FONTANA

EDITED BY R. CHETWYND-HAYES

TALES OF TERROR FROM OUTER SPACE

TALES OF TERROR FROM OUTER SPACE

Fontana Tales of Terror

Welsh Tales of Terror
Ed. R. Chetwynd-Hayes

Scottish Tales of Terror
Ed. Angus Campbell

London Tales of Terror
Ed. Jacquelyn Visick

Sea Tales of Terror
European Tales of Terror
Ed. J. J. Strating

Tales of Terror from

OUTER SPACE

Edited by R. Chetwynd-Hayes

Collins
FONTANA BOOKS

First issued in Fontana Books 1975

Made and printed in Great Britain by
William Collins Sons & Co Ltd Glasgow

CONTENTS

Introduction	7
I, Mars *by Ray Bradbury*	10
Eight O'Clock in the Morning *by Ray Nelson*	20
Girl from Mars *by Robert Bloch*	26
Heresies of the Huge God *by Brian W. Aldiss*	33
The Head-Hunters *by Ralph Williams*	44
The Animators *by Sydney J. Bounds*	59
The Night of the Seventh Finger *by Robert Presslie*	70
No More for Mary *by Charles Birkin*	87
Invasion of Privacy *by Bob Shaw*	98
The Ruum *by Arthur Porges*	121
The First Days of May *by Claude Veillot*	135
Specialist *by Robert Sheckley*	153
No Morning After *by Arthur C. Clarke*	169
Shipwreck *by R. Chetwynd-Hayes*	175

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Editor gratefully acknowledges permission to reprint copyright material to the following:

A. D. Peters & Co. for I, MARS by Ray Bradbury.
The Owl Agency and the author for EIGHT O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING by Ray Nelson.
The Scott Meredith Literary Agency for GIRL FROM MARS by Robert Bloch, from *The Living Demons.*
Brian Aldiss for HERESIES OF THE HUGE GOD.
The Scott Meredith Literary Agency for THE HEAD-HUNTERS by Ralph Williams, from *Stories For Tomorrow.*
Sydney J. Bounds for THE ANIMATORS, © 1975.
E. J. Carnell Literary Agency for THE NIGHT OF THE SEVENTH FINGER by Robert Presslie, © 1966, from *New Writings SF7.*
Charles Birkin for NO MORE FOR MARY from *Where Terror Stalked.*
The Scott Meredith Literary Agency for INVASION OF PRIVACY by Bob Shaw, from *Best Science Fiction 1971.*
Mercury Press for THE RUUM by Arthur Porges, © 1953, from *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction.*
Damon Knight for THE FIRST DAYS OF MAY, © 1961, by Mercury Press, Inc.
A. D. Peters & Co. for SPECIALIST by Robert Sheckley.
Messrs Gollancz and the author for NO MORNING AFTER by Arthur C. Clarke, from *Time And Stars.*
London Management and the author for SHIPWRECK by R. Chetwynd-Hayes, © 1975.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Every effort has been made to trace the owners of the copyright material in this book. It is the editor's belief that the necessary permissions from publishers, authors and authorised agents have been obtained, but in case of any question arising as to the use of any material, the editor, while expressing regret for any errors, will be pleased to make the necessary correction in future editions of the book.

INTRODUCTION

Although in the course of compiling this collection I have read an average of 50 science-fiction anthologies, none of the stories I selected have much to do with science. With one exception, they deal with invaders that either menace or disconcert the inhabitants of this already, agitated planet.

The one exception is *I, Mars* by Ray Bradbury. This story has no bug-eyed monsters, no invading aliens, no nasty things on stalks that peer in through the bedroom window on a star-bright night. But it is so brilliantly written, has such an undertone of terror, that I just could not leave it out. Mr Bradbury does not write stories so much as prose poems. For example:

'The sun rose. He was immensely tired, full of thorns and brambles of weakness, his heart plunging and aching.'

'And as if his body now discovered a thing which it had long kept secret, it seemed to decay upon his tired bones. The flesh of his eyelids fell away like flower petals. His mouth became a withered rose. The lobes of his ears melting wax . . .'

Apart from the mind-clinging language, the story is gripping from 'The phone rang' to 'the dead city.'

Eight O'Clock In The Morning by Ray Nelson has confirmed a long-held suspicion, namely, that television programmes are in the hands of wicked invaders from outer space. If you are a regular watcher of the box, you must agree. In his story, Mr Nelson, with great courage, has revealed the facts and it is up to us to take some kind of defensive action. What about switching off?

Heresies Of The Huge God is a lovely piece of the macabre. Who can say that there is not an extra-terrestrial moth winging its way towards us? So vast in size that, 'Aerial surveys suggest that this creature – if one can call it that – straddles a line along the Red Sea and across south east Europe . . .' Or again: 'The oceans also were disturbed, while great volumes of waters displaced by his body poured over the nearby land, killing many thousands of beings and washing ten thousand dead whales into the harbours of Colombo.'

Heaven preserve us.

I cannot believe that Mars is a very nice planet. Ever since H. G. Wells recorded that memorable invasion, we have been bedevilled by Martian illegal immigrants. Now Robert Bloch has come up with the *Girl from Mars.* A nice enough girl if one can overlook her one weakness.

I was not aware until I read *The Head Hunters* by Ralph Williams, that the planet earth was used as a hunting preserve by certain sporting types from wide-open spaces. When one comes up against a terrestrial party with like intentions, it is interesting to speculate which head will grace which wall.

Sydney J. Bounds has had much experience in dealing with assorted horrors, as his many anthologised stories will testify, and he handles *The Animators* with his usual skill. The scene is set on that ill-fated planet Mars, but the end results are hell-bent for earth. As though Brian Aldiss's giant insect was not enough.

I felt rather sorry for the stranded alien in *The Night Of The Seventh Finger* by Robert Presslie, which is not only lost in space, but in time as well. You may think his would-be girl victim is rather revolting. But I suppose it takes all types to make a universe.

Charles Birkin has given us a new kind of invader from outer space in his *No More For Mary.* I can only suggest you be very careful with the insecticide spray from now onwards. That oversized bug crawling up the table leg might well have the kindest intentions.

At first I thought that *Invasion of Privacy* by Bob Shaw was just another horror story, then I slowly realized who – or what – was responsible for Granny Cummins's resurrection, and began to cast anxious glances at the empty house across the road. It would appear that no-one is safe once those creatures from beyond the skies decide to invade. Not even the dead.

The Ruum by Arthur Porges relates the adventures of Jim Irwin who was unfortunate enough to meet a Type H-9 Ruum, that had been accidentally left behind on earth some hundred million years ago. You might be interested to know that a Ruum resembles a half-filled leather sack of liquid-metal, but, to quote: '. . . it was not leather; and what

appeared at first a disgusting wartiness, turned on closer scrutiny to be more like the functional projections of some outlandish mechanism.'

Ugh!

The First Days of May by Claude Veillot, translated by Damon Knight is a wonderfully horrible story. I can only describe it as a wide-awake nightmare with blood-curdling trimmings. For example: 'At the entrance to the Winter Circus, a number of Shrills are crouching on their barbed legs. They're the first I've seen since the ones I burned this morning, in front of the hotel.

'Does that curious noise come from the Circus – that whirling sound, thin and yet loud, that reminds me of the sound of crickets in the wastelands of Provence? And where does that heavy, thick, stale odour come from, that *green* smell? . . .'

I think I would rather shake hands with Sydney J. Bounds's Animators.

Specialist by Robert Sheckley is both funny and terrifying. It is also very original. For the first ten pages you may wonder what is going on, what with Talker, Eye, Engine, Thinker and Walls, all discussing where they can find a Pusher. What is a pusher? You'll give your body to know.

According to Arthur C. Clarke in *No Morning After* the world will not end with a bang, but a hiccup. The moral being – don't drink when you talk to kindly aliens.

Last of all my own contribution *Shipwrecked.* Not satisfied with the unholy league that is either on its way, or already in our midst, I have imported a lump of intelligent jelly. Well – why not? It will make a nasty change.

Having – I sincerely trust – read this book from cover to cover, you will have some idea of what to expect in the near future. You could be crushed by a giant insect from outer space, eaten by a blonde from Mars, lose your head to a celestial hunter, become an animated corpse in an empty house, come second in a race with a Ruum, be turned into an egg-laying machine by a Shrill, or have a one-sided conversation with a lump of jelly.

It doesn't leave much time to worry about the rising cost of living.

R. CHETWYND-HAYES.

I, MARS

RAY BRADBURY

The phone rang.

A gray hand lifted the receiver.

'Hello.'

'Hello, Barton?'

'Yes.'

'This is Barton.'

'What?'

'This is Barton!'

'It can't be. The phone hasn't rung in twenty years.'

The old man hung up.

Brrrrinnnng!

His gray hand seized the phone.

'Hello, Barton', laughed the voice. 'You have forgotten, haven't you?'

The old man felt his heart grow small and like a cool stone. He felt the wind blowing in off the dry seas and the blue hills of Mars. After twenty years of silence and cobwebs and now, tonight, on his eightieth birthday, with a ghastly scream, this phone had wailed to life.

'Who did you think it was?' said the voice. 'A rocket captain? Did you think someone had come to rescue you?'

'No.'

'What's the date?'

Numbly, 'July 20th, 2097'.

'Good Lord. Sixty years! Have you been sitting there that long? Waiting for a rocket to come from Earth to rescue you?'

The old man nodded.

'Now, old man, do you know who I am?'

'Yes.' The dry pale lips trembling. 'I understand. I remember. I am Emil Barton and you are Emil Barton.'

'With one difference. You are eighty. I am only twenty. All of life before me!'

The old man began to laugh and then to cry. He sat holding the phone like a lost child. The conversation was impossible, and should not be continued, and yet he went on with

it. When he got hold of himself he held the phone close to his withered lips and said, in deepest anguish, 'Listen! You there! Listen, oh God, if I could warn you! How can I? You're only a voice. If I could show you how lonely the years are. End it, kill yourself! Don't wait! If you knew what it is to change from the thing you are to the thing that is me, today, here, now, at this end.'

'Impossible.' The voice of the young Barton laughed, far away. 'I've no way to tell if you ever get this call. You're talking to a transcription. This is 2037. Sixty years in your past. Today, the atom war started on Earth. All colonials were called home from Mars, by rocket. I got left behind!'

'I remember', whispered the old man.

'Alone on Mars', laughed the young voice. 'A month, a year, who cares? There are foods and books. In my spare time I've made transcription libraries of ten thousand words, responses, my voice, connected to phone relays. In later months I'll call, have someone to talk with.'

'Yes', murmured the old man, remembering.

'Forty-sixty years from now my own transcripto-tapes will ring me up. I don't really think I'll be here on Mars that long; it's just a beautifully ironic idea of mine, something to pass the time. Is that really you, Barton? Is that really me?'

Tears fell from the old man's eyes. 'Yes!'

'I've made a thousand Bartons, tapes, sensitive to all questions, my voice, in one thousand Martian towns. An army of Bartons over Mars, while I wait for the rockets to return.'

'You fool', the old man shook his head, wearily. 'You waited sixty years. You grew old waiting, always alone. And now you've become me and you're still alone in the empty cities.'

'Don't expect my sympathy. You're like a stranger, off in another country. I can't be sad. I'm alive when I make these tapes. And you're alive when you hear them. Both of us, to the other, incomprehensible. Neither can warn the other, even though both respond, one to the other, one automatically, the other warmly and humanly. I'm human now. You're human later. I can't cry, because not knowing the future I can only be optimistic. These hidden tapes can only react to a certain number of stimuli from you. Can you ask a dead man to weep?'

'Stop it!' cried the old man. He felt the familiar great seizures of pain. Nausea moved through him, and blackness. 'Stop it! Oh God, but you were heartless. Go away!'

'Were, old man? I *am*. As long as the tapes glide on, as long as secret spindles and hidden electronic eyes read and select and convert words to send to you, I'll be young, cruel, blunt. I'll go on being young and cruel long after you're dead. Goodbye.'

Click.

Barton sat holding the silent phone a long while. His heart gave him intense pain.

What insanity it had been, in those first secluded years, fixing the telephonic brains, the tapes, the circuits, scheduling calls on time relays:

Brrrrinnnng!

'Morning, Barton. This is Barton. Seven o'clock. Rise and shine!'

Brrrrinnnng!

'Barton calling. You're to go to Mars Town at noon. Install a telephonic brain. Thought I'd remind you.'

'Thanks.'

Brrrrinnnng!

'Barton? Barton. Have lunch with me? The Rocket Inn?'

'Right.'

Brrrrinnnng!

'That you, B.? Thought I'd cheer you. Firm chin, and all that. The rescue rocket might come tomorrow, to save you.'

'Yes, tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow.'

Click.

But 40 years had burned into smoke. Barton had muted the insidious phones and their clever, clever repartee. He had sealed them into silences. They were to call him only after he was 80, if he still lived. And now today, the phones ringing, and the past breathing in his ear, sighing, whispering, murmuring, and remembering.

Brrrrinnnng!

He let it ring.

'I don't have to answer it', he thought.

Brrrrinnnng!

'There's no one there at all', he thought.

Brrrrinnnng!

'It's like talking to yourself', he thought. 'But different. Oh God, how different.'

He felt his hands crawl unconsciously toward the phone.

Click.

'Hello, old Barton, this is young Barton. One year older, though. I'm twenty-one today. In the last year I've put voice brains in two hundred towns on Mars. I've populated it with arrogant Bartons!'

'Yes.' The old man remembered those days six decades ago, those nights of rushing over blue hills and into iron valleys of Mars, with a truckful of machinery, whistling, happy. Another telephone, another relay. Something to do. Something clever and wonderful and sad. Hidden voices. Hidden, hidden. In those young days when death was not death, time was not time, old age a faint echo from the long blue cavern of years ahead. That young idiot, that sadistic fool, never thinking to reap the harvest so sown.

'Last night', said Barton, aged 21, 'I sat alone in a movie theatre in an empty town. I played an old Laurel and Hardy. God, how I laughed.'

'Yes.'

'I got an idea today. I recorded my voice one thousand times on one tape. Broadcast from the town, it sounds like a thousand people living there. A comforting noise, the noise of a crowd. I fixed it so doors slam in town, children sing, music boxes play, all by clockworks. If I don't look out the window, if I just listen, it's all right. But if I look, it spoils the illusion. I guess I'm getting lonely.'

The old man said, 'Yes. That was your first sign.'

'What?'

'The first time you admitted you were lonely.'

'I've experimented with smells. As I walk down the deserted streets, the smells of bacon and eggs, ham steak, filets, soups, come from the houses. All done with hidden machines. Clever?'

'Fantasy. Madness.'

'Self-protection, old man.'

'I'm tired.' Abruptly, the old man hung up. It was too much. The past pouring over him, drowning him. . . .

Swaying, he moved down the tower stairs to the streets of the town.

The town was dark. No longer did red neons burn, music play, or cooking smells linger. Long ago he had abandoned the grim fantasy of the mechanical lie. Listen! Are those footsteps? Smell! Isn't that strawberry pie! No, he had stopped it all. What had he done with the robots? His mind puzzled. Oh, yes . . .

He moved to the dark canal where the stars shone in the quivering waters.

Underwater, in row after fish-like row, rusting, were the robot populations of Mars he had constructed over the years, and, in a wild realization of his own insane inadequacy, had commanded to march, one two three four! into the canal deeps, plunging, bubbling like sunken bottles. He had killed them and shown no remorse.

Brrrrinnnng.

Faintly a phone rang in a lightless cottage.

He walked on. The phone ceased.

Brrrrinnnng. Another cottage ahead, as if it knew of his passing. He began to run. The ringing stayed behind. Only to be taken up by a ringing from now this house – Brrrrinnnng! now that, now here, there! He turned the corner. A phone! He darted on. Another corner. Another phone!

'All right, all right!' he shrieked, exhausted. 'I'm coming!'

'Hello, Barton.'

'What do you want!'

'I'm lonely. I only live when I speak. So I must speak. You can't shut me up forever.'

'Leave me alone!' said the old man, in horror.

'This is Barton, age twenty-four. Another couple of years gone. Waiting. A little lonelier. I've read *War and Peace*, drunk sherry, run restaurants with myself as waiter, cook, entertainer. And tonight, I star in a film at the Tivoli. Emil Barton in *Love's Labour's Lost*, playing all the parts, some with wigs, myself!'

'Stop calling me', the old man's eyes were fiery and insane. 'Or I'll kill you!'

'You can't kill me. You'll have to find me, first!'

'I'll find you!' A choking.

'You've forgotten where you hid me. I'm everywhere in Mars, in boxes, in houses, in cables, towers, underground! Go ahead, try! What'll you call it? Telecide? Suicide? Jealous, are you? Jealous of me here, only twenty-four, bright-eyed, strong, young, young, young? All right, old man, it's war! Between us. Between me! A whole regiment of us, all ages from twenty to sixty, against you, the real one. Go ahead, declare war!'

'I'll kill you!' screamed Barton.

Click. Silence.

'Kill you!' He threw the phone out the window, shrieking.

