted a few yards on by a succession of doors on either side. Just beyond the first door to the left a pane of glass was set into

the wall; a window. 'If we don't want them to see us, we keep below the level of the window,' she informed them.

They bent low and scuttled past. Beyond, a door was ajar. Bronsil paused, hearing voices. 'Wait a moment,' he whispered.

They gathered around the door, listening.

'You must pull yourself together, Doctor.' The voice was soft. 'You must not give up. We were assured of your unselfish motives in this matter and we trusted you on that basis. After all, we could have conducted the whole affair ourselves.'

The doctor's voice replied; he sounded dispirited. 'You don't realise what it's like,' he said. 'That's your trouble. You never did realise. If you'd had the slightest knowledge of what you were doing in the first place, all this would never have happened.'

'We know that.' The voice held regret. 'But your help is needed at this juncture. You've been keeping information from us, for your own selfish motives. Then you found that your motives were ... ah ... invalid, and you cracked up. No matter. What's the latest position?'

There was a pause before the doctor replied, then his voice was firmer; he appeared to have got a grip of himself. 'The majority of the subjects are relapsing into lethargy now that the stimuli of hunger and cold are removed. The exceptions are, so far as I can tell, the man Bronsil and the woman Marion. These two may yet respond to the concealed stimulus of enforced inactivity.'

'Is there any point in cutting off the heat and the food?'

'I don't think so. They've gone as far as they can. Only the two I mentioned would be likely to react.'

'And ... the young girl Joanna?'

'An incipient nymphomaniac, with tendencies towards alcoholism.'

'She sounds promising. Why do you not cite her as a possibility? Why do you inform us of her human qualities rather than her prospects? We want an unbiased opinion Doctor.'

'The girl Joanna is a possibility,' muttered the doctor.

'Good. Now get back in there and find out what's going on. Pay special attention to those three. It would be tragic if, at this point, they contracted disease through your neglect. It is in your own interests, Doctor. Do we need to remind you?'

'You hypocritical bastards,' said the doctor quietly.

Sounds of movement came from within the room. The three listeners hurried away; Bronsil tried a door; found it locked. They pressed themselves against the wall and waited.

The doctor emerged; without a glance in their direction he walked slowly away down the corridor towards the Community Room. His shoulders were sagging; he scuffed his feet along the floor like an unutterably dispirited child.

Eventually the corridor ended at a blank wall. To the right of this was a door; Bronsil tried the handle and found it was unlocked, alone of all the doors they had encountered. This gave him the chastening impression that they had been intended to enter this room, all along. Despite the inaccuracies in the overhead conversation the Prells still had complete control; the group's every move had been planned in advance—only the personalities involved were incorrect. Marion should have been with them; Wilkinson was an unexpected factor.

The room they entered was unlike any they had seen before. It was oblong, a little larger than the square room, with two further doors in the adjacent wall. Furniture was scattered around; tables, chairs, a carpet, and sundry other items the purpose of which they could not immediately divine. But the feature which drew their fascinated attention was a window.

It occupied most of one wall, a huge pane of glass affording a view which at first Bronsil found totally alien. The overall impression was of green, with blue and white above; the light was sharp and illuminated the strange scenery with an exaggerated reality. Frightened yet at the

same time curious, he drew closer; felt the glass with fingers that trembled, looked up, and saw the sun ...

Half-forgotten memories flowed from the recesses of his mind; gradually he came to understand what he saw. This was the outside world, as depicted from time to time in Justifications. This was where men fought and died with axes, swords and bombs. This was a terrifying, dangerous place ...

'What is it?' asked Wilkinson shakily.

'I rather think it must be the final Justification,' Bronsil replied. 'But this time it's real, outside the glass.'

'Can it get in?'

'I don't think so. We'll have to be careful. First, let's find out where these doors lead.'

Joanna had already opened one; it gave on to a smaller room, one wall of which was entirely taken up with rectangular items of metallic equipment. At the far end was a door which, judging by its position, led to the outside world.

'Don't open that,' Bronsil warned.

Meanwhile Wilkinson had opened up the front of one of the pieces of equipment. He bent down and peered inside; reached and took out an object which he sniffed, loudly.