In the midnight cold, the ancient automobile moved in deep valleys. Under Barton's feet on the floorboard were revolvers, rifles, dynamite. The roar of the car was in his thin, tired bones.

I'll find them, he thought. Find and destroy, all of them. Oh, God, God, how can he do this to me?

He stopped the car. A strange town lay under the late twin moons. There was no wind.

He held the rifle in his cold hands. He peered at the poles, the towers, the boxes. Where? Where was this town's voice hidden? That tower? Or that one there! Where! So many years ago. So long gone. So forgotten. He turned his head now this way, now that, wildly. It must be that tower! Was he certain? Or this box here, or the transformer half up that tower?

He raised the rifle.

The tower fell with the first bullet.

All of them, he thought. All of the towers in this town will have to be cut apart. I've forgotten. Too long.

The car moved along the silent street.

Brrrrinnnng!

He looked at the deserted drugstore.

Brrrrinnnng!

Pistol in hand, he entered.

Click.

'Hello, Barton? Just a warning. Don't try to rip down all

the towers, blow things up. Cut your own throat that way. Think it over . . .'

Click.

He stepped out of the phone booth slowly and moved into the street and listened to the telephone towers humming high in the air, still alive, still untouched. He looked at them and then he understood.

He could not destroy the towers. Suppose a rocket came from Earth, impossible idea, but suppose it came tonight, tomorrow, next week? and landed on the other side of the planet, and used the phones to try to call Barton, only to find the circuits dead?

Barton dropped his gun.

'A rocket won't come', he argued, softly, logically with himself. 'I'm old. It won't come now. It's too late.'

But suppose it came, and you never knew, he thought. No, you've got to keep the lines open.

Brrrrinnnng.

He turned dully. His eyes were blinking and not seeing. He shuffled back into the drugstore and fumbled with the receiver.

'Hello?' A strange voice.

'Please', pleaded the old man, brokenly. 'Don't bother me.'

'Who's this, who's there? Who is it? Where are you?' cried the voice, surprised.

'Wait a minute.' The old man staggered. 'This is Emil Barton, who's that?'

'This is Captain Leonard Rockwell, Earth Rocket 48. Just arrived from New York.'

'No, no no.'

'Are you there, Mr Barton?'

'No, no, it can't be, it just can't.'

'Where are you?'

'You're lying, it's false!' The old man had to lean against the booth wall. His blue eyes were cold blind. 'It's you, Barton, making fun of me, lying to me again!'

'This is Captain Rockwell. We just landed in New Schenectady. Where are you?'

'In Green Town', he gasped. 'That's a thousand miles from you.'

'Look, Barton, can you come here?'

'What?'

'We've repairs on our rocket. Exhausted from the flight. Can you come help?'

'Yes, yes.'

'We're at the tarmac outside town. Can you rush by tomorrow?'

'Yes, but—'

'Well?'

The old man petted the phone, pitifully. 'How's Earth? How's New York? Is the war over? Who's President now? What happened?'

'Plenty of time for gossip when you arrive.'

'Is everything fine?'

'Fine.'

'Thank God.' The old man listened to the far voice. 'Are you sure you're Captain Rockwell?'

'Damn it, man!'

'I'm sorry!'

He hung up and ran.

They were here, after many years, unbelievable, his own, who would take him back to Earth seas and skies and mountains.

He started the car. He would drive all night. Could he do it? What of his heart—It would be worth a risk, to see people, to shake hands, to hear them near you.

The car thundered in the hills.

That voice. Captain Rockwell. It couldn't be himself, 40 years ago. He had never made a recording like that. Or had he? In one of his depressive fits, in a spell of drunken cynicism, hadn't he once made a false tape of a false landing on Mars with a synthetic captain, an imaginary crew? He jerked his grey head, savagely. No. He was a suspicious fool. Now was no time to doubt. He must run under the moons of Mars, hour on hour. What a party they would have!

The sun rose. He was immensely tired, full of thorns and brambles of weakness, his heart plunging and aching, his fingers fumbling the wheel, but the thing that pleased him most was the thought of one last phone call: Hello, young Barton, this is old Barton. I'm leaving for Earth today! Rescued! He chuckled weakly.

He drove into the shadowy limits of New Schenectady at

sundown. Stepping from his car he stood staring at the rocket tarmac, rubbing his reddened eyes.

The rocket field was empty. No one ran to meet him. No one shook his hand, shouted, or laughed.

He felt his heart roar into pain. He knew blackness and a sensation of falling through the open sky. He stumbled toward an office.

Inside, six phones sat in a neat row.

He waited, gasping.

Finally:

Brrrrinnnng.

He lifted the heavy receiver.

A voice said, 'I was wondering if you'd get there alive.'

The old man did not speak, but stood with the phone in his hands.

The voice continued, 'An elaborate joke. Captain Rockwell reporting for duty, sir. Your orders, sir?'

'You', groaned the old man.

'How's your heart, old man?'

'No!'

'Hoped the trip would kill you. Had to eliminate you some way, so I could live, if you call a transcription living.'

'I'm going out now', replied the old man, 'and blow it all up. I don't care. I'll blow up everything until you're all dead!'

'You haven't the strength. Why do you think I had you travel so far, so fast? This is your last trip!'

The old man felt his heart falter. He would never make the other towns. The war was lost. He slid into a chair and made low sobbing, mournful noises from his loose mouth. He glared at the five other, silent phones. As if at a signal, they burst into silver chorus! A nest of ugly birds screaming!

Automatic receivers popped up.

The office whirled. 'Barton, Barton, Barton!!'

He throttled the phone in his hands, the voice, the youth, the time of long ago. He mashed, choked it and still it laughed at him. He throttled it. He beat it. He kicked at it. He hated it with hands and mouth and blind raging eye. He furled the hot wire like serpentine in his fingers, ripped it into red bits which fell about his stumbling feet.

He destroyed three other phones. There was a sudden silence.

And as if his body now discovered a thing which it had long kept secret, it seemed to decay upon his tired bones. The flesh of his eyelids fell away like flower petals. His mouth became a withered rose. The lobes of his ears melting wax. He pushed his chest with his hands and fell face down. He lay still. His breathing stopped. His heart stopped.

After a long spell, the remaining two phones rang.

Twice. Three times.

A relay snapped somewhere. The two phone voices were connected, one to the other.

'Hello, Barton?'

'Yes, Barton?'

'What's happened?'

'I don't know. Listen.'

The silent room. The old man did not stir on the floor. The wind blew in the broken window. The air was cool.

'Congratulate me, Barton, this is my twenty-sixth birthday!'

'And I'm twenty-four!'

'Congratulations!'

Laughter drifted out the window into the dead city.

EIGHT O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING

RAY NELSON

At the end of the show the hypnotist told his subjects, 'Awake.'

Something unusual happened.

One of the subjects awoke all the way. This had never happened before. His name was George Nada and he blinked out at the sea of faces in the theatre, at first unaware of anything out of the ordinary. Then he noticed, spotted here and there in the crowd, the nonhuman faces, the faces of the Fascinators. They had been there all along, of course, but only George was really awake, so only George recognized them for what they were. He understood everything in a flash, including the fact that if he were to give any outward sign, the Fascinators would instantly command him to return to his former state, and he would obey.

He left the theatre, pushing out into the neon night, carefully avoiding giving any indication that he saw the green, reptilian flesh or the multiple yellow eyes of the rulers of Earth. One of them asked him, 'Got a light, buddy?' George gave him a light, then moved on.

At intervals along the street George saw the posters hanging with photographs of the Fascinators' multiple eyes and various commands printed under them, such as, 'Work eight hours, play eight hours, sleep eight hours', and 'Marry and Reproduce'. A TV set in the window of a store caught George's eye, but he looked away in the nick of time. When he didn't look at the Fascinator in the screen, he could resist the command, 'Stay tuned to this station'.

George lived alone in a little sleeping room, and as soon as he got home, the first thing he did was to disconnect the TV set. In other rooms he could hear the TV sets of his neighbours, though. Most of the time the voices were human, but now and then he heard the arrogant, strangely bird-like croaks of the aliens. 'Obey the government', said one croak. 'We are the government', said another. 'We are your friends, you'd do anything for a friend, wouldn't you?'

'Obey!'

'Work!'

Suddenly the phone rang.

George picked it up. It was one of the Fascinators.

'Hello', it squawked. 'This is your control, Chief of Police Robinson. You are an old man, George Nada. Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock, your heart will stop. Please repeat.'

'I am an old man', said George. 'Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock, my heart will stop.'

The control hung up.

'No it won't', whispered George. He wondered why they wanted him dead. Did they suspect that he was awake? Probably. Someone might have spotted him, noticed that he didn't respond the way the others did. If George were alive at one minute after eight tomorrow morning, then they would be sure.

'No use waiting here for the end', he thought.

He went out again. The posters, the TV, the occasional commands from passing aliens did not seem to have absolute power over him, though he still felt strongly tempted to obey, to see these things the way his master wanted him to see them. He passed an alley and stopped. One of the aliens was alone there, leaning against the wall. George walked up to him.

'Move on', grunted the thing, focusing his deadly eyes on George.

George felt his grasp on awareness waver. For a moment the reptilian head dissolved into the face of a lovable old drunk. Of course the drunk would be lovable. George picked up a brick and smashed it down on the old drunk's head with all his strength. For a moment the image blurred, then the blue-green blood oozed out of the face and the lizard fell, twitching and writhing. After a moment it was dead.

George dragged the body into the shadows and searched it. There was a tiny radio in its pocket and a curiously shaped knife and fork in another. The tiny radio said something in an incomprehensible language. George put it down beside the body, but kept the eating utensils.

'I can't possibly escape', thought George. 'Why fight them?'

But maybe he could.

What if he could awaken others? That might be worth a try.

He walked twelve blocks to the apartment of his girlfriend, Lil, and knocked on her door. She came to the door in her bathrobe.

'I want you to wake up', he said.

'I'm awake', she said. 'Come on in.'

He went in. The TV was playing. He turned it off.

'No', he said. 'I mean really wake up.' She looked at him without comprehension, so he snapped his fingers and shouted, *'Wake up!* The masters command that you wake up!'

'Are you off your rocker, George?' she asked suspiciously. 'You sure are acting funny.' He slapped her face. 'Cut that out!' she cried, 'What the hell are you up to anyway?'

'Nothing', said George, defeated. 'I was just kidding around.'

'Slapping my face wasn't just kidding around!' she cried.

There was a knock at the door.

George opened it.

It was one of the aliens.

'Can't you keep the noise down to a dull roar?' it said.

The eyes and reptilian flesh faded a little and George saw the flickering image of a fat middle-aged man in shirt-sleeves. It was still a man when George slashed its throat with the eating knife, but it was an alien before it hit the floor. He dragged it into the apartment and kicked the door shut.

'What do you see there?' he asked Lil, pointing to the many-eyed snake thing on the floor.

'Mister . . . Mister Coney', she whispered, her eyes wide with horror. 'You . . . just killed him, like it was nothing at all.'

'Don't scream', warned George, advancing on her.

'I won't, George. I swear I won't, only please, for the love of God, put down that knife.' She backed away until she had her shoulder blades pressed to the wall.

George saw that it was no use.

'I'm going to tie you up', said George. 'First tell me which room Mister Coney lived in.'

'The first door on your left as you go toward the stairs', she said. 'George . . . Georgie. Don't torture me. If you're going to kill me, do it clean. Please, George, please.'

He tied her up with bedsheets and gagged her, then

searched the body of the Fascinator. There was another one of the little radios that talked a foreign language, another set of eating utensils, and nothing else.

George went next door.

When he knocked, one of the snake things answered, 'Who is it?'

'Friend of Mister Coney. I wanna see him', said George.

'He went out for a second, but he'll be right back.' The door opened a crack, and four yellow eyes peeped out. 'You wanna come in and wait?'

'Okay', said George, not looking at the eyes.

'You alone here?' he asked, as it closed the door, its back to George.

'Yeah, why?'

He slit its throat from behind, then searched the apartment.

He found human bones and skulls, a half-eaten hand.

He found tanks with huge fat slugs floating in them.

'The children', he thought, and killed them all.

There were guns too, of a sort he had never seen before. He discharged one by accident, but fortunately it was noiseless. It seemed to fire little poisoned darts.

He pocketed the gun and as many boxes of darts as he could and went back to Lil's place. When she saw him she writhed in helpless terror.

'Relax, honey', he said, opening her purse, 'I just want to borrow your car keys.'

He took the keys and went downstairs to the street.

Her car was still parked in the same general area in which she always parked it. He recognized it by the dent in the right fender. He got in, started it, and began driving aimlessly. He drove for hours, thinking—desperately searching for some way out. He turned on the car radio to see if he could get some music, but there was nothing but news and it was all about him, George Nada, the homicidal maniac. The announcer was one of the masters, but he sounded a little scared. Why should he be? What could one man do?

George wasn't surprised when he saw the roadblock, and he turned off on a side street before he reached it. No little trip to the country for you, Georgie boy, he thought to himself.

They had just discovered what he had done back at Lil's place, so they would probably be looking for Lil's car. He parked it in an alley and took the subway. There were no aliens on the subway, for some reason. May be they were too good for such things, or maybe it was just because it was so late at night.

When one finally did get on, George got off.

He went up to the street and went into a bar. One of the Fascinators was on the TV, saying over and over again, 'We are your friends. We are your friends. We are your friends'. The stupid lizard sounded scared. Why? What could one man do against all of them?

George ordered a beer, then it suddenly struck him that the Fascinator on the TV no longer seemed to have any power over him. He looked at it again and thought, 'It has to believe it can master me to do it. The slightest hint of fear on its part and the power to hypnotize is lost'. They flashed George's picture on the TV screen and George retreated to the phone booth. He called his control, the Chief of Police.

'Hello, Robinson?' he asked.

'Speaking.'

'This is George Nada. I've figured out how to wake people up.'

'What? George, hang on. Where are you?' Robinson sounded almost hysterical.

He hung up and paid and left the bar. They would probably trace his call.

He caught another subway and went downtown.

It was dawn when he entered the building housing the biggest of the city's TV studios. He consulted the building directory and then went up in the elevator. The cop in front of the studio entrance recognized him. 'Why, you're Nada!' he gasped.

George didn't like to shoot him with the poison dart gun, but he had to.

He had to kill several more before he got into the studio itself, including all the engineers on duty. There were a lot of police sirens outside, excited shouts, and running footsteps on the stairs. The alien was sitting before the TV camera saying, 'We are your friends. We are your friends', and didn't see George come in. When George shot him with the needle gun

he simply stopped in mid-sentence and sat there dead. George stood near him and said, imitating the alien croak, 'Wake up. Wake up. See us as we are and kill us!'

It was George's voice the city heard that morning, but it was the Fascinator's image, and the city did awake for the very first time and the war began.

George did not live to see the victory that finally came. He died of a heart attack at exactly eight o'clock.

GIRL FROM MARS

ROBERT BLOCH

'The wild Man from Borneo – he eats 'em alive – he eats 'em alive—'

Ace Clawson leaned against the side of the platform and listened to Lou, the spieler. Somebody had to listen to him, and there was no crowd in this lousy drizzle.

The rain was letting up now as it got dark, but the afternoon storm had made mudpies in the Midway. Ace stared up the deserted carny street as the lights came on over the soggy tents and the drooping banners of the *World of Wonder* shows. He shivered. This was a stinking climate – no wonder these Georgia crackers got malaria.

Maybe it would stop raining soon. Maybe the marks would come down after supper. They'd better. Only two days left to play here and Ace wasn't off the nut yet. Well, that's the way some seasons went, just one bad break after another.

Ace scratched his chin. Better shave. Ah, phooey on that. And phooey for Lou, too – blatting his brains out for nothing up there. He looked at the gawky spieler on the platform and grinned. Punk kid, his first season out, and he needed practice. Ace cocked his head and called.

'Hey, Lou!'

'Yeah?'

'Shut up!'

Lou shut up and climbed down. He tossed his head and Ace ducked the spray of raindrops. 'You damn' fool, barking at nobody! Stuff it. Go inside and take the gang over to Sweeney for chow. We won't see a sucker around here for an hour yet.'

'Sure, Ace.'

Lou went inside and rounded up the Strange People. They came out single file; Fat Phyllis waddling along with little Captain Atom, Hassan the fire-eater puffing on one of his rancid shoe pegs, Joe the Alligator Boy wearing a raincoat, Eddie in his wild man outfit.

Ace stood behind the ticket stand. He didn't feel like talking to them. Somebody was bound to make a crack about

Mitzie and Rajah. Nuts to that noise!

He watched them plod through the red clay of the Midway, then squinted up at the banners behind the platform. All the Strange People squinted back with their painted eyes – Phyllis, Captain Atom, the World's Smallest Man, the Mighty Hassan, the Alligator Boy, the Wild Man from Borneo, Rajah the Magician, and the Girl from Mars.

Rajah the Magician, dressed in evening clothes and wearing a turban on his head, was sawing a woman in half. The Girl from Mars spread her batwings over the sky. Ace scowled at them and cursed.

They had to take a powder on him, did they? Had to run out – and together! That's what hurt. They ran off together. Rajah and Mitzie. It was probably her idea, the tramp. Just giving him the old double-X behind his back. Laughing at him. Bad weather, a poor take, and on top of it she had to run out on him too!

Ace bit into his lower lip. That was all the supper he needed. That and a drink.

He sat down on the edge of the platform and pulled out his pint. Almost full. He pulled out the cork and threw it away. It wouldn't be needed again for this bottle.

Tilting his head back, he swallowed. One swig for the rain. One swig for the lousy Georgia crackers. One swig for Rajah and Mitzie. Yes, and one swig for what he'd do to that broad if he ever caught up with her.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that the rain had stopped. And then, he saw the girl.

She came wandering up the Midway, walking very slow. She was wearing some kind of gray playsuit, but he could tell it was a girl all right, even from far away, because the lights showed off her blonde hair.

Blonde hell, she was platinum; as she got closer he saw the bush on her head was almost white. Her eyebrows, too. Like one of those – what did they call 'em? – albinos. Only her eyes weren't pink. They were kind of platinum too. Starey eyes. She gawked at everything as she went past the pitches.

Ace watched her coming; he had nothing else to do. Besides, she was worth watching. Even with that outfit on, he could see that she was really stacked. But built! Long legs, and plenty of meat on the torso. A disheroo.

He slicked back his hair. When she passed the tent he'd step out and walk over, sort of smiling. Then—

Ace hesitated. Because the girl wasn't passing the tent. She came up to the end of the platform and stopped. She looked up and began to read the banners, moving her lips. She stood kind of funny, swaying a little as if she had a load. Maybe she did, at that. Anyhow, she rocked on her heels and stared up. She kept looking at one banner and mumbling to herself.

Ace turned his head. She was staring at the Girl from Mars. Yes, and that's what she was mumbling out loud, too; he could hear it.

'The Girl from Mars', she kept saying. She had a kind of foreign accent. Blondie. Maybe a Swede or something.

'Something I can do for you?'

Ace swung over and came up behind her. She jumped about a foot.

'Teker—'

Swede all right. But built. She didn't wear any makeup. She didn't need to. Ace smiled at her.

'I'm Ace Clawson. Own this show. What can I do for you, sister?'

She sized him up and then looked back at the banner.

'The Girl from Mars', she said. 'Is that truth?'

'Truth?'

'There is such a one? Inside there?'

'Uh – no. Not now. She scrammed.'

'Kep?' The girl swallowed quickly. 'I mean – what do you say?'

'She ran away. What's the matter, you don't talk English so good, huh?'

'English? Oh. Speech. Yes, I talk it.' She spoke slowly, frowning. At least her eyebrows frowned, but her forehead didn't wrinkle. Her skin was gray, like the playsuit. No buttons on the suit and she wasn't carrying a purse. Foreigner.

'She did not po—possess wings?'

Ace grinned. 'No. Fakeroo.' She was beginning her frown act again and he remembered she was probably drunk. 'It was a gag, see? There is no Girl from Mars.'

'But I am from *Rekk*.'

'What?'

'I am from *Re*—from Mars.'

She was lushed to the gills. Ace stepped back. 'Oh yeah. Sure. You're from Mars, huh?'

'I came today.'

'Well, well. Just like that, huh? Pleasure or business?'

'Kep?'

'Skip it. I mean, what's on your mind? What can I do for you?'

'Hungry.'

Not only a lush, but a mooch, yet. But she *was* built. And when Ace put his hand on her shoulder, she didn't move away. Her shoulder was warm. The heat just poured off her. Hot stuff. And she was hungry—

Ace glanced at the tent flap behind him. He was beginning to get an idea. It came to him when he put his hand on her shoulder. To hell with Mitzie. This was just what the doctor ordered. And the Midway was deserted. The gang wouldn't be back from Sweeney's for 45 minutes yet.

'Hungry', the girl repeated.

'Sure. We'll get you something to eat. But let's talk first. Come on inside.' Ace got another grip on her shoulder. Warm. Soft. Good stuff.

The lights inside were dim. Lou had switched off when he left. The flaps were down over the platforms against the tent walls, as they were during the grind when only one freak performed at a time. Ace led her over to the Girl from Mars platform. There was a cot inside and he could lower the flap. Take it easy first though.

She walked on her heels until he held her still and pushed her down on the steps on the side of the platform. Touching her made him want to hurry it up, even though he knew he had to be careful. The heat came off her in waves, and he was warm from the whiskey.

'So you're from Mars', he said, huskily, bending over her but remembering to keep a grin on his face. 'How did you get here?'

'Ertells. The—machine. With the others. *Hydron,* very swift. Until we land. Then this, we did not expect. In the atmosphere. Electric.'

'The storm? Lightning?'

She nodded, expressionless. 'You understand. The *kor* –

the machine split. Broken. All *flerk.* All but I. I fell. And then I did not know. Because I had no orders. *Pre* was ended. You understand?'

Ace nodded. She was hot. God, she was hot. And built. He stepped back, still nodding. Let her finish. Maybe she'd sober up a little.

'So I walked. Nothing. Nobody. Dark. Then I saw light. This place. And the words. And you. I read the words.'

'And here you are.' Humour them. You got to humour them, dames and drunks. 'How come you read English, and talk?'

'*Pre* did it. Education. Because he – planned we must come. Much I cannot know. I will understand. Now hungry.'

There was no expression on her face. Lushes always twist their faces a lot. She didn't stagger, just walked on her heels was all. And there was no liquor smell from her. So – she wasn't drunk!

Ace stared.

He stared at the expressionless face, at the platinum hair and eyebrows. He stared at the sandals she wore, at the gray suit without any pockets, without any buttons. No buttons. That was it. *She didn't have all her buttons.*

Yeah. Sure. She was a whack. She came here this afternoon, all right. Busted out of the country nuthouse in the storm. No wonder she didn't carry a purse or anything. Just a lousy whack on the lam from the san.

Wouldn't that have to be the kind of break he got? A screwball with an empty gut and an empty noggin. That's all he needed. But she was *built.* And that's all he needed—

Why not?

Ace figured fast. Half an hour, maybe. Long enough. He'd hustle her out of here right away. Nobody would know. It was a dirty trick, maybe. What the hell, he'd been getting the dirty end long enough himself; rain, no take, that damned Mitzie running out on him, no woman. He needed a change of luck. And besides, it wouldn't hurt her, maybe do her good. Nobody would find out anything and even if they did, she was a whack. Didn't know what she was saying, even. Why not?

'Hungry.'

'Wait a minute, sister, I got a great idea. Come on back here for a second.'

He motioned her to her feet, led the way up the steps, and lifted the flap. It was dark on the platform behind the canvas curtain. He groped for the couch, found it.

'Sit down here.' He made his voice soft. She stood right next to him, not backing away, and when he pulled her down, pulled down all that heat and softness, she came without a sound.

He made himself wait, kept talking first.

'Yeah, I got a great idea. Why not? You're from Mars, ain'tcha?'

'Yes. From *Rekk*.'

'Sure. And my Girl from Mars skipped. So the way I figure it, why don't you come along with the show? You can have the same setup, 60 a week and chow, travel around and see the country. Nobody to tell you what to do or when to do it, see? Your own boss. Free. Get it – free?'

He wanted it to sound good. Sort of subtle, about being free. Even if she was a whack, she had enough sense to bust out and probably knew she'd have to keep moving. Not that he'd let her tie up with the show, that was all con, but he wanted her to go for the deal. Then he could start.

'But that is not what you speak. Hungry—'

Ah, to hell with it! You don't waste your breath on a screwball. And here in the dark she wasn't a screwball. She was a disheroo, a tall blonde, hot, better than Mitzie, damn Mitzie anyhow, she was here and he could feel her, feel the warmth just busting out of her—

Ace put his hands on her shoulders.

'Hungry, huh? Well, don't you worry about that, sister. I'll take care of you. All you gotta do is cooperate.'

Damn it! He heard the mumbling now, the gang was coming back, filing into the tent, climbing up on platforms and scraping chairs. He wouldn't have time.

But what the hell, he was behind the curtain, it was dark, he'd keep quiet and make her keep quiet and they could sneak out later. Besides, his hands were on her shoulders. Ace felt her lean against him, felt those curves, solid. Instead of drawing back, she kept coming in, she wasn't whacky, she knew what she was doing, this was all right.

Somebody in the outer tent flicked up the lights, and a thin glow filtered through the canvas curtain. He grinned at her

upturned face. Her eyes were wide, shining. He ran his hands down her back. She was strong, eager.

'Don't you worry about being hungry, baby', he whispered. 'I'll take care of you.'

The heat poured out of her as she pressed his shoulders. He bent his head to kiss her. She opened her mouth, wide, and in the dim light he saw her teeth. They were platinum-coloured, too.

Then he wanted to draw back, but something about the heat pouring off her made him feel dizzy. Besides, she held on to him so tight, and she kept whispering 'hungry' over and over again, and now she was drawing him down on the cot and he saw the teeth coming at him. They were long and pointed. He couldn't move, she held him, the heat came out of her eyes to blind him, and the long, sharp teeth were coming closer and closer—

Ace hardly felt any pain. Everything turned to heat and whirled away. Somewhere in the distance a voice began to chant. It was Lou, standing outside, standing under the Girl from Mars banner and beginning his chant. That was the last thing Ace heard or knew. The chant, the spiel.

'The Wild Man From Borneo – he eats 'em alive – he eats 'em alive—'

HERESIES OF THE HUGE GOD

BRIAN W. ALDISS

The Secret Book of Harad IV

I, Harad IV, Chief Scribe, declare that this my writing may be shown only to priests of rank within the Sacrificial Orthodox Universal Church and to the Elders Elect of the Council of the Sacrificial Orthodox Universal Church, because here are contained matters concerning the four Vile Heresies that may not be spoken of among the people.

For a Proper Consideration of the newest and vilest heresy, we must look in perspective over the events of history. Accordingly, let us go back to the First Year of our epoch, when the World Darkness was banished by the arrival of the Huge God, our truest, biggest Lord, to whom all honour and terror.

From this present year, 910 H.G., it is impossible to recall what the world was like then, but from the few records still surviving, we can gather something of those times and even perform the Mental Contortions necessary to see how events must have looked to the sinners then involved in them.

The world on which the Huge God found himself was full of people and their machines, all of them unprepared for His Visit. There may have been a hundred thousand times more people than now there are.

The Huge God landed in what is now the Sacred Sea, upon which in these days sail some of our most beautiful churches dedicated to His Name. At that time, the region was much less pleasing, being broken up into many states possessed by different nations. This was a system of land tenure practised before our present theories of constant migration and evacuation were formed.

The rear legs of the Huge God stretched far down into Africa – which was then not the island continent it now is – almost touching the Congo River, at the sacred spot marked now by the Sacrificial Church of Basoko-Aketi-Ele, and at the sacred spot marked now by the Temple Church of Aden, obliterating the old port of Aden.

Some of the Huge God's legs stretched above the Sudan and across what was then the Libyan Kingdom, now part of the Sea of Elder Sorrow, while a foot rested in a city called Tunis on what was then the Tunisian shore. These were some of the legs of the Huge God on his left side.

On his right side, his legs blessed and pressed the sands of Saudi Arabia, now called Life Valley, and the foothills of the Caucasus, obliterating the Mount called Ararat in Asia Minor, while the Foremost Leg stretched forward to Russian Lands, stamping out immediately the great capital city of Moscow.

The body of the Huge God, resting in repose between his mighty legs, settled mainly over three ancient seas, if the Old Records are to be trusted, called the Sea of Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Nile Sea, all of which now form part of the Sacred Sea. He eradicated also with his Great Bulk part of the Black Sea, now called the White Sea, Egypt, Athens, Cyprus, and the Balkan Peninsula as far north as Belgrade, now Holy Belgrade, for above this town towered the Neck of the Huge God on his First Visit to us mortals, just clearing the roofs of the houses.

As for his head, it lifted above the region of mountains that we call Ittaland, which was then named Europe, a populous part of the globe, and was raised so high that it might easily be seen on a clear day from London, then as now the chief town of the land of the Anglo-French.

It was estimated in those first days that the length of the Huge God was some four and a half thousand miles, from rear to nose, with the eight legs each about nine hundred miles long. Now we profess in our Creed that our Huge God changes shape and length and number of legs according to whether he is Pleased or Angry with man.

In those days, the nature of God was unknown. No preparation had been made for his coming, though some whispers of the millennium were circulating. Accordingly, the speculation of his nature was far from the truth, and often extremely blasphemous.

Here is an extract from the notorious Gersheimer Paper, which contributed much to the events leading up to the First Crusade in 271 H.G. We do not know who the Black Gersheimer was, apart from the meaningless fact that he was a

Scientific Prophet at somewhere called Cornell or Carnell, evidently a Church on the American Continent (then a differently shaped territory).

'Aerial surveys suggest that this creature – if one can call it that – which straddles a line along the Red Sea and across south east Europe, is non-living, at least as we understand life. It may be merely coincidence that it somewhat resembles an eight-footed lizard, so that we do not necessarily have to worry about the thing being malignant, as some tabloids have suggested.'

Not all the vile jargon of that distant day is now understandable, but we believe 'aerial surveys' to refer to the mechanical flying machines which this last generation of the Godless possessed. Black Gersheimer continues:

'If this thing is not life, it may be a piece of galactic debris clinging momentarily to the globe, perhaps like a leaf clinging to a football in the fall. To believe this is not necessarily to alter our scientific concepts of the universe. Whether the thing represents life or not, we don't have to go all superstitious. We must merely remind ourselves that there are many phenomena in the universe as we conceive it in the light of the Twentieth Century science which remain unknown to us. However painful this unwanted visitation may be, it is some consolation to think that it will bring us new knowledge – of ourselves, as well as the world outside our little solar system.'

Although terms like 'galactic debris' have lost their meaning, if they ever had one, the general trend of this passage is offensively obvious. An embargo is being set up against the worship of the Huge God, with a heretical God of Science set up in his stead. Only one other passage from this offensive mish-mash need be considered, but it is a vital one for Showing the Attitude of mind of Gersheimer and presumably most of his contemporaries.

'Naturally enough, the peoples of the world, particularly those who are still lingering on the threshold of civilization, are full of fear these days. They see something supernatural in the arrival of this thing, and I believe that every man, if he is honest, will admit to carrying an echo of that fear in his heart. We can only banish it, and can only meet the chaos into which the world is now plunged, if we retain a galactic

picture of our situation in our minds. The very hugeness of this thing that now lies plastered loathsomely across our world is cause for terror. But imagine it in proportion. A centipede is sitting on an orange. Or, to pick an analogy that sounds less repulsive, a little gecko, six inches long, is resting momentarily on a plastic globe of the Earth which is two feet in diameter. It is up to us, the human race, with all the technological forces at our disposal, to unite as never before, and blow this thing, this large and stupid object, back into the depths of space from whence it came. Good night.'

My reasons for repeating this Initial Blasphemy are these: that we can see here in this message from a member of the World Darkness traces of that original sin which – with all our sacrifices, all our hardships, all our crusades – we have not yet stamped out. That is why we are now at the greatest Crisis in the history of the Sacrificial Orthodox Universal Church, and why the time is come for a Fourth Crusade exceeding in scale all others.

The Huge God remained where he was, in what we now refer to as the Sacred Sea Position, for a number of years, absolutely unmoving.

For mankind, this was the great formative period of Belief, marking the establishment of the Universal Church, and characterized by many upheavals. The early priests and prophets suffered much that the Word might go round the World, and the blasphemous sects be destroyed, though the Underground Book of Church Lore suggests that many of them were in fact members of earlier churches who, seeing the light, transferred their allegiances.

The mighty figure of the Huge God was subjected to many puny insults. The Greatest Weapons of that distant age, forces of technical charlatanry, were called Nuclears, and these were dropped on the Huge God – without having any effect, as might be expected. Walls of fire were burnt against him in vain. Our Huge God, to whom all honour and terror, is immune from earthly weakness. His body was Clothed as it were with Metal – here lay the seed of the Second Crusade – but it had not the weakness of metal.

His coming to earth met with immediate Response from nature. The cold winds that prevailed were turned aside about his mighty flanks and blew elsewhere. The effect was

to cool the centre of Africa, so that the tropical rain forests died and all the creatures in them. In the lands bordering Caspana (then called Persia and Kharkov, say some old accounts), hurricanes of snow fell in a dozen severe winters, blowing far east into India. Elsewhere, all over the world, the coming of the Huge God was felt in the skies, and in freak rainfalls and errant winds, and month-long storms. The oceans also were disturbed, while the great volume of waters displaced by his body poured over the nearby land, killing many thousands of beings and washing ten thousand dead whales into the harbours of Colombo.

The land too joined in the upheaval. While the territory under the Huge God's bulk sank, preparing to receive what would later be the Sacred Sea, the land roundabout rose Up, forming small hills, such as the broken and savage Dolomines that now guard the southern lands of Ittaland. There were earthquakes and new volcanoes and geysers where water never spurted before and plagues of snakes and blazing forests and many wonderful signs that helped the Early Fathers of our Faith to convert the ignorant Everywhere they went, preaching that only in surrender to him lay salvation.