'I think this is food,' he said. 'But it's cold.'

During the next hour they thoroughly explored their surroundings. The third room proved to be a bedroom; there were two beds and they found clothes. Urged by Joanna, Bronsil dressed himself and, after a moment's hesitation and cynical comment, Wilkinson did likewise, reluctantly pulling on a shirt and pants. In some obscure fashion, Bronsil enjoyed the feel of clothes against his body; he gained confidence and felt less at the mercy of his surroundings. Wilkinson denied this sensation, but it was noticeable that he ceased to start at each move the others made; before long he was pulling open drawers and experimenting on the items he found, speculating as to their use. Back in the room with the window, they sat down to discuss the situation.

Bronsil was already thinking ahead. 'Sooner or later, we're going to have to go outside,' he forecast.

Wilkinson laughed shortly. 'You must be mad.'

'I don't mean now. I mean in a few days. There's a pattern to all this. You heard what the Prell said. A ... stimulus will be applied to make us move on. By then we'll be used to the appearance of the outside world, and we'll go out of that door.'

'Let's think of one thing at a time,' urged Joanna with unaccustomed nervousness.

Suddenly the doctor was in the room, staring at them, his jaw slack. 'You people get around,' he muttered at last.

Bronsil seized the initiative. 'So you didn't go to the Community Room like the Prells told you,' he accused.

'How much do you know?' The doctor's face was pale; his tongue flickered over his lips. He looked at Wilkinson. 'What are you doing here?'

'Any objection?' Wilkinson followed Bronsil's example of belligerence.

'No ... No ... I didn't expect ... Never mind.'

'Marion's back there.'

The doctor was silent, staring from one to the other. 'Now you're here, I'd better show you around,' he said at last, reluctantly.

He took them into the next room and showed them the working of the refrigerator, the cooker, and the various other items. He informed them that further food was in the cans, and demonstrated how to open them. He took them through the bedroom and showed them the washroom. He did all this quickly, perfunctorily, and left, giving the impression that he no longer wished to be bothered with them. 'You're on your own, now,' were his final words.

They looked at each other. An artificial light burned in the ceiling; outside the window it was dark.

'That's real night,' said Bronsil. His fear had left him, to be replaced by a sense of adventure.

'Time for bed,' remarked Joanna, yawning.

Suddenly they felt uncertain in one anothers' presence. They drifted into the bedroom, eyeing the beds.

Joanna took the initiative, reaching for the hem of her dress and drawing it over her head, very slowly. Beneath the dress she was naked. As her face reappeared, flushed and shadowed by strands of hair, she was looking at Bronsil with peculiar directness.

He felt an unaccustomed churning in his stomach and a forgotten stirring. He moved forward uncertainly ...

Wilkinson was beside Joanna, grasping for her, his face intent, his breathing harsh.

Bronsil seized him by the arm, swung him away and hit him flush on the jaw. As the older man sprawled back to the floor, holding his face, Bronsil commanded: 'You sleep in the other room, Wilkinson.'

Climbing into the bed beside Joanna, Bronsil felt powerful, all-conquering and ... in a last instant of analysis before intelligence sank beneath the sea of instinct, he knew that he had become ... primitive.

They sat at the table eating breakfast, an unappetising mess inexpertly cooked by Wilkinson. It was Bronsil who had suggested that Wilkinson prepare the food. Now he was wondering if this had been a mistake. Not only from the quality standpoint; he felt somehow that Joanna should have performed the duty but had been disinclined to ask her. It had appeared necessary to establish unquestioned superiority over the other man.

'Look!' Joanna pointed out of the window.

An animal was moving among the trees; slender and graceful, it suddenly turned towards them with cocked ears, then bounded away silently.

'What was it?' The girl asked.

'I don't know.' Bronsil was puzzled. 'Another form of life, I suppose.'

Further speculation was cut short by a humming sound. A panel in the wall swung open revealing the familiar sight of a Justification Screen.

'Tertiary Justification number one. A grounding has already been given which should enable you to understand the basic differences between the psychology of the Prell and human races. You will also have learned certain physical differences; the importance of all this will become apparent in the course of the Tertiary Justification series. Try to understand what you will see.'

A huge globe appeared on the screen, blue and green, and motionless yet swirling silver. It grew larger and the colours more distinct, their boundaries clearly defined. Abruptly the globe disappeared; the screen was blue, the tops of buildings could be seen at the lower margin, a silver object was descending from a clear sky.

The ship had landed, globular on stilt legs; the dust-storm abated. A commentator jabbered in the background; his voice was frenzied. People were running; tiny figures scuttling for shelter. The snouts of long guns nosed past the camera, covering the ship.

A circular hatch opened and the camera zoomed into close-up. A creature emerged, amorphous, flowing to the ground. A Prell. There was a flash as the shell of a trigger-happy gunner exploded against a force-shield; the Prell froze, then moved again, away from the ship, inexorably towards the camera.

It paused and a cavity opened near the centre of the shapeless mass of protoplasm.

'We bring you hope,' it boomed clearly.

The screen receded into the wall, the hatch closed, the three humans looked at each other.

'Something must have happened, unless it was all a trick,' Bronsil speculated. 'For some reason the Prells turned into jailors. Why?'

'Maybe we turned on them,' said Wilkinson, looking at Bronsil meaningly. 'Humans can get aggressive. Above themselves. So they locked us up.'

'The Prells must have been around for a long time,' Bronsil murmured, ignoring Wilkinson. 'And they're still here. What's happened to us? Where are all the rest?' He

stared out of the window at the forest. '*When* is now?' he asked slowly, remembering the apparent retrogression of the Secondary Justifications. As if in answer, there was a movement among the trees.

An animal, similar to the one they had seen before, bounded across the clearing. Pursuing it, yelling and waving clubs, were three men, filthy and clad in ragged loincloths.

Bronsil was soon proved to be right in his supposition as to the intended length of their stay in the rooms; the previous pattern repeated itself. The food they ate was not replaced and before long Wilkinson announced that the cupboards and refrigerator were empty. They sat around gloomily, from time to time looking out of the window.

'What now?' asked Wilkinson after a silence which had lasted for a long time. 'I mean, you're the boss. What do you suggest we do next? Sit here and starve?'

'We've got to go outside,' Bronsil stated. 'We join those men outside and hunt . . . meat. Food.'

'Catch that animal and kill it, you mean? You can't be serious. You can go if you like. I'll stay here with Joanna.'

'I'm going with Bronsil,' the girl stated definitely.

Wilkinson's voice rose to a whine. 'You'd leave me here to die?'

'If that's the way you want it.' Bronsil stood, his mind made up. 'Come on, Joanna. We can take two of the knives from the kitchen. They'll be better than clubs.'

Wilkinson followed them into the next room. 'Look here,' he was saying desperately, 'let's discuss this thing. Let's find out a bit more before we go. You know, observe through the window and so on. See what's happening out there.'

'We've observed enough.' Bronsil opened a drawer and took out two long knives. He made for the door.

'Wait!' Wilkinson's voice was sharp. Bronsil whirled round. The other man had his arm around Joanna from behind; he held a sharp knife to her neck. 'You go, you go alone, Bronsil. The girl stays with me.' He was grinning

feverishly, an expression of fear and triumph combined. His hand moved upwards over Joanna's body, caressing, squeezing. A thin trickle of blood showed at her throat where the blade trembled. Her eyes were wide with terror. There was a sharp, startling report. An expression of blank amazement appeared on Wilkinson's face, then he slid to the floor and lay still.

The doctor stood in the doorway; Bronsil recognised the object in his hand as a gun.

'Life's so simple for you, isn't it, Bronsil?' the doctor said bitterly. 'You don't have to take decisions. Everything's mapped out for you. You move safely from one point to the next, gathering impressions, learning, all the time protected from reality.' His voice shook. 'Have you ever thought about those poor bastards back in the Community Room, while you've been fighting out your cosy little threesome in this cosy little house? Have you ever thought about Marion?'

'No,' admitted Bronsil, still staring at the body of Wilkinson.