Many Whole Peoples perished at this time of upheaval, such as the Bulgarians, the Egyptians, the Israelites, Moravians, Kurds, Turks, Syrians, Mountain Turks, as well as most of the South Slavs, Georgians, Croats, the sturdy Vlaks, and the Greeks and Cypriotic and Cretan races, together with others whose sins were great and names unrecorded in the annals of the church.

The Huge God departed from the world in the year 89, or some say 90. (This was the First Departure, and is celebrated as such in our Church calendar – though the Catholic Universal Church calls it First Disappearance Day.) He returned in 91, great and aweing be his name.

Little is known of the period when he was absent from our Earth. We get a glimpse into the mind of the people then when we learn that in the main the nations of Earth greatly rejoiced. The natural upheavals continued, since the oceans poured into the great hollow he had made, forming our beloved and holy Sacred Sea. Great Wars broke out across the face of the globe.

His return in 91 halted the wars – a sign of the great peace his presence has brought to his chosen people.

But the inhabitants of the world at That Time were not all of our religion, though prophets moved among them, and many were their blasphemies. In the Black Museum attached to the great basilica of Omar and Yemen is documentary evidence that they tried at this period to communicate with the Huge God by means of their machines. Of course they got no reply – but many men reasoned at this time, in the darkness of their minds, that this was because the God was a Thing, as Black Gersheimer had prophesied.

The Huge God, on this his Second Coming, blessed our Earth by settling mainly within the Arctic Circle, or what was then the Arctic Circle, with his body straddling from northern Canada, as it was, over a large peninsula called Alaska, across the Bering Sea and into the northern regions of the Russian lands as far as the River Lena, now the Bay of Lenn. Some of his rear feet broke far into the Arctic Ice, while others of his forefeet entered the North Pacific Ocean – but truly to him we are but sand under his feet, and he is indifferent to our mountains or our Climatic Variations.

As for his terrible head, it could be seen reaching far into the stratosphere, gleaming with metal sheen, by all the cities along the northern part of America's seaboard, from such vanished towns as Vancouver, Seattle, Edmondton, Portland, Blanco, Reno, and even San Francisco. It was the energetic and sinful nation that possessed these cities that was now most active against the Huge God. The weight of their ungodly scientific civilization was turned against him, but all they managed to do was blow apart their own coastline.

Meanwhile, other natural changes were taking place. The mass of the Huge God deflected the Earth in its daily roll, so that seasons changed and in the prophetic books we read how the great trees brought forth their leaves to cover them in the winter, and lost them in the summer. Bats flew in the daytime and women bore forth hairy children. The melting of the ice caps caused great floods, tidal waves, and poisonous dews, while in one night we hear that the waters of the Deep were moved, so that the tide went out so far from the Malayan Uplands (as they now are) that the continental

peninsula of Blestland was formed in a few hours of what had previously been separate Continents of Islands called Singapore, Sumatra, Indonesia, Java, Sydney, and Australia or Austria.

With these powerful signs, our priests could Convert the People, and millions of survivors were speedily enrolled into the Church. This was the First Great Age of the Church, when the word spread across all the ravaged and transformed globe. Our institutions were formed in the next few generations, notably at the various Councils of the New Church (some of which have since proved to be heretical).

We were not established without some difficulty, and many people had to be burned before the rest could feel the faith Burning In Them. But as generations passed, the True Name of the God emerged over a wider and wider area.

Only the Americans still clung largely to their base superstition. Fortified by their science, they refused Grace. So in the Year 271 the First Crusade was launched, chiefly against them but also against the Irish, whose heretical views had no benefit of science; the Irish were quickly Eradicated, almost to a man. The Americans were more formidable, but this difficulty served only to draw people closer and unite the Church further.

This First Crusade was fought over the First Great Heresy of the Church, the heresy claiming that the Huge God was a Thing not a God, as formulated by Black Gersheimer. It was successfully concluded when the leader of the Americans, Lionel Undermeyer, met the Venerable World Emperor-Bishop, Jon II, and agreed that the messengers of the Church should be free to preach unmolested in America. Possibly a harsher decision could have been forced, as some commentators claim, but by this time both sides were suffering severely from plague and famine, the harvests of the world having failed. It was a happy chance that the population of the world was already cut by more than half, or complete starvation would have followed the reorganization of the seasons.

In the churches of the world, the Huge God wa[illegible] to give a sign that he had Witnessed the great victory over the American unbelievers. All who opposed this enlightened act were destroyed. He answered the prayers in 297 by moving swiftly forward only a comparatively Small Amount and

lying Mainly in the Pacific Ocean, stretching almost as far south as what is now the Antarter, what was then the Tropic of Capricorn, and what had previously been the Equater. Some of his left legs covered the towns along the west American seaboard as far south as Guadalajara (where the impression of his foot is still marked by the Temple of the Sacred Toe), including some of the towns such as San Francisco already mentioned. We speak of this as the First Shift; it was rightly taken as a striking proof of the Huge God's contempt for America.

This feeling became rife in America also. Purified by famine, plague, gigantic earth tremors, and other natural disorders, the population could now better accept the words of the priests, all becoming converted to a man. Mass pilgrimages were made to see the great body of the Huge God, stretching from one end of their nation to the other. Bolder pilgrims climbed aboard flying aeroplanes and flew over his shoulder, across which savage rainstorms played for a hundred years Without Cease.

Those that were converted became More Extreme than their brethren older in the faith across the other side of the world. No sooner had the American congregations united with ours than they broke away on a point of doctrine at the Council of Dead Tench (322). This date marks the beginning of the Sacrificial Catholic Universal Church. We of the Orthodox persuasion did not enjoy, in those distant days, the harmony with our American brothers that we do now.

The doctrinal point on which the churches split apart was, as is well known, the question of whether humanity should wear clothes that imitated the metallic sheen of the Huge God. It was claimed that this was setting up man in God's Image; but it was a calculated slur on the Orthodox Universal priests, who wore plastic or metal garments in honour of their maker.

This developed into the Second Great Heresy. As this long and confused period has been amply dealt with elsewhere, we may pass over it lightly here, mentioning merely that the quarrel reached its climax in the Second Crusade, which the American Catholic Universals launched against us in 450. Because they still had a large preponderance of machines, they were able to force their point, to sack various monas-

teries along the edge of the Sacred Sea, to defile our women, and to retire home in glory.

Since that time, everyone in the world has worn only garments of wool or fur. All who opposed this enlightened act were destroyed.

It would be wrong to emphasize too much the struggles of the past. All this while, the majority of people went peacefully about their worship, being sacrificed regularly, and praying every sunset and sunrise (whenever they might occur) that the Huge God would leave our world, since we were not worthy of him.

The Second Crusade left a trail of troubles in its wake; the next 50 years, on the whole, were not happy ones. The American armies returned home to find that the heavy pressure upon their western seaboard had opened up a number of volcanoes along their biggest mountain range, the Rockies. Their country was covered in fire and lava, and their air filled with stinking ash.

Rightly, they accepted this as a sign that their conduct left much to be desired in the eyes of the Huge God (for though it has never been proved that he has eyes, he surely Sees Us). Since the rest of the world had not been Visited with punishment on quite this scale, they correctly divined that their sin was that they still clung to technology and the weapons of technology against the wishes of God.

With their faith strong within them, every last instrument of science, from the Nuclears to the Canopeners, was destroyed, and a hundred thousand virgins of the persuasion were dropped into suitable volcanoes as propitiation. All who opposed these enlightened acts were destroyed, and some ceremonially eaten.

We of the Orthodox Universal faith applauded our brothers' whole-hearted action. Yet we could not be sure they had purged themselves enough. Now that they owned no weapons and we still had some, it was clear we could help them in their purgation. Accordingly, a mighty armada of 166 wooden ships sailed across to America, to help them suffer for the faith – and incidentally to get back some of our loot. This was the Third Crusade of 482, under Jon the Chubby.

While the two opposed armies were engaged in battle out-

side New York, the Second Shift took place. It lasted only a matter of five minutes.

In that time, the Huge God turned to his left flank, crawled across the centre of what was then the North American continent, crossed the Atlantic as if it were a puddle, moved over Africa, and came to rest in the south Indian Ocean, demolishing Madagaska with one rear foot. Night fell Everywhere on Earth.

When dawn came, there could hardly have been a single man who did not believe in the power and wisdom of the Huge God, to whose name belongs all Terror and Might. Unhappily, among those who were unable to believe were the contesting armies, who were one and all swept under a Wave of Earth and Rock as the God passed.

In the ensuing chaos, only one note of sanity prevailed – the sanity of the Church. The Church established as the Third Great Heresy the idea that any machines were permissible to man against the wishes of God. There was some doctrinal squabble as to whether books counted as machines. It was decided they did, just to be on the safe side. From then on, all men were free to do nothing but labour in the fields and worship, and pray to the Huge God to remove himself to a world more worthy of his might. At the same time, the rate of sacrifices was stepped up, and the Slow-Burning Method was introduced (499).

Now followed the great Peace, which lasted till 900. In all this time, the Huge God never moved; it has been truly said that the centuries are but seconds in his sight. Perhaps mankind has never known such a long peace, 400 years of it – a peace that existed in his heart if not outside it, because the world was naturally in Some Disorder. The great force of the Huge God's progress half-way across the world had altered the progression of day and night to a considerable extent; some legends claim that, before the Second Shift, the sun used to rise in the east and set in the west – the very opposite of the natural order of things we know.

Gradually, this peaceful period saw some re-establishment of order to the seasons, and some cessation of the floods, showers of blood, hailstorms, earthquakes, deluges of icicles, apparitions of comets, volcanic eruptions, miasmic fogs, destructive winds, blights, plagues of wolves and dragons, tidal

waves, yearlong thunderstorms, lashing rains, and sundry other scourges of which the scriptures of this period speak so eloquently. The Fathers of the Church, retiring to the comparative safety of the inland seas and sunny meadows of Gobiland in Mongolia, established a new orthodoxy well-calculated in its rigour of prayer and human burnt-offering to incite the Huge God to leave our poor wretched world for a better and more substantial one.

So the story comes almost to the present – to the year 900, only a decade past as your scribe writes. In that year, the Huge God left our Earth!

Recall, if you will, that the First Departure in 89 lasted only twenty months. Yet the Huge God has been gone from us already half that number of years! We need him Back – we cannot live without him, as we should have realized Long Ago had we not blasphemed in our hearts!

On his going, he propelled our humble globe on such a course that we are doomed to deepest winter all the year; the sun is far away and shrunken; the seas Freeze half the year; icebergs march across our fields; at mid-day, it is too dark to read without a rush light. Woe is us!

Yet we deserve everything we get. This is a just punishment, for throughout all the centuries of our epoch, when our kind was so relatively happy and undisturbed, we prayed like fools that the Huge God would leave us.

I ask all the Elders Elect of the Council to brand those prayers as the Fourth and Greatest Heresy, and to declare that henceforth all men's efforts be devoted to calling on the Huge God to return to us at once.

I ask also that the sacrifice rate be stepped up again. It is useless to skimp things just because we are running out of women.

I ask also that a Fourth Crusade be launched – fast, before the air starts to freeze in our nostrils!

THE HEAD-HUNTERS

RALPH WILLIAMS

The walls of any well-decorated men's club will illustrate the fact that Earth is richly supplied with big game – lions, rhinoceros, elephants, mountain sheep, and dozens of other species. When successfully stalked and killed, they make superb trophies testifying to the skill and courage of the hunter who bagged them. Taken as a whole, they suggest that man is the most successful of all terrestrial killers, that he is 'lord of the fowl and the brute', and that no other form of life above the microscopic level is giving him much competition in the struggle for physical survival.

To any really sporting trophy-hunter, then, the supreme test of skill would be the bagging of the dominant life-form, the mightiest hunter of all the hunters, man himself. Any sportsman-scientist visiting Earth would certainly judge his field trip incomplete without a specimen of *homo sapiens.* And if the hunting is done in the interest of science, so that the prize becomes part of a zoo or a museum, no qualms need be felt about the reluctance of the quarry to submit to capture and eventual taxidermy.

The hunting would not, of course, be done with anything so crudely mechanical as a propelled pellet of lead. The hunting would be with the mind, and with anesthesia. The danger would be only in forgetting that any cornered animal is likely to fight.

Mr Williams has constructed an extremely ingenious story in which the eventual trophy is perhaps the most attractive of his characters. If it is an uncomfortable thought that Earth might, in other eyes, look a little like a kind of special game refuge, that is only because man is spoiled by thinking of himself as the lord of creation. If there is something of a shock in the idea that man should be hunted for sport and science, perhaps we should inquire of the stag, the moose, and the tiger about this point.

The man crouched shuddering in the sparse shelter of the

spruce clump, flattening himself into the ground, holding himself motionless, guarding even the terrified thoughts which flitted through his mind. He was gaunt and unshaven, and the knife-sharp mountain wind whipped through the tattered remnants of his clothing. He drew it closer about him – not for warmth, it was past providing warmth – but so the ragged flutter would not betray him.

In the dry wash below, the thing that hunted him rustled and muttered to itself. Once it seemed to come his way, and he froze even stiller, striving to quiet the beating of his heart, desperately blanking his mind. It passed and moved on up the valley, and he relaxed slightly; still fearful, but with hope beginning to grow. Half an hour passed, and the thing did not return, and he stretched and burrowed in the moss, making himself comfortable, but still he did not move from his hiding place. For the rest of the afternoon he remained in the shelter of the spruce clump, not moving, not even thinking, simply waiting.

When it was good and dark he ventured out, stealthily and fearfully, although he knew the thing he feared moved only in the light. He ran silently from cover to cover, stopping and listening often with open mouth. Gradually, as he put distance between himself and danger, the urgency of his terror faded. Yet still he kept moving. It was dark, the wind was cold, he had not eaten his fill for days; and he stumbled often, tearing his hands and bruising his body; still he kept doggedly on, working out of the mountains, down toward the foothills.

Somewhere down there was the railroad and people like himself and safety. The thought of this drove him along, but actually it was farther than he thought, and he was not approaching it directly, he was bearing off at an angle which would have led him down onto the river flats. If he had not seen the fire, he would certainly have died somewhere in the hills or boggy flats.

When he first saw the fire winking and flaring on the far side of a little mountain lake, his none-too-clear mind did not recognize it, and he might have wandered past. Then as he came opposite it he suddenly knew it for what it was, a campfire – he could even make out vague figures moving about it, human figures, and he shouted several times. There

was no answer. With weary, dogged determination he began to work his way around the lower end of the lake, wading through boggy spots up to his waist, tripping over stunted, rooty willow clumps, crawling through alder brakes woven like basketry by wind and the weight of winter's snows. It was slow, heart-breaking work—

Neely had been hunting sheep, and he had not been finding them. Or rather, though he had seen sheep, he had seen none with the head he wanted which would put his name well up in the record book. Consequently, he was not in a charitable mood.

He was a short, choleric, self-assured man, carrying forty pounds of suet on a frame which had once been muscular; and he had a short, bristly pepper-and-salt moustache and light-blue, unfriendly eyes. He was accustomed to command, to pay well for service and receive it. In this case, he did not think he was getting what he had paid for, and he made no attempt to conceal his displeasure.

Perhaps he was right. Halvarsen had not shown him the sheep he wanted, and it is a guide's business to satisfy his sport's wants within reason – and this was not an unreasonable want. A man does not pay good money for a trip to Alaska, hire airplanes and outfits and the best sheep-hunter in the country, spend perhaps one or two thousand dollars, because he has a taste for wild mutton.

He does things like this for heads, and in the four days they had been here Halvarsen had not shown him the right head, or anything near it. Halvarsen himself did not understand it. Only the month before he had flown over this area with the Game Commission man, making a pre-season check, and there had been plenty of sheep, good heads among them. Something had run them out, and it was beginning to worry him; in two more days the floatplane would return to pick them up, and if a man as important as Neely went back to the States without his sheep, it could be very bad business. Big-game hunting does not depend on mass advertising, its clientele is too restricted and specialized; a man's reputation is made or broken by word-of-mouth endorsement or disparaging rumour among the sports in the big cities Outside.

So now Halvarsen moved morosely about the evening camp chores, and Neely sat grumpily back under the lean-to tent, half reclining against his rolled-back sleeping bag, and sucked at his pipe.

Suddenly Halvarsen froze and turned slowly in a listening attitude to look out over the lake.

Neely listened too, but his city-dulled ears heard nothing.

'What is it?' he asked irritably. 'You hear something?'

Halvarsen shrugged. 'Somet'ing hollered', he said. 'Sounded funny.' He moved out a little toward the water's edge.

The fire was crackling and snapping, and the ripples stirred by the breeze lapped against an old stump in the lake, but the next time Neely heard it too – a faint yodelling yell.

'Loon', he snorted contemptuously.