'Allow me to inform you that she died yesterday. There are three people left alive there, now. That's all, three of them, waiting to die, while you enjoy yourself here ... And that's not all. Do you realise, Bronsil, that you are one of the only nine people left alive out of thousands in this place?'

'Why blame me for that?' asked Bronsil, at last concentrating on the doctor's words, and finding them puzzling.

'Blame you?' the doctor shouted; the gun trembled dangerously. 'I'm congratulating you, you bastard! You're the sort of man we want! You're the man who will invent the napalm bomb!' He was becoming hysterical. 'You've got initiative. And you've just forced me to kill the man who might have fathered philosophers, and nurses, and teachers.' His eyes narrowed suddenly, became cunning. 'It might have been an accident,' he murmured. 'I could have fired two shots at Wilkinson, and hit you with one ... There's no room for you, Bronsil.'

'All the room in the world, Doctor, if what you say is true.' Joanna spoke suddenly; her tone was startlingly adult. 'And don't forget that I'm here, a witness. And you wouldn't shoot me, would you, Doctor? We know that's something you just couldn't do.'

The man wrenched his gaze from Bronsil, looked at her, the maniac gleam dying from his eyes. He tried to speak, but failed.

Joanna pursued him remorselessly. 'I can count, Doctor. Eight people. Three in the Community Room, dying. Bronsil and me. Three more outside. That's seven. Who is the eighth, Doctor? It's *you*, isn't it? You were the first out of the Scarlet Rooms, the first to go through the mill of this ... place. And you joined up with the Prells, to help them.'

The doctor nodded, dumbly.

Joanna continued. 'And you had dreams, didn't you? You were in charge. You could drop hints here and there to help the people you thought might win through. You didn't do much of that, because I reckon the Prells want us to make it unassisted, for some reason. The only person you helped was me. Why, Doctor?' She paused, regarding him, but he gave no reply. 'Because I was the only woman, that's why. You had a shrewd suspicion Marion wouldn't make it, yet you tried to fool the Prells, because of your great dream. And what was that dream?'

'With my willing assistance, you dreamed you would father a new breed of Men out of the disaster of this place.'

The doctor seemed to have forgotten the gun; it hung limply from his fingers. 'You just don't know what you're talking about,' he muttered. He turned like an automaton and walked slowly to the door, his shoulders bowed against the words which followed him.

'But you didn't realise the one important requirement, did you? In order to father Men, you've got to be a man yourself!'

Bronsil was watching the young girl's face as the doctor left; he shuddered inwardly at the contempt he saw there.

They wandered slowly through the forest along a worn track pitted by the passage of countless animals. Around them the trees bulked huge and formless, their upper branches rippling and gesturing in the cool wind. The random appearance of the world about them was eerie; nothing possessed regular shape or position; all was confusion, unexpected sounds, smells; and the strange, unpredictable play of light and shadow as the sun shafted through the rustling leaves.

Colours too; infinitely varying shades of green and brown, with sudden unexpectedly flaming reds and yellows from small flowers beside the path. Glancing upwards, they saw russet animals quick among the branches and glimpses of blue sky beyond the pattern of emerald and brown. What they saw was a beauty which man had not enjoyed for many years, yet it filled them with misgivings.

'It frightens me, this place,' said Joanna as they walked.

Bronsil led; she was a few paces behind. He was not frightened. Alert, nervous maybe, but at least reasonably confident of his ability to deal with the unexpected. As he walked he mused on the unpredictability of Joanna's reactions. In any of the human problems which had arisen over the past months she had shown herself confident and unafraid, in contrast to his own ineptitude. Yet the unknown terrified her; he could still remember her fear in the Community Room, her retreat to the couches and bottles, her longing for the security of her Scarlet Room.

As for himself, these fears and longing had abated over the months. He scarcely thought of retreat; he wanted to go forward, to find out...

It struck him that he and Joanna made a pretty good team.

It was Bronsil who dealt with the large, tawny animal when it dropped from a branch before them, spitting and snarling, while Joanna cowered behind a tree and he knifed it as it sprang.