'Might be', Halvarsen said doubtfully. 'Sounded funny, though.' He listened a few moments longer and then went back to his pots and pans. He thought Neely might be right, but did not believe it. A man long alone in the woods gets away from logical thinking, he grows to depend on feeling and knowledge which comes without conscious thought. He hears a stick crack back in the woods, and he does not think: That might be a moose. Instead, his memory ties instantaneously back to the seen but unnoticed dung half a mile away, the almost invisible hoof prints on a gravel bar, the clipped willow-tips the corner of his eye telegraphed in and stored as he looked at something else; and he *knows* that *is* a moose, a picture of a bull sneaking around through the trees to get down-wind of him comes into his mind.

The noise Halvarsen had heard brought no such picture into his mind, nor any other picture; it was simply a funny noise. Probably, in the subconscious part of his mind which stored and collated the material out of which these pictures were built, there were also filed under 'Unidentifiable' certain unnoticed traces of whatever it was that had driven the sheep away, and the absence of the sheep themselves; and this little store of uncertainty may have made him doubly sensitive to further false notes.

A little later, as he was unrolling the sleeping-bags and arranging Neely's pneumatic mattress, he heard a faint splash from the bottom end of the lake. He knew this was not a beaver, nor a moose, nor anything else that should have been

there, but he did not mention either the noise or this knowledge to Neely.

He crawled into bed and lay quietly, following the thing's progress around the lake by the occasional splash, crash of brush, or suck of feet in marshy grass. It was moving slowly but without caution, and clumsily, and suddenly he knew what it was; it still left some loose ends, but the picture was in his mind now.

He rose on one elbow and nudged Neely.

'Somebody out there', he said. 'Coming this way.'

'Nuts', Neely said. 'What would anybody be doing here?'

Halvarsen did not answer. The man was close now, stumbling recklessly along, and having hard going. And the picture in Halvarsen's mind began to take on detail and colour, showing someone hurt or long lost in the hills, until it resembled surprisingly the ragged man he had not yet seen.

'I better go help', he said. He pulled on his boots and picked up a flashlight. 'HOY!' he shouted. 'Hold up! I bring a light!'

By the time he was back with the ragged man over his shoulder, Neely had kicked up the fire. Halvarsen eased the man down on one of the sleeping-bags. The stranger was conscious, but played out.

'People', he said dully over and over. 'Real people. I made it, I foxed the stinking bugger, he won't get me now. People, real people. I made it. I made it.'

'Shut up', Neely said. He rummaged in a pack and brought out a bottle of whisky. 'Here, take a drink of this.'

The stranger opened his mouth apathetically and then, as the whisky stung his throat, grasped the bottle and swallowed avidly. Tears started in his eyes and he gasped and then drank greedily again.

'Hey, cut that out.' Halvarsen pulled the bottle away. 'You drink too much, way you are, you be drunker than a hoot owl. You wait a minute, I warm up some of this stew.'

Neely was studying the man closely, noticing the heavy growth of beard and the tattered clothing, the red-rimmed eyes and gaunt belly.

'What happened?' he asked. 'You look like you've had a tough time. Lose your outfit?'

The whisky had brightened the man. He sat up now and

crouched closer to the fire. 'It was the panda', he said. 'I was running away from him. He thought he had me in the cage, but I got away, picked the lock and got away.' The stranger giggled. 'I foxed him; he killed Joe, but I got away, clear away.' He glanced nervously at Halvarsen and Neely. 'You fellows won't let him get me, will you? You get me out of here, I'll make it worth your while. Wilson's my name, Steve Wilson. I've got plenty of money. I can pay whatever you think it's worth.'

'Panda?' Neely said irritably. 'What are you talking about? There're no pandas around here.'

The ragged man cringed back. 'Well, not a panda exactly', he said defensively. 'I called it that, it kind of looked like one. It had this cave and kept me in the cage—'

Back in the cave he had hollowed to shelter himself and the spaceship and his equipment, Snrr grumbled sourly to himself. It was a bad habit he had fallen into from being much away from others of his kind; but it seemed to relieve his feelings, especially when things were not going well. They had gone abominably, today. He had had another of those frightening spells of disorientation, the blank periods when he froze unmoving and unseeing. He knew he was getting too old for these one-man field trips; the increasing frequency of the attacks indicated this might be his last.

Worse yet, he had lost his best specimen, a live mammal showing definite signs of intelligence, and he had intended to present it to the zoo at Ebrrl as the fitting climax to a lifetime of distinguished field work for the Royal Museum. The manner of its escape argued an even higher degree of cunning than he had supposed it possessed, and this made its loss doubly annoying. The door to its cage had over 600 possible combinations – not too many for any intelligent creature to solve, but still requiring time and fixity of purpose, together with a systematic approach. He had never seen his captive show the slightest interest in the lock; yet it must have fiddled patiently with the thing at every opportunity over a period of days or weeks, whenever he was absent or his back was turned, to learn and memorize the combination for use when opportunity offered.

And what cleverness to wait for one of his attacks, to trip the door catch and sneak quietly out during his paralysis, switch off the protective field outside the cave entrance, and scamper away! He moaned inwardly, feeling a loss like a vacuum in his belly, at the thought of this engaging animal's escaping him, and regretting that he had been too busy to evaluate it properly and study it before.

Well, he thought resignedly, what can't be helped must be borne. He went about preparing his evening meal, moving with the puttering fussiness of a very old bachelor. Afterward, he plodded wearily up the ramp to his bed in the ship. His bones ached – he had gone far afield that day, trying to track down the run-away. Ordinarily, he worked deliberately and methodically, husbanding his strength, plotting out the ranges of the specimens he sought, feeling them out with his mind, patiently nudging them toward him with carefully disguised mental impulses, till they came within range of his anesthetic darts. This scurrying and running after a panicky quarry was not to his taste nor best abilities, and the exertion had taken its toll.

Still, he paused for a moment in the storeroom to gloat over his loot – the carefully cleaned and preserved skins, skeletons, and heads, all neatly packed; the bundles of meticulous notes, sketches, and films; and best of all, on the wrapping bench, still unpacked, the twin to the specimen he had lost. He picked up the head and turned it gently in his tentacles, admiring again the regularity of features; the noble height and breadth of forehead; the wisp of black moustache; the lifelike plastic eyes, with their bold, bright, fierce stare.

Neely and Halvarsen had not done too well at prying information from the fugitive. After being fed, he lapsed into a semicoma, from which he mumbled disjointed and repetitive responses to their questions, and finally they let him sleep. At intervals during the morning they woke him and fed him and tried again, but his rambling replies continued to be irritatingly vague and senseless. Apparently a reaction to the shock of his captivity and flight had set in which made it difficult for him to speak or think coherently.

What they were able to get did not make sense, at least to Neely.

Halvarsen did not try to make sense of it.

He had listened and watched quietly most of the time, while Neely questioned, and a new picture had begun gradually to form in his mind. This picture was of a large, teddy-bearish creature, furry and black, with white markings, and two sets of short sturdy tentacles branching from its shoulders. Halvarsen had never seen a panda, but his business was big game, he had seen pictures and read of them, and he knew this was not one, though Wilson called it that. This was no common animal, it was something which thought and acted like a man, which used tools and machines, which killed for pleasure rather than food. It tortured and mutilated its prey, penning live captives in cages until their turn came.

The picture was full of holes and was blurry, the animal moved jerkily and in ways not clear, its motivation was vague and its origin vaguer; but as far as it went it fitted the absence of game and the other little subconscious observations Halvarsen had made.

He believed it.

Neely had no picture and he did not believe what he had heard, but he had come to think something had followed Wilson, perhaps a wolverine, and he was curious.

'There aren't any sheep here', he said flatly. 'They've moved out, there's no use looking any more.'

Halvarsen nooded gloomily. 'That's right. This panda thing scare them away.'

Neely eyed him sharply. 'You think that's why they've left?'

'Sure', Halvarsen said. 'Sheep, they're pretty particular what comes around them.'

Neely shrugged. 'Maybe. Anyway, we might as well see if we can find this thing, whatever it is. You think you can backtrack Wilson?'

'Sure', Halvarsen said. 'Why not?'

Wilson did not take kindly to the idea of being left alone, but they gave him what was left of the bottle and reassured him they would be gone only a short time; and he grudgingly promised to remain at the camp until they returned. Even

Neely could follow his back trail in most places, but the hunters moved cautiously, not knowing just where they might encounter the thing they sought, nor how wary it might be. They came to the place where Wilson had hidden late in the afternoon, and were almost ready to turn back when Halvarsen froze and grunted, pointing with his chin, and Neely followed the direction of his eyes. Neely saw nothing at first, and then suddenly it moved and he saw it, a patch of starkly black and white fur, moving up a little slope perhaps half a mile away. It might have been anything – a skunk, a magpie, or even a man; except that skunks are not found at that altitude, and it did not move like a man or a magpie.

It had not seen nor sensed them, Neely thought, and he motioned Halvarsen down, crouching, himself, with a slow, almost imperceptible motion, so as to blend into the hillside, till from a little distance he would have seemed an old, gnarled stump, or perhaps a rock. He dared not use the glasses, lest their flash catch the thing's attention, and with his bare eyes he could make out no details. It was simply an indefinable mass, moving unhurriedly, purposefully along.

Snrr was feeling better today. He had started out on a half-hearted continuation of his search for the lost specimen, and sometime during the afternoon had suddenly become aware that two others of the same species were approaching him. What luck! Fresh, unaware minds – susceptible to suggestion!

He followed their progress avidly, his pleasure mounting as he became aware they were consciously seeking him, out of curiosity stirred by knowledge of the escaped animal. He stimulated this curiosity gently, and showed himself to them at the moment they were almost ready to turn back. Now he squatted in the entrance to his cave, feeling them hidden on the ridge across, studying him in their turn. Their wariness and curiosity made them easy subjects, their high-keyed nervous systems reacting beautifully to the slightest mental touch. He let them stay there for a while, wondering how best to ambush them.

Across the narrow valley, Neely lay flat on his stomach

just under the ridge, his glasses glued to his eyes. The light was fading fast now, but Snrr's cave was on the westerly slope, and he showed clearly in the glasses. His huge, benign face was turned ruminatively down the valley, and the white markings like spectacles about his eyes, the white-banded muzzle and lower jaw and belly did make him look startlingly like a huge toy panda. Only the tentacles, coiled idly along his forelegs, were out of place.

'I can't believe it', Neely whispered. 'Here, you look. See what you think.'

Halvarsen took the glasses and focused them carefully.

'Yah', he said stolidly. 'That's him, all right.'

He shifted the glasses slightly, studying the approaches to the cave. 'You see that funny yiggle in the air, like heat waves?' he asked. 'I bet that's that thing that Wilson feller said you couldn't see, but couldn't get through either, till he turned the switch off. What do you think, huh?'

Neely had not noticed. He took the glasses back. Now his attention had been called to it, he could see a faint shimmer in the air directly in front of the cave.

'It must be', he said. 'It just don't make sense, but it's there.' He was a matter-of-fact individual, used to seeing things proceed in orderly and methodical fashion, and what he was seeing now offended the deepest core of his logic. Still, he found himself accepting it as true. He did not realize this urge for acceptance proceeded, in part, from Snrr.

It was almost dark now, and Snrr did not function well in the dark. He caught the embryo thought in Neely's mind that it might be better to return to camp and come back in the morning for another look. This fitted well with Snrr's plans, it would give him time to prepare a proper ambush for them. He gently built the thought up into resolution in Neely's mind, and followed the two men back until mental contact faded out with distance.

Back at camp, the two men found the whisky gone, Wilson asleep, and the fire out. Neely broke out a fresh bottle while Halvarsen found wood and started the fire.

For the first time, Neely offered to share his whisky, and

Halvarsen accepted gratefully, both for the improvement in relations it betokened and for its own sake.

'You know', Neely said while Halvarsen fried bacon and warmed beans, 'that screen in front there, that thing you can't see, makes it kind of awkward. You think it might stop a bullet?'

Halvarsen shrugged. 'Might be.'

'We could try one and see', Neely said thoughtfully. 'But then we might spoof him. No, we've got to catch him outside or get him to turn it off.'

'Well', Halvarsen said, 'let's eat now, we can figure on it later.' He split the beans and bacon carefully between the two pans, whacked off a huge slice of bread with his knife and buttered it, and passed the loaf and the butter to Neely. For a while both were too busy to talk; it had been a long time since lunch, and the whisky had sharpened their appetites.

After dinner, over their third cup of tea, they returned to the subject. It did not take them long to work out the possibilities; the object of this hunt was an unusual one, but the principles remained unchanged.

'Well, that might work', Halvarsen said finally. 'But how we going to get that Wilson feller to help? He's pretty scared of that panda thing.'

'Here's the convincer, right here', Neely said with a tight grin. He held up the second bottle of whisky, still more than half full. 'All that boy wants to do is drink himself to sleep so he can forget what happened. We don't have to tell him where we're going, he'll follow this bottle.'

'Yah, I guess so', Halvarsen said doubtfully. Something else was troubling him, but he could not quite put his finger on it. By now his mental picture of the strange beast was almost complete, and there had been something out of character in its actions this afternoon.

'You know', he said suddenly, 'that Wilson says this feller can get inside your head, make you think things aren't so. You think he might do that to us?'

Neely looked startled and thoughtful. 'Well, I don't know', he said finally. 'He wouldn't let us come up on him so easy, if he could do that, would he? Wouldn't he steer us away?'

'No, I don't think so', Halvarsen said slowly. 'He caught

Wilson and Wilson's buddy, maybe he wants to catch us, too? I think maybe we just better be pretty careful tomorrow, not do anything foolish because it looks easy.'

Snrr thought they had better be careful too. In the mid-morning he waited confidently at the entrance to his cave, the controls to his hidden dart-throwers near at hand. Presently he picked up the feeling of the men approaching, coming warily but confidently along. At first the knowledge that Wilson was with them was disconcerting, but then as they came closer and he picked up clearer thoughts, he smiled to himself. It seemed they were bringing his captive back, perhaps as some sort of peace-offering or bribe. So much the better. He would get all three. There was room for only one live specimen, but he could keep the best alive and have two more heads besides.

At the lower end of the valley the men separated, one going along the ridge they had followed the day before, the other two coming straight up the valley toward his cave. This was fine, Snrr thought; he had prepared for either route; this way he could take them one at a time without alarming them. His former captive, he noted, was one of the two coming up the valley, and was now beginning to show signs of panic, which might not be so good, but probably would not frighten the other two seriously, since they had expected this.

The ragged man had been preoccupied before, following the big blond man without paying particular attention to his surroundings, but now he suddenly began to orient himself, and he did not like it. He hung back and remonstrated and the big man took his arm and pulled him along, and this frightened him more. The big man pulled him around and shoved him ahead up the valley. He screamed then, in a high piercing voice, and ran a little way, then looked wildly around and ran off to one side, apparently with the intent of ducking past. The big man lifted something to his shoulder, dirt spurted in front of the ragged man, there was a sharp crash, and he paused, then began to run blindly up the valley. The big man stopped and calmly watched him go.

Snrr began to have doubts. He had lost track of the third man, and the running man's horrible fright was blanking out

what the big man was thinking; but there was an unmistakable aura of menace in the air which Snrr found confusing – something intent and calculating, quite unlike the usual brainless rage of cornered animals.

He let the running man go past the first ambush, uncertain whether to take him or not. At the second point, he decided a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush, and fired. The anesthetic darts took immediate effect, but Wilson's fright continued to echo in his mind, crashing like static over the lower-pitched thoughts of the other two. The big man had disappeared at the moment Wilson fell, and Snrr could not immediately locate him, but still he received that heavy overtone of menace, like the far-away roar of a lion. He could not see very well either; the shimmer of the protective field directly in front of him blurred his vision. He was beginning to feel boxed-in and unsure of himself, and he decided to cut the field for a moment and get a clear view of what was happening, orient himself for action against the two remaining. He reached out to the switch which controlled the field.

After leaving Halvarsen and Wilson, Neely moved up the ridge toward a spot opposite the thing's cave. The place where they had been yesterday was too far away, a good seven hundred yards, but there was a small hogback angling down to a knob directly across from the cave. It was this he was aiming for. Half-way along the ridge, he began to feel it might be better to go up the farther ridge first and reconnoitre, but this would have disrupted their carefully laid plans, and he turned off. It did not occur to him that Snrr might wish him to go on up to the booby-trapped area they had been in the previous evening, it was just that he was single-mindedly intent on getting to his assigned position. Perhaps if Snrr's attention had not been distracted, he might have felt differently.

Neely came up the far side of the knob and eased around its base until he had a good view of both the valley and the cave. Carefully, he measured the distance with his eye. Two hundred – no, nearer two fifty. Close enough, even if three hundred yards. His sights were set at two fifty; at two hundred yards the bullet would rise one inch. At three

hundred it would drop three inches. Dead on would kill, at either range.

Experimentally, he dropped his eye and sighted, his cheek nestling comfortably against the warm walnut stock, right hand automatically bringing the butt tight against his shoulder. In the thrice magnified field of the scope the beast stood sharp and clear; it faced a quarter toward him, intently studying something it held in its tentacles, apparently unaware of either Neely or the other two. The picket point rested like a finger against the forward point of its right shoulder.

But was that right? Where would the vital organs of a beast such as this be? The head, perhaps, since its eyes were in its head, and its ears, as in other animals. But suppose its brain was in its belly, as he vaguely thought he remembered some reptiles' was said to be? In the chest then? What if the heart, or what served for a heart, the lungs, and blood vessels were in the abdomen? It must be the neck, for the neck would logically carry communications between the head and body, and must be one of the most vulnerable points. Low down in the neck, where the muscles of chest and shoulder would give something for the bullet to work on, give it a chance to open properly, and 220 grains of lead-and-copper alloy, arriving at its destination with a force of slightly better than two tons, would take care of the rest.

The picket swung gently, seeking out the spot, finding it at different angles as the beast moved about, growing used to it.

Then, with his eyes still holding the thing in the scope, he moved his right hand away and waved it gently twice. He did not look to see if Halvarsen saw the signal. That was Halvarsen's job.

Presently, he did not need to look. High and shrill across the distance, he heard a scream of fear and terror, then a shot and more cries. The beast heard it too, and stared nearsightedly down the valley toward Halvarsen and the ragged man. Neely kicked the safety with his thumb and put the first faint breath of pressure on the trigger. The beast was restive now; it picked up something and fiddled indecisively with it, then manipulated it in an obscure fashion, and the screams abruptly choked off. The beast peered across at where Neely lay, then back down at Halvarsen. It stepped uncertainly to

one side, raised a tentacle to something on the wall, and suddenly the faint shimmer in the air died. In the same instant, the rifle roared. Neely had the bolt worked and the slack half taken up on the trigger in the instant before the scope swung back onto the cavern.

But there was nothing to shoot at, nothing to see, except one black-and-white paw which scratched perkily at a sunlit spot on the cavern floor, and then was still. Neely watched it steadily for perhaps five minutes. It did not move.

He met Halvarsen at the bottom of the hill and they climbed up to the cave together. Halvarsen stared around in awe at the ship, at the strange implements and instruments, but Neely had eyes only for Snrr.

He smoothed the soft, woolly fur, noting what a beautiful pelt the thing had, and turned the head so the light struck it. Already he could see it mounted on a pedestal, holding something, perhaps a smaller animal, in its curious tentacles, peering near-sightedly off into the middle distance, exactly as it had appeared in his scope.

And underneath, the plaque: 'Contributed by S. W. Neely, from his Alaskan hunt; *ursus* – no, new species; *Neeliana* (better yet), *Martianus*—? *Venusian*—? or simply *extraterrestrialis*?'

THE ANIMATORS

SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

Harrington, squat with dark curling hair, itched where he couldn't scratch. He sat in a Mars Bug, perched high on balloon tyres, with a view across a cratered landscape of rock and rust-red dust. The cabin was pressurized and though he had his helmet off, he was suited up. He wanted to get back to Base One for a wash, a meal and his regular call to Earth. But most of all for a good scratch.

He stared broodingly at Pugh, the expedition's pint-sized geologist. Pugh was still outside, chipping bits of rock with a hammer and placing the chips in a plastic sack.

He leaned forward and snapped a toggle switch, grumbling into the mike: 'Hurry it, Shorty – I've got a radio schedule to meet.'

Pugh's voice came back, rising with excitement. 'Hold it two minutes – I think I've found something.'

Harrington scowled as the suited figure mover farther away from the Bug. Then Pugh vanished as if the ground had opened to swallow him. Dust rose in a small cloud.

'Pugh?'

Rasping breath sobbed over the radio link. A choked voice came: 'Glass gone . . . can't breathe . . . help me . . .'

Harrington snapped fast his helmet, grabbed a coil of rope, spare mask and oxygen cylinder and went through the lock at emergency speed. He secured one end of the rope to the Bug and started for the spot where the geologist had disappeared. Under one-third gravity, he travelled fast.

'Pugh?'

The answering rattle had a strangled quality that frightened him. He hurried to the edge of the fall and saw Pugh below, hands over the shattered glass of his helmet. He tossed down cylinder and mask, slid down the rope; and reached Pugh too late to help him.

So it had happened at last. One accident: one fatality. As Harrington straightened, he thought, Brunel isn't going to like this. The Commander was fond of stressing the point –

in a thin atmosphere containing no oxygen, you just don't take chances.

He climbed the rope and trudged slowly back to the Bug. There he made his report.

Brunel's clipped voice sounded even harsher over the radio: 'Stay in the Bug until we reach you.'

Harrington waited in a state of unease. He didn't like Brunel. None of them liked him; the Commander of the First Mars Expedition was a military man, and scientists have never liked taking orders from the army.

Lane came through from Base and Harrington instructed him on procedure for Mars-Earth transmission. He wouldn't make it in time now.

The expedition's second Bug came rolling across dust-covered rock at speed to pull up beside him. Brunel and Dalby got out and Harrington joined them.

'Where were you when he fell?' Brunel demanded.

'In the Bug.'

'So Pugh was out alone? After I gave an order that no man was to go outside alone. What was he doing?'

'I'd been with him', Harrington said. 'Then it got close to time for my radio call-in. I went back – Pugh lagged behind.'

Brunel's face grew cold with anger inside his helmet. Even in a suit, he gave the appearance of ramrod stiffness. His tongue lashed with the bite of a whip.

'So he died because you disobeyed an order! In future, all pairs outside will be roped together. Got that?'

Harrington nodded. 'He said he'd found something – he didn't say what – then the ground caved in.'

Brunel stalked towards the dust-fall with Harrington and Dalby following. The physicist's neatly-barbered beard bobbed inside his helmet. 'Be interesting to know what he thought he'd found.'

Brunel circled the cave-in warily. He didn't expect a scientist to see it his way, but to him it looked like a trap. Pugh had been shown the bait and lured to a dead-fall. He lowered himself on the rope and inspected the pit. Pugh had fallen head-first on to a crag of rock that splintered his face-plate. It could have been natural, but he felt that it wasn't. He took his time searching and found only rock and dust.

He secured the rope about the body, took Pugh's bag of

rocks, and climbed up. Harrington and Dalby hauled up the rope.

'Strip him', Brunel ordered. 'We may need his suit for spare parts.'

He crossed to the Bug, returning with shovels. Together, they dug a shallow grave and laid Pugh's body in it. In death, he seemed even smaller than Harrington remembered. They stood with heads bowed as Brunel recited ancient words over the grave:

'Dust to dust . . .'

The words took on new meaning on Mars, a world of red dust. They covered the naked corpse, climbed into the two Bugs and drove back to Base.

A shrunken sun sank below the horizon and darkness came. Stars gleamed hard and bright through the tenuous atmosphere. A meteor dug a small crater under the palest of moonlight.

No wind stirred, yet dust heaved upwards from the surface and fell away in a small slithering shower. A pale hand groped at the sky, scooping away dust. Another joined it. Shoulders heaved and a head showed; the head had Pugh's face, dust falling from the open mouth.

The corpse climbed upright, swaying unsteadily. Its legs moved uncertainly as it turned in a full circle. It paused as if hunting a bearing.

Then, slowly, it set out across the flat and desolate land with plodding steps. A naked dead thing that moved across the night-dark dust, moved steadily on a direct course for the distant Base.

Inside the Mars Base, under an inflated plastic pressure dome, Harrington sat in shirt-sleeves at the radio transmitter. He was alone again; after a night's sleep, both Bugs were out exploring.

Lane, the expedition's metallurgist, was using a portable drilling rig. His voice came through flat: 'Struck another vein of almost pure iron . . . the fifth so far.'

Harrington listened absently; the routine stuff went directly

onto tape – he monitored only in case of emergency. Alone, he had too much time to brood on the manner of Pugh's death, telling himself that even if he had been outside, he couldn't have done anything. Yet a feeling of guilt still bothered him.

The Base was cramped; a mountain of stores surrounding an oasis of living space. Moving his legs, he knocked against Pugh's rock samples – samples that Brunel had inspected minutely before tagging them for analysis on Earth. One air-lock.

Harrington was scratching beneath dark curling hair when a green light flashed above the lock; someone was coming in. Surprised, he flipped a switch and called:

'Who is it? Who's back?'

Brunel said: 'What d'you mean, Harrington? Nobody's back – we're ten kilometres away, and I know Lane is still drilling.'

The smooth voice of Vincent, the expedition's physician, confirmed: 'That's right – I can see Lane right outside our Bug now. What's up?'

Harrington felt as if he'd been doused with ice-cold water; he began to shiver uncontrollably. The short hairs on his skin bristled. There couldn't be anyone outside the dome; it wasn't humanly possible. He stared, mesmerized, at the pressure gauge as the air-lock filled. Then the inner door opened.

Harrington rose up out of his chair, pushing it back. Fear dried his mouth as he croaked in protest: 'No! No, it can't be . . .'

Pugh's naked corpse shuffled towards him, eyes glazed, flesh giving off a sweet-sour smell.

Harrington backed away till he came up against a wall. 'You're dead', he whispered. 'We buried you.' He shut his eyes and when he opened them again, Pugh was at the work-bench. A pale hand lifted one of Vincent's scalpels.

'For God's sake, man—'

Man? Harrington watched Pugh's naked chest and it did not rise and fall with the effort of breathing.

Sweat beaded Harrington's forehead as Pugh advanced on him. His voice trembled, 'Dead, dead . . .'

Pugh reached him. The blade of the scalpel flashed in the

light as it rose, travelled through a short arc and buried itself in Harrington's chest.

Brunel's voice crackled with urgency over the open radio: 'Harrington! What's going on there? Answer me!'

Pugh waited, silent and motionless, gazing at the body on the floor. The voice on the radio ran on unheeded.

Lane left his rig and hurried back to Mars Bug Two. No answer had come from Harrington; he had the uneasy feeling there never would be an answer.

Brunel said: 'Vincent, Lane, get back there fast. I'll join you as soon as I can.'

Vincent, a handsome Latin, gave power to the drive and steered a course over meteor-splashed rock. Red dust rolled past as the Bug bounced on big balloon tyres.

'You figure he went off his nut, Doc?'

Vincent said carefully: 'I shouldn't think so. But one can never be sure, especially under these conditions.'

Lane picked up binoculars, waiting; he had been drilling only two kilometres from Base. As the dome came into view, he focused on it.

He spoke into the mike: 'Looks normal enough from outside.'

'It's what's inside that worries me', Brunel came back. 'Go in and find out. Vincent stays in the Bug. Keep constant radio contact.'

Vincent brought the Bug to a halt outside the lock and they both stared at it. The dome was opaque, patched where a small meteor had struck. No sound came from it, neither was there sign of movement. It appeared just as they had left.

The burly engineer snapped his helmet over sandy hair. 'Testing.'

'Okay', Vincent answered.

'Here goes then—'

'Keep talking to me.'

Lane left the Bug and walked to the lock. As he cycled it, he wondered about Harrington's last words. It hadn't sounded like a radio breakdown; Harrington was the expert and knew his job.

He found himself hesitating in the lock and knew he was

scared. Angry with himself, he said: 'Opening inner door now.'

He stepped through.

Harrington faced him, seated at the transmitter, his shirt front stained with blood. He was not breathing.

'Harrington's dead', he informed. 'Looks as though he's been stabbed. But there's no knife, so—'

Lane froze as Harrington rose to his feet, looking past the engineer.

Lane started to turn, screamed as he glimpsed Pugh's naked corpse. 'It's Pugh – Pugh's back from the dead!'

Then the scalpel slid through his suit, between his ribs, and waves of pain and darkness engulfed him and he toppled over.

Vincent stayed inside the Bug, watching the air-lock of Mars Base. It did not open and no voice came over the radio. He waited, suppressing the terror building up inside him; whatever was in there had got Lane.

He was glad when Brunel and Dalby arrived in the other Bug; he hadn't enjoyed the long wait alone.

'Anything new?' the Commander asked tersely.

'Nothing.' And as he'd been reporting over the radio ever since Lane went in, the question was meaningless.

'Harrington and Lane in there – and nothing', Brunel mused.

'And Pugh—'

Brunel cut him short. 'Forget about Pugh!'

The Commander took his Bug round the dome in a leisurely circuit. 'Notice anything, Dalby?'

The bearded physicist shook his head. 'Nothing—'

'The footprints, man – the footprints!'

Then Dalby saw them: a single line coming across the desert, the prints of a man's naked feet in the dull red dust. Small feet. 'Pugh!' he said, shaken.

Brunel did not answer. He drove his Bug back to where Vincent waited at the air-lock.

'Except for the small emergency cache, all our supplies are inside the dome. Air, water, power.' Brunel paused, allowing time for Dalby and Vincent to get the full impact of their situation. 'We need those supplies to survive until the relief ship arrives. So we let down the dome.'

Neither man objected.

Brunel closed his helmet and went outside. He walked directly to the big valve set in the base of the dome, turning it to bleed off air. Slowly the dome sagged, wrinkling like a concertina; minutes later, it was no more than a collapsed plastic sack. Airless. Nothing stirred beneath the grey folds.

'All right', Brunel said finally. 'There can be nothing alive under there now. Help me take the cover off.'

Dalby and Vincent left their Bugs and joined him. Together, they caught hold of the limp plastic sheet, peeling it back from the massed equipment. It was an awkward job, with the plastic snagging on sharp corners – and, before they'd finished, something stirred and rose up from the uncovered supplies.

All three froze. Brunel felt his skin crawl.

Pugh came first, naked, scalpel in hand. Harrington followed, his shirt bloodied. Lane came last, ungainly in a space suit from which the air had gone. They advanced in silence on the three survivors.

Brunel took a deep breath and shouted: 'Get out of here!' He turned and ran for his Bug; inside he had his army .45 revolver, the only armament carried by the expedition.

Vincent and Dalby, paralysed at seeing dead men walk, were slow to react.

Pugh reached Dalby and plunged the scalpel into his suit again and again. Harrington and Lane bore Vincent to the ground, wrenching away the flexible hose from the air-cylinder on his back.

Brunel came from the Bug, revolver in hand. As Pugh walked towards him, he pumped slugs into the pale naked body. Flesh splattered, blood leaked. Pugh staggered under the impact but still came on.

Brunel threw his empty gun down and fled inside the Bug. He drove into the desert, alone.

He drove at reckless speed to get away from Base One. His mind refused to accept that the dead could return; his body knew otherwise. His hands steered while his brain refused to think.

Later, Brunel realized there was nothing behind him; no-

one chasing him. He calmed a little and slowed the Bug's headlong flight; he began to worry about survival. Reason returned.

He would need air and water, so he must get to the emergency cache and stock up. Now that he was the last man alive on Mars, the small cache might enable him to last out till the relief ship came. The ship! How was he going to warn the crew?

First things first; he couldn't warn them if he failed to survive. He turned the Bug, headed for the cache, and increased speed.

He calculated time. The ship had already left Earth; it would be past the half-way mark by now. He would still need to ration himself.

He stopped the Bug on rising ground in sight of the cache, marked by an aerial transmitting a homing signal, and searched the landscape through binoculars. Nothing moved anywhere. Satisfied that he was alone, he drove to the cache and began moving stores into the Bug. He filled every space with water cans, fuel cells, food concentrates and air cylinders.

He had barely finished and was on his last trip to the Bug when he noticed movement on the horizon. He halted, watching. The distant specks resolved into five human-like figures, three of them suited. So Dalby and Vincent had now joined the zombies. They plodded across the blood-red desert towards him.

Brunel got in the Bug and drove at them. Bullets were useless; perhaps he could crush them.

The surface was uneven and cratered and the Bug rolled as he aimed at them with reckless speed. One by one they stepped aside, avoiding him easily. He felt the Bug tilt sideways as he swerved to attack again, and just saw the rift in time.

Sweating, he cut speed and turned away. If the Bug went over, he was finished. He drove on carefully and, when he glanced back, saw they were following. The Bug could outdistance them; but it left tracks and he had to sleep sometime.

He remembered the ship. The only radio capable of reaching far out in space was the Base transmitter. On impulse, he turned in a wide circle and drove back to Base. He left the Bug and searched the pile of stores. The transmitter had gone.

They had taken the transmitter and hidden it somewhere, buried it in the sand, he supposed. It was a frightening thought; the living dead were not without intelligence.

As he stood there, he saw them again. Moving dots on the horizon, coming for him.

Brunel climbed back into the Bug and drove off. He was tiring, and it seemed that they didn't tire. Perhaps they didn't need sleep at all. Eventually they'd catch up with him.

He drove automatically across the red and ochre land, passing a cold lava flow and low hills, avoiding dust drifts and open rifts. Once he imagined he saw a smoking volcano. Then the wind rose.

The wind built up, lifting the dust mantle. The sky was hidden; but so were the Bug's tracks. He altered course and drove slowly, watching the ground for hazards. He drove till he could no longer see where he was going, then shut down the engine.

Outside the wind stormed and swirling dust shrouded the land. Brunel slept.