It was Joanna who took the initiative when they encountered the roving band of three men; she insisted they

joined up and eased Bronsil into position as leader of the group.

By day they hunted. At first they carried their kill back to the building and cooked the meat in the kitchen, sleeping indoors. Later they found the door locked, the building barred to them. An attempt to explore the perimeter failed; there were other entrances likewise locked, but the place was too vast for a complete circuit. They gave up and struck off into the forest again, sleeping under the trees and eating their food raw.

They found the doctor on one of their rare excursions to the vicinity of the building. He lay in a clearing. As they approached there was a scuttling and rustling as scavengers retreated. The gun was in his hand; the back of his head was blown out. His eyes had been removed by birds; the sockets stared sightlessly at the sky with an expression of empty surprise, as though at the last instant he had discovered a belated, unexpected truth.

Remembering the incident between Joanna and the doctor, Bronsil expected her to indulge in self-recrimination; he put his arm around her and led her gently away from the distressing scene, muttering awkward words of comfort.

'It would have happened, whatever,' she said with surprising calm. 'He'd done his work. He was a stop-gap, a transition, and he knew it. There was no place for him out here. I expect he tried it, he walked through the door and into the forest, with his stethoscope and his bitterness and he found no use for either. So he died. He needn't have used the gun. He died in the same way as the people in the Community Room. He wasn't fitted for progress.'

Bronsil thought. 'This means we are the only ones left,' he said slowly.

Beyond the clearing, white through the trees, the vast building extended to infinity.

'There must be something ... next,' said Bronsil.

Next came to them, without their seeking. The stimuli

were completed; they were in their natural element among the trees, predatory animals gifted with intelligence. They hunted, they killed, they ate. The retrogression period undergone in the huge building was ended, the humans had returned to a condition where they could survive without assistance. In this reversal of evolution, only the fittest had survived ... The cycle began again almost immediately; one of the group had discovered how to make fire and they ate their food cooked, outside a hut made of saplings, leaves and creepers.

Already recollections of the Scarlet Room were fading although occasionally Bronsil thought of the Community Room, Marion and the doctor; but before that ... it was akin to the time of infancy, a memory invoked only by chance associations. One night, as he lay with Joanna in the hut, a stray creeper from the roof brushed his face. He woke with a start, a bitter taste in his mouth, to find himself sucking on the hanging strand. He spat it out, disgusted, and chased an elusive memory for a few moments before sleep came again.

They often spoke of the Justifications in the evening as they sat before the fire, watching the embers collapse into glowing ash and the glow fade to a grey mound drifted by the cool breeze, darkening with night into an indistinct smudge signifying it was time for bed. They remembered the Justifications well; there had been something hypnotic in the presentations on the screen, and often Bronsil felt that the events depicted had actually occurred in his presence. They were more real than the Community Room, for instance. The others felt the same and soon came to discuss the Justifications as exciting events in which they had all, as a group, participated. The evenings were thus frequently spent in speculation and it was agreed that a future had been lost which it was the purpose of the group to recapture. In this way they progressed, working with the primitive tools they possessed to strive for a culture they already knew, experimenting with cookery, leather, simple timber machinery, pottery and other projects.

Bronsil was satisfied that their environment had not, as previously, become a barrier against advancement. The only danger lay in a return to the building and this, it was apparent, the group would not attempt to do. It was tacitly agreed that the building represented stagnation and eventual death; the joy of work and discovery in the forest was too great for them to consider that...

He scrambled over the last few yards of loose rock and dust and stood, alone and triumphant, at the summit of the knoll. He turned. Before him lay the forest, the treetops below his level, a carpet of rippling viridescence spreading away to the distant stark white expanse of the building. Even from here he could not determine the extent of the building which curved below the horizon flat roofed; but he knew that the size did not matter; and wheeling round again he contemplated the opposite horizon, where further forest stretched like the future into the mystery of distance.

It was moments before he realised that he was not alone. He heard a noise and moved forward, notching an arrow to his bow, expecting some small ground animal. He descended quietly, treading carefully and trying not to disturb the loose surface. Feeling his way around a jagged rock corner he stopped abruptly, staring.