When he woke, the storm had ended and the sun shone palely. He appeared to be between hills, surrounded by a monotony of dust and rock and craters.

He made a meal and ate. It would be best to stay where he was, wait it out. When the ship arrived, he could use the Bug's small radio to broadcast a last-minute warning.

He gave thought to what had taken over his men. It had to be some alien form of life; only another life form could manipulate dead bodies as if they were puppets. Something parasitic. A virus? A virus could affect the brain and nervous system – and remain dormant a long time. A parasite left over from a Martian animal now extinct . . .

A virus, Brunel remembered vaguely, consisted of a nucleic-acid surrounded by a protein shell. When it invaded the living cell of a host, it manufactured its own variety of protein and replicated itself. Where one entered, many emerged, spilling over to infest new cells – and, eventually, other host bodies.

It had to be something like that, he decided. Suppose the ship landed . . . what was there to stop them taking over the crew and returning to Earth to spread their plague of living death?

He must survive and keep a listening watch, ensure that never happened.

Brunel woke, his mouth furred and his body weak. The interior of the Bug had begun to stink; it had never been designed for continuous living-in. He sipped water and chewed slowly on a half-ration of concentrate; and it seemed he had done little else for a long time.

The zombies hadn't found him – if they'd even bothered to continue the hunt – and he hadn't moved the Bug to avoid leaving tracks they might stumble across. How long was it since he'd given up listening on the radio? It had been silent every time he'd switched on, and he needed to save the fuel cells. He'd need it in . . . how many days? Laboriously, he crossed another day off the calendar. Getting close now . . . his head throbbed from breathing foul air. Could he risk a trip to Base to get air cylinders? It was hard to think straight, his body was lethargic. He'd have to—

What was that?

High in a sky of deepest purple, a faint red streak burned. A ship coming down. He stared suspiciously at the calendar, wondering if he'd miscounted. Early, he decided, but it had to be the relief ship – couldn't be anything else.

He switched on his radio.

'Mars relief ship to Base One. Are you receiving?'

Brunel went cold as he heard Harrington's calm voice: 'Receiving you clearly.'

'Glad to know you've got the radio going again. We'll sit down as close to Base as possible. How's everything down there? Have you seen any more of Commander Brunel?'

'Situation as before. We're fine. As for—'

Brunel came out of shock to cut in urgently: 'Don't land! Commander Brunel speaking – do not land, I repeat. Everyone except myself is dead, taken-over by aliens!'

A new voice came from the ship: 'Doctor Elliot here. Just take it easy, Commander. We'll soon be with you—'

'For God's sake, don't land on Mars!'

Harrington said: 'I told you, he's mad—'

'We'll take good care of the Commander.'

Appalled. Brunel realized he'd missed an earlier transmission. They must have sent an S.O.S., and the ship had burned fuel to arrive early.

He set the Bug in motion, racing for the end of the ship's trajectory. He fought to get the hysteria out of his voice: 'I repeat, don't land at Base. The personnel are no longer human!'

He was ignored. A voice aboard the relief ship intoned: 'Countdown to landing. Ten – nine – eight – seven . . .'

Brunel had the Bug travelling at its highest speed, taking chances to reach the ship before the zombies did. The balloon tyres bounced joltingly.

He saw Base in the distance. The dome was inflated; suited figures waited beside a Bug as the ship touched down. Everything looked so normal that Brunel cursed in despair.

One of the Bug's wheels went over the lip of a crater and the machine toppled, crashing down on its side. The plastic dome shattered.

Brunel grabbed for his helmet, shouting one last time: 'Don't open the lock – don't let them in!'

He was in pain from the crash and found the lock jammed. He lay there, helpless, sick with horror. There was nothing more he could do. In the crater, he could not even see the ship; only imagine . . .

Voices of the crew sounded over the radio, welcoming members of the expedition. Then the voices stopped. In the silence, Brunel sweated and sobbed.

It was Pugh who finally came for him. Brunel did not wait for the scalpel; he opened his helmet to the Martian atmosphere.

Later, no longer human, he joined the living dead aboard the ship. It rose into the purple sky on a column of flame and on course for Earth.

THE NIGHT OF THE SEVENTH FINGER

ROBERT PRESSLIE

He was crouched in a pool of darkness at the roadside. Waiting. Waiting for the one who would be passing soon. He had waited through many times of darkness. Sometimes the little one would come along. Most times she didn't. He ached at the heart to talk with her.

There were others who passed. But none in whom he could sense empathy. Only the little one who walked loudly would do. And in all the times she had passed his courage had failed him. He could not approach her.

Since courage refused to come spontaneously he decided it would have to be premeditated. He had prepared for tonight, slowly built up the courage he needed. He did not think he could make the same effort more than once. So he had waited through all the darknesses until he had found a pattern. As many as the fingers on one hand, that was the secret. Always on the darkness of the seventh finger: that was when the little one was sure to be abroad.

One hand was clenched round the seventh finger of the other as he waited. It was a talisman, the seventh finger. Tonight he had the courage. Tonight the talisman must work its magic.

The year before last, Eastwood was a smallish dot on the ordnance maps to mark the intersection of a couple of second class roads. The name was printed in lower case letters so tiny the ink filled in the loops. The place meant nothing to anybody except its inhabitants and the smart ones who knew they could cut a quick way to the coast if they dropped off the main arterial and diverted through Eastwood to the coastal trunk.

Then the town was engulfed and another sump was built to take the overflow population from the metropolis. Eastwood became Eastwood New Town and the only way to find the place marked by a dot on an out-of-date road map was to stop in the immaculate new Main Street, catch a shopper

emerging from one of the glittering multiple stores and ask him or her for directions to the Old Town.

The social engineers responsible for the birth of satellite towns consistently overlook one point: a satellite town is more than a parade of purse-milking stores and three-bedroomed houses that differ only in the colour of the paintwork; a new town is also new people. Eastwood New Town was 60,000 people suddenly extracted from total urban habits to semi-rural conditions. And one-third of the 60,000 were minors. Too young to be consulted about which amenities should be incorporated into the new town, but old enough to form an indispensable part of its labour force.

The mere lack of dance halls, cinemas, ice rinks and bowling alleys is enough to stir in the young a rapacious lust for these things. It is no good to point out that the civic authorities have provided a calculated quantum of youth clubs. The kids complain there are too many strings attached to them. Usually – because churches have empty halls to lease – religion gets the blame. But the real reason probably lies in the label prefixing the clubs. Labels mean a lot to the young. They like the security of having things categorized. So the *youth* clubs of Eastwood were shunned while the odd one or two with club superintendents sharp enough to apply a label like 'The 16 – 21 Club' got full houses every night.

Unfortunately there was nowhere near enough of these to cater for all of the teen population. Which meant a nightly exodus by scooter, motor-cycle, car or bus to the nearest town supplying teen-projected entertainment.

Even if the exodus was their own idea the kids could still find a legitimate gripe to level at the planners: there were never enough buses. The transport service was still under the control of the metropolitan head office and no allowance had been made for these nightly excursions. The service provided was insufficient, hopelessly inadequately intervalled, and because the buses had to get back to their depot the last bus was in the middle of the evening as far as the teenagers were concerned.

Sue Bradley hated the New Town. She thought her old man was a nut for ever opting to pick a house-guaranteed job there. It was all right for him. He was old. Past it. But try to tell him! To listen to him you'd think Eastwood was

Liverpool or London. He didn't understand. It was a waste of time talking.

Watching her get off the last bus with a jaunty wave and a casual 'Traa' to the conductress nobody would have guessed she was scared. Not even Torquemada could have got her to admit it, but she was still very young.

Like most of the Saturday night pilgrims she was about fifteen going on nineteen. She was madder than usual because the expected pick-up hadn't materialized. She had wasted her time sharing three Cokes and most of the dances with one boy who had then had the nerve to tell her he was going on to a party later where one of his mates had already laid on a partner for him.

She had seriously considered taking up an offer made the previous week by Johnny who was also Simon Legree of Simon Legree and his Slaves when he stood at the mike. Johnny thought he was on the way up. There could be a recording date in the near future. He cultivated the local fans energetically. If any of the dolls wanted to come back stage and watch him strip off his sweaty shirt and fondle the phallic bullwhip that was his stage gimmick he welcomed them. Some day they could send his disc-to-be into the charts. And he could always rely on recruiting four of them to join the Slaves later for a quick bash among the guitar cases in the back of the group's Dormobile.

But he had once made the mistake of confiding to Sue in a tipsy moment that he was married unhappily, of course – with a kid of two.

When the target date had told her about the party she had veered in the direction of the bandstand, determined not to have her evening spoiled and also to let Duffy see she was in with Johnny. She changed course in mid-stride and made for the cloakroom to pick up her things. She could count on a ride in the Dormobile. She wasn't so sure it would take her anywhere near home.

She caught the last bus to Eastwood.

When she bailed out at the terminus and the bus had turned to make its way back to the depot she stood for a full minute under the street lamp that served to mark the end of the bus's journey. It was the last street lamp for 500 yards.

Her family were newcomers to Eastwood. They had been

allocated a house in one of the outlying districts which was still in the process of being converted from drawing board to reality. It would be another month before street lighting was installed, another three before the road was made good and the buses ran all the way out to the housing estate.

Home was a vague silhouette where a spangled arc plotted the graph of an avenue of picture windows.

She hitched the strap of her shoulder bag with one hand, bracketed the lapels of her coat with the other and started along the make-shift pavement.

In spite of two years' practice with her mother's shoes she still teetered slightly on her stilettos. She was learning how to overcome this by keeping her steps short and by laying them down hard. She liked the noise they made in darkness. It filled the silence. The sound of her own heels was better than no sound at all.

As she neared the point of no return, halfway between the bus terminus and the estate, she quickened her pace some more. She stopped once to make sure the silence of the night was complete. It was. Except for the grumble of passing cars back on the highway. Satisfied, but none the less uneasy, she fillied on up the hill.

When she was coming near the clump of bushes she stepped off the pavement out into the road, caring less for the mud stirred up by the afternoon's rain than for the menace of the shrubbery. There wasn't a single aspect of the dark road that didn't choke her, but the bushes and the old house hidden behind them really gave her the willies. Somebody – some nit, she thought – used to live there. Somebody who was bought out so that Eastwood could expand.

The house had a reputation. In a misguided moment she had once let a date entice her inside it for a snogging session that ended in a wrestling match. And it was a favourite hangout for yobs who swopped fags and dirty stories while they waited for birds who were too dumb to know they shouldn't travel the road alone.

Sue hurried past the house and the bushes, her ears cocked for half-stifled giggles. When nothing happened and her virtue was assured for another Saturday she sighed 'Thank vice' through her teeth, subconsciously slowed her pace and practically strutted as if she had never been afraid at all.

She was taken completely unawares when the hand that held her lapels was grasped by another with such force that she was halted in her stride and lifted to the tips of her toes.

Her reactions had the swiftness of practice and feminine instinct. She swung her shoulder bag in a scything motion and jammed her knee upwards. The bag thumped softly and the knee passed clean through the legs of whoever had grabbed her.

'Lay off', she ordered. She let the strap of her bag slide to the fold of her arm and hooked her Rimmel-lacquered nails at the face above her.

The voice that said, 'I will not hurt', was deep and resonant like it had been fed through an echo chamber. The crushing grip on her hand belied the statement.

'Shove off, will you.'

'I will not hurt. Come.'

'Get knotted.'

'Please.'

Sue felt herself being lowered, but not released. She strained her eyes into the darkness. He was big, whoever he was. His silhouette didn't tally with the shape of anybody she recognized. She had never seen anybody that big. She wasn't even sure his size was possible.

'If you don't get your hands off me', she threatened, 'I'll scream. They've got a place for people like you.'

The deep voice was plaintive as it repeated: 'I will not hurt.' But Sue's heart fluttered like a captured sparrow's when she was scooped bodily into the crook of an arm out of a muscle-man advertisement and a hand big enough to put a finger in each ear was clapped across her mouth.

He carried her into the old house she had just passed.

The front door had disappeared long ago, probably appropriated for kindling wood or a make-shift toboggan when the snow had covered the hill. Some person or persons unknown had removed the fireplaces, all the interior room and cupboard doors, every inch of lead or copper piping, and extracted the power and light wiring from the conduits. The visiting yobs, in fits of boisterous spirits or vandalism, had stripped the wallpaper, broken the plastering and heaved so many stones up at the ceiling that apart from one corner where a few tiles offered shelter the inside of the house was

open to the stars above.

Sue was surprised to see a light burning in the sheltered corner. It looked like a candle, guttered like a candle, but it smelled like somebody was frying chips.

She struggled to get free, shook her head to get rid of the gagging hand. Unexpectedly she was put down and the hand was removed. And she forgot her threat to scream. Or maybe she didn't forget but considered it and decided screaming was childish – even if there was nobody around but the giant to pass verdict on her. She stood where she had been set down. Not daring to move. Yet. They were side by side, equidistant from the entrance. Later maybe.

She said: 'Who's cooking?'

When he didn't answer she took time out to get a proper look at him. He was big all right. It wasn't that he was so terrifically tall: maybe six and a half feet. But there was an all-over massiveness about him, something not quite natural; he was all shoulders and chest. With a great white-faced melon head, lightly fuzzed on top. For a moment Sue thought she had met him before, then she remembered. Last Sunday on the telly. When she had been drying her hair. *Classics on Celluloid.* Every Sunday at three. Last Sunday it was 'The Hunchback of Somewhere-or-other'. That was who he looked like. Charles Laughton. She remembered the name because she had liked the film. She had cried when the crowd had been throwing muck at the hunchback. Only this one wasn't a hunchback and he wasn't what you would call exactly ugly. Not even pathetic ugly.

'I hurt no one. Eat no one.'

'What are you going on about?'

'Cook no one.'

'Nit! That's only an expression. Like it used to be "What's cooking?" but now you say "Who." '

'I make.'

'Not me you don't.'

He rolled his head in self-rebuke at not being able to match her speed of thought, her quick hopping from subject to subject. He said: 'I did not make you. I do not make people. I make the light.'

'That!'

'In darkness I go to people's places.' He was frowning

with the effort to keep going, to avoid being sidetracked. 'They put food outside their places. Into big boxes.'

'You mean dustbins?'

'I collect until I have enough to make light.'

'No wonder it stinks.'

He looked at her with enormous consideration. 'I know you. I know you will be afraid if I do not have light. Darkness is a friend. My friend. But you are afraid without light.'

I'm afraid period, she thought. And I'm getting out of here fast. He's soft in the head. It's late already and if I don't get home soon there'll be one hell of a row. Like usual. And they'll believe this for an excuse, won't they? Not bloody likely they won't. And even if they did they would say girls of your age shouldn't be out so late and you should have more sense than come up that dark road by yourself. And if you *did* have somebody with you, a date, then you got told that no decent girl would let a boy take her up a dark road, etcetera, etcetera.

'All go, isn't it?' she said.

He just looked at her. She said: 'Have you done? I mean: can I go now? All right, you're dead clever. You can make candles. Come back at Christmas.'

He said: 'No.'

'What d'you mean no?'

'I have waited for you. Many darknesses. I need you.'

'Jack it in, Charlie. What do you think I am?'

He spread the fingers of one hand where she could see them in the candlelight. 'All these darknesses', he said. 'And many times all these.'

'Jeezis!' the girl gasped. She did a double sidestep past him and raced for the door. His reach was long enough to let him catch her in a single stride. He hefted her back to the corner by the candle and covered her mouth again.

Above the hand that wrapped her face, her eyes were wild and rolling with terror. She had just about decided he was only a harmless idiot. Somebody so dopey that nobody would talk to him and he wanted her to put an interlude of companionship in his loneliness. Then he had shown her that hand. With all those fingers. Seven of them. Her eyes went up and showed a lot of white as if they were going to do a back flip at the thought of those same fingers soiling her mouth.

'I have waited', he went on relentlessly. 'I fingered your coming and going in the darknesses. I am slow at fingering. But I found that I must wait for a darkness of the seventh finger. I waited and you came. I need you. I need your help.'

Sue took her eyes back from under their lids. She tried to fill them with the expression she used when she was lying her head off to her old man. She made tiny nods of assent, as much as the grip on her head would allow.

He uncovered her mouth experimentally. She wiped it with her sleeve. 'Who are you?' she asked.

'You will help me?'

'Anything you say.'

'You will not go away again?'

'Get on with it.'

'I am lost.'

'You can say that again. If they saw you in daylight they'd whip you inside. You don't half look funny. Leather coat and kinky boots. They're out. They were last year. Where have you been hiding?'

'Here. When there was darkness. When there was light I had to hide in other places. I made holes in the earth. Over there where there are trees.'

'I didn't mean that. I meant where did you come from.'

He lifted his head to the naked rafters. 'In the big darkness', he said. 'I think.'

'You think? Don't you know? Hey – you're not one of *them*, are you?' She was beginning to feel surer of herself. She sensed her mental superiority and she was inclined to believe his assertions that he intended no harm. 'You know', she said. 'Like from another planet. Like that one, *The Monster from Mira*.' She pronounced the last word like mirror. 'I saw that. It weren't half a giggle', she reminisced, and smiled at the memory.