Before him was a silver dome, instantly recognisable as a photograph from the album of his memory. The door was open, the Prell was watching him.

'Bronsil,' It said clearly from the shapeless gap of its mouth.

'Firstly, I want you to watch this,' the alien said, setting up a portable Justification screen.

In a laboratory, men and Prells could be seen working together. In the fields, dense green shoots were harvested by giant machines. Areas of the sea were netted off; fat fish swam lazily. Huge mindless beasts, lumps of shapeless flesh, grew even larger as they grazed steadily on lush grass. In the cities, in the countryside, people went about their

business joyfully; there were frequent carnivals and the streets glittered with spectacular costumes. Everywhere were the Prells, helping, advising, dealing merciful justice in the courts. The development of science accelerated with the fresh infusion of knowldge; miracles were depicted...

'Utopia was achieved in a few years,' the Prell said, switching off the screen. 'Together, Prell and Man made an invincible partnership; Man's forcefulness and curiosity complementing the Prell's gentle inventiveness and scientific knowledge. Things got done, as never before. We had been observing Earth for many centuries and picked the moment for revealing ourselves carefully—the moment when Man, at the summit of his achievements, paused in real danger of destroying himself. We prevented this and we set progress in motion again.'

Bronsil's feelings were mixed. He understood that he had witnessed another chapter in the history of mankind but was unable to relate it to his present situation. Indeed, he did not particularly care. Justifications were interesting as topics of conversation, but they bore little relationship to real life. 'It's only history,' he said, feeling in some way obliged to reassure the Prell who was obviously wondering how to phrase his explanation of the subsequent disaster. 'It doesn't signify.'

'We are very sorry for what happened,' said the Prell.

'You imprisoned us,' said Bronsil, 'but you've released us. I daresay you had your reasons.' His mind was on Joanna and the rest of the group; he felt it was time to get back. The curiosity he used to experience in the building had been engendered by inactivity; now there was plenty to do. He was busy. He could not afford the time to listen to all this.

'All those people who died in the building,' the Prell continued. 'Thousands more than you realise. And when we released you, we had to be so ... cruel. Forcing you from circumstance to circumstance, impelling you to learn again all the things you had forogtten ... We could not even confide completely in the doctor. It is not in the nature of

the Prell to be unmerciful. It was hard; we wanted to help you, but we could only compel you, stage by stage.'

'Are there any others, besides my group?' Bronsil asked.

'I'm afraid not. You are now in ... I suppose you would call it a game reserve. When you are fully recovered, we will ship you back to Earth, if you wish.'

'Isn't this Earth?' At last Bronsil was startled out of his disinterest.

'This is my home world, although you would call it Earth-type. You and your group are the only survivors of a large team of adults and children which arrived several years ago with the object of turning our world into a virile Utopia like Earth, preparatory to further joint conquests. We needed you. We have known space travel for a long time, but we are not ... aggressive and dynamic.

'We constructed a building for you, as similar as possible to such buildings on Earth. Whatever you suggested, we installed. In time, we were puzzled by the further additions you requested and your gradual retreat from a lively communal life to a solitary existence ...

'And we thought you were evolving in some way unknown to us and would presently emerge from your chrysalis transformed. But you did not emerge. Until we had to force you, and then it was too late ...'

'We did not understand the psychology of your peculiar sexual reproductive system which provides you with that hidden memory of a period of ultimate safety and comfort.' The alien's voice grew defensive. 'How could we, we who reproduce asexually?'

'How could we know that, for all his toughness, when faced with the ultimate strangeness of permanent living on an alien planet, Man would creep into a pink little egg-shaped room and suck nourishment from a tube?

'Man is not suited to the conquest of space; he cannot thrive in alien surroundings. Now, we know that the Prell must advance alone.'

Bronsil had lost interest again; he shrugged, looking at the forest. There was a lot to discover in this new world. It was

his world; he had, in a sense, been born here. He muttered a brief farewell and set off down the hill, wondering if the others had made a kill for supper. He was a little worried about Joanna; she had been temperamental lately, demanding strange foods, and she seemed to be putting on weight.

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