'Not a monster', he denied. For the first time he showed signs of emotion. The anger was slight but it was there. 'Some of them called me a monster. They make fun of me. But if I am not there they could not go.'

Sue pulled a face. She said: 'Who? Who called you a monster and who couldn't go where?'

'Men. Human men like you.'

She howled. 'You are in a bad way! I'm a girl. Don't you

know the difference?'

He let the question go by. Her speech was so full of non sequiturs and tangential remarks that he decided to follow only the main drift and let the rest slide.

'Men are bad', he said. 'They need me, yet they mock me. They talk about Earth. Say it is a good place. But to me it is a bad place. It has men. It has beasts. I wish I was not here.'

Wide-eyed and soft-spoken, Sue said: 'You really mean it, don't you.'

'It is not Earth itself that is bad. I love Earth. It is the men and the—'

'No not that. You really believe you came from up there. You've been seeing too many films. It doesn't *actually* happen, you know. You should see a doctor. I'm not joking. Not taking the mick. Crikey, I like a horror movie same as anyone, but I don't go getting ideas it could *really* happen.'

'You will know that I speak the truth. You will know, little one. There will be ships—'

Sue was bending over the candle. There had been one squashed and panstick-scented cigarette left in her bag but no matches. She squinted up as she tried to avoid singeing her flick-ups. She said: 'We've got *them*. Everybody's got them nowadays.' She thought this was true. She saw nothing odd about her nonchalance. Familiarity had robbed the miracle of its magic. She had no particular interest in relay satellites, planetary probes or lunar surveys. But in watching television or scanning the dailies for the state of the pop charts it was impossible to avoid coming across some reference to the exploration of space. There was even a love-in-a-capsule strip picture story in last week's *Valentine*.

'Yes', she was told. 'There were ships. When they described Earth to me they said there were once many ships, but they had never seen them. Only the pictures that tell stories. They said the pictures were a history of Earth. Many times they looked at the pictures. For they had never seen Earth either. They looked at the pictures. They told the stories of the goodness of Earth. Sang the songs in praise of Earth. This is how I learn that Earth was known as a good place.'

The girl blew a contemptuous stream of smoke into his face. He coughed and rubbed his eyes.

'That's right', she said. 'Now you'll be telling me you've never seen a fag before.'

He made a denial. 'I have seen the men do this thing. But I was not allowed to do it myself.'

She reversed the butt. 'Here', she offered, 'have a drag.'

'They would not allow it.'

'Who wouldn't?'

'The men.'

'There's nobody here but us.' She was getting impatient. 'Look Charlie', she said, 'I'm missing my beauty sleep. I should have been home ages ago. I did what you asked. I listened to you. And I believe everything you said about not hurting me. But if you want my honest opinion I think you're barmy. You say you came here in a spaceship. All right, but where is it? Show me. And according to you the ship was full of men who hadn't seen Earth. So where did they come from? Mars? Because if they came from anywhere else except here how could they be men? And either I'm not switched on or something but the way you were talking you would think that *now* – you and me here – was a hundred years ago.'

'A hundred? That is a number. I do not understand numbers. They did not teach me these. I only know fingering.' He held his hands at belly level, fingers outspread. He sounded very proud when he said: 'I teach myself fingering.'

'You're dead clever.'

He smiled, taking it as a genuine compliment. 'I can tell you when I came from.'

Sue groaned dramatically. 'One minute he's from the stars, next it's the future.'

'Is so', he agreed. 'I am from the not yet.'

'You're joking of course.'

'When I asked the time of Earth, the time that the pictures showed and the songs praised, they showed me the years by my fingering. It was the fingers of one hand as many times as the fingers of the other.'

'Forty-nine? You crease me. Forty-nine years in the future you're going to come zooming out of space in your little ship. Only it won't be forty-nine years from now, it will be today. Phooey!'

He shook his head. 'It was not forty-nine.'

'You said you didn't understand numbers.'

'I know it had more words.'

Sue didn't feel like demonstrating with *his* fingers so she used her own and flashed them upwards five times, keeping one finger down on the fifth flip. 'That's forty-nine.'

As quickly as she had gestured, he had tried to follow her movements on his own hands, translating ten-figured symbols into multiples of seven. Then he tried to show her the number he meant. She got lost before he had really started. If she had been told that he was demonstrating seven cubed she would have been none the wiser. Only that it was a lot more than forty-nine.

He said: 'That was when the ship went wrong and I came to Earth.'

'I'm sorry. Sorry for you. I said it before, you should see a doctor. I'm not saying you're mental or anything like that, but you need help.'

'Your help. This is why I wait for you. You help me and I help you. Yes?'

'Why me?'

'I have told you. I do not like men. I feel when you pass in other darknesses that you are different. You will not mock. Will not call me monster.'

'Could be, Charlie. I'm full of soft spots. But I must get home.'

'Home.' He said it wistfully. 'This is home for you? This Earth. I have no home.'

'My heart bleeds for you.'

'The ship was my home. It was the home of the men. They were born in the ship. I was made in it.'

'You were what?' Sue choked on the last of her cigarette. She flipped it into a corner. 'Don't get me wrong', she said. 'I'm not taking the mick. I just remembered something. Like when I took shorthand and typing at night school. My boy-friend gave me a new typewriter for Christmas – he was one of my old boy-friends, I never talk to him now. He got it for cigarette coupons. 8000 coupons. Smoked himself to a suntan. It was a portable. In a zip case with a flap on the inside of the lid. In the flap pocket there was a yellow leaflet and you could only see the top words. Know what it said? "Operating Instruction for your Brother". I said what'n Earth you bought

me, Paul – a robot? It was the name of the typewriter, you see. When you pulled out the leaflet the next word was Typewriter.'

What Sue did not add was that the incident had happened not to herself but to her elder sister. She had a trick of translating a good story into the first person singular. She thought it always sounded more plausible that way.

'You give me sadness. I feel that you have said a joke. But I was not given a sense of humour. They wanted to see their Earth that was so much talked about. The journey was very big. It takes a long, long time. Longer than the life of a man. They must sleep for most of the journey. But someone has to watch the ship and make corrections. The ship can do much thinking but it cannot correct when things happen that were not to be seen before. So I was made. Not of metal like a machine. I was made of man-stuff. And I was taught words a little, thinking a little, but best I was taught one thing. To look after the ship.'

'Poor Charlie. You didn't make too good a job of it, did you?'

He ploughed on. 'I was taught what is a warp but—'

'Were you now? Well I wasn't. What's a warp?'

'You are walking your Earth and you put your foot on a place where there is nothing. Yes?'

'I trip. That's a hole, not a warp.'

'There came', he insisted, ' one of these warps which I was taught to recognize. A hole which the ship fell into. I remembered what I must do and I did it. But the hole was too big. The ship fell through.'

'Char-ming! You fell through a hole in the sky. Oh, Charlie!'

'Not in the sky. The hole was in time.'

'In time for what?'

He ignored the interruption. 'Warps can make holes in space or in time. If the ship is not corrected it jumps great distances off course or falls backwards or forwards in time. This is what I am taught. Our ship fell backwards. It came to Earth. But not safely. Not at the correct time.'

Sue thought that for all his crazy talk he was still pretty sweet in a nutty sort of way. She tried not to hurt his feelings deliberately. 'Charlie', she said, 'tell me: if all this really

happened, where did you land? I haven't seen anything in the papers.'

He pointed to where the rear door of the house had stood before it had been appropriated. 'There. In the deep water.'

'The old gravel pit.' Suddenly the whole thing was possible. The pit had been abandoned years ago because of seepage. It was rumoured to be bottomlessly deep. Certainly the black depth of water was enough to make everybody give it a wide berth.

Sue asked: 'What happened to the others – the men?'

'Dead.'

'Drowned? Or killed by the crash?'

'They were asleep. The machine which keeps them cold while they sleep was broken by the warp. There was great heat. They died when we were falling through the warp.'

'Well at least they never knew what hit them. But just imagine: travelling all that distance and then not making it. It's like me being at work all day. Home is a drag when you're there but when you're at work you can't *wait* to get home. It's like I was sitting on the bus looking forward to coming home and the bus crashing and I never made it. Still, you made it. You got home.'

'No. I have told you. I was made in the ship. The men were born in it. For the men and for me this would have been the first time on Earth. Only their fathers – many fathers ago – had seen Earth. It was these fathers who made the pictures and first sang the songs. It was the pictures and the songs that made the men hurt to see Earth. They said men, all men, had been away too long. They said it was not good for a child to be too long away from its mother's breast.'

'Watch it, Charlie.'

'For me too it was going to be good. I too was hurting to see Earth.' He sighed, hunching his Quasimodo shoulders. 'I like Earth very much. But I hurt because I have brought it trouble.'

'You said you *didn't* like it.'

'Earth I like. It speaks to me like the men said mothers speak to their children. It is my friend—'

Sue burst into song. *'I talk to the trees . . .* It's a dirty great lump of stone, Charlie! You can't make friends with a lump of stone. Or maybe in your case you can. Better than

speaking to yourself like some nuts, I suppose.'

'It is a living thing', he persisted. 'It tells me where to make a hole to hide in. It puts a tree over the hole to protect me from too much heat and too much wet. It gives me roots to eat. It gives me plants with big leaves and tells me to burn them and eat the ashes. For it knows that I must have the salt that is in the ashes. It shows me its other friends. I have talked with the birds that fly and with the little fish that live in the water that runs into the place where the ship came down. It pleases my eyes with white pictures on the blue of the sky. It told me which grasses to pull and chew to heal the hurt I felt when I came. And yet it is true what you say: I like Earth but I do not like it. There are other grasses which cut my face when I move into my hole. There are beasts that spit at me and cut me with their hands if I go near to be friends. And there are men.'

'There are men', Sue agreed. 'Some are okay, some you've got to watch. But I've got no complaints. It takes all sorts. If you're so – hell, you've got me talking like all this was real, like it had actually happened – but if this world doesn't suit you, Charlie, you'd better hop it. Or if you can't do that with your supposed-to-be spaceship all smashed up, then you'll have to do the other thing. You wouldn't be the first one who said they were fed up of the world.'

A breath of wind, too puny to be called a gust, whirled through the doorless door and just about snuffed out the candle. The sudden chasing of giant shadows across the floor made them both look at the candle. The stump of it was smaller than its flame. He took a fresh one from somewhere inside his leather jacket. While he bent to kindle it from the dying light Sue sneaked tip-toe away from him.

'Wait.'

She hadn't thought he was capable of such firmness of voice. She halted in her tracks involuntarily.

'You are the one I waited for', he said. 'I have waited so long. I cannot lose you now. Not yet. I have more to say.'

'Look, I was late last Saturday. That cost me a clip on the ear from my mother and a lecture from the old man. They'll kill me tonight. Worse maybe. They'll make me stay in for a month. Can you imagine?'

He had a hand inside his jacket again. He pulled out a

wad of paper. Old paper. Wrinkled, but with the smoothed-out look of ancient and precious documents. Tattered at the edges. Yellowed all over.

'You are Bradley', he said.

'*Miss* Bradley, if you don't mind. Even at work I get Miss. So?'

'I was right. You are the one. I did not think you would mock and you did not. I wanted you to listen and you did. That you are also Bradley is a—'

'Coincidence.'

'Miracle.'

'You've been hanging around for days. You said so. You probably asked somebody my name.'

'I am sad for saying bad things about Earth. It must have been Earth that chose the place of our coming. Earth must have known I was looking for you.'

Blackmail. That was what Sue thought. He gives out with the soft soap, so you'll feel lousy if you snub him. But soft soap wouldn't save her from a tongue lashing when she got home.

'I'm sorry', she said. 'But this is it. I'm going. I'll scream if you try to stop me. Then the bad bad mans will come and get you. You wouldn't like that to happen, would you?'

Loudly, desperately, he said: 'They were dying.'

'What are you coming with now?'

'The men. They were dying. This is why they so much want to see Earth. Before they die. The cold machine in the ship makes them sleep. Gives them enough time to come before they die. They were the last. Once there were many. As many as Earth has. But a bad thing comes to their world. Not a thing that makes dying sudden. A thing that is slow, but makes many die, then many more until there are only as many left as I would have fingers if I had another hand.'

'Some kind of disease?'

He recognized the word he had not been able to remember. He nodded.

'And they brought the disease here?'

'They did not want this. Only to come near Earth and look at it in the picture makers before they died. It was my fault that they came down to Earth.'

She swallowed the bitter taste that had come into her mouth. She wished she had another cigarette left.

She said: 'But it will be all right, won't it? I mean, they're way down under the water.' But she could tell by his face that the water wasn't going to be any deterrent to the disease.

He was unfolding the paper carefully. 'Bradley', he said, 'the son of your son's son was a' – he read the word with difficulty – 'biochemist. He was the man who found how to make life and how to make it grow into a manshape like me. That was in the beginning. Many sons later it was another Bradley who made manshapes who could do work after teaching. It was this Bradley who made me. He was on the ship.'

'You trying to tell me that some relation, some *descendant* of mine made you? A million years from now or whenever it was. Or is it *will be*? You're out of your tiny mind!'

'That is why I have waited. To ask you to have no sons.'

'To ask me what?'

'If you have no sons there will be no other Bradleys. There will not be the Bradley who made me. And if I am not made I cannot make the mistake that has brought the disease to Earth. You must promise.'

'And if I don't? Hey, let me go!'

'No sons. You must not. If you do not promise I will have to make you die.'

He held a green capsule, a sparrow's egg in size and shape, in the hand that wasn't imprisoning her.

'Let me go, stupid. Look, I'll promise anything you like but that doesn't guarantee anything. If it's any consolation, I haven't the slightest notion of getting married and having kids. But I'm not the only surviving member of my family, you know. There's my sister. Maybe it's her who has all the sons. Maybe it's none of us. It doesn't have to be. The world is full of Bradleys.'

'Promise', he pleaded.

'I should have known', she gritted out. 'I'm a right sucker and no maybes. I should have run when I had the chance. Instead I get taken in by the craziest line I've ever heard. You're just what I thought you were. A madman. A *monster*!'

He released her so suddenly that she stumbled. She got her feet sorted out, gave him one last big-eyed look of disgust and ran for the door.

When she was out in the darkened road she kept on running and didn't look back until the night was made day – an eerie fluorescent tube day. A blue-white light that gouted silently from the old house.

She slowed to a walk. Even when the light was gone and it was dark again. She was late now. No point in getting a sweat on for the sake of a few minutes.

Men, she thought. They're all the same. Then she had another thought, a sobering one: that thing, that monster, had killed himself. There could be trouble. Police. Enquiries. She would be involved. Her mind flew ahead, guessing at the questions, fashioning the answers. She had already decided against trying on the truth with her father. And if it was hopeless with him, what would the police think? Nobody, but nobody, was going to believe her.

It was too crazy for herself to believe. Charlieboy said he was from the future. Wanted her to prevent his very existence. But if she did, just suppose, then how could he have been there tonight, scaring her silly? And what about the disease-ridden ship that was supposed to be lying at the bottom of the old gravel pit?

She was near home, saw that the lights were still on and decided she would be better occupied fabricating a plausible fib for her lateness.

When there was nothing in the news next day, or the day after, or within a whole week, she began to feel safe. Maybe there had been no trace left of the thing in the old house.

She did a self-imposed penance of staying at home for a month of Saturdays. At first she thought she would never forget her experience. But youthful resilience took over and she did forget. She was able to shove the entire incident into a corner of her mind.

But the next time she went out on a Saturday she remembered enough to make her want to avoid the walk from the bus terminus to her home.

The only mistake she made that night was to ask a slightly startled but smirking Simon Legree if he would mind giving her a lift in the Dormobile . . .

NO MORE FOR MARY

CHARLES BIRKIN

Toby Lewis stacked together the pile of typescript and wrestled with it for nearly five minutes before he could get its edges in neat alignment and ready for the stapling machine. He had finished the rough draft of his new play. He was far from satisfied with the pace of the build up in what he hoped would be the delirious last act, but the back of the job had been broken by getting down on paper the action and dialogue which had been simmering in his brain since April, and now that the birth pangs were behind him he looked forward to attending to the alteration and polishing.

The heat of the afternoon was abating and he had to decide whether he would drive down to the beach for a swim or use the small deep pool which formed the terminal of the terrace of the Villa Long which he had rented for two months and which, alas, he was due to leave in a few days time. During his tenancy he had kept to his schedule, writing from eleven in the morning until one o'clock, and from immediately after luncheon until half past four. Experience had taught him that longer hours made him stale. Upon his return to London, given a further six weeks application, *Simple Simon* should be finished.

It would be his fourth consecutive production at the Trafalgar Theatre, where each of its predecessors had averaged a two year run. The critics affected to scorn his dramatic efforts, washing their hands of such trivialities with tolerant benevolence, but the public flocked to his farces, which made a mint of money for all connected with them.

Toby Lewis was a sturdy, healthy and exceedingly cheerful young man in his middle thirties. He had been married once, but it had not turned out to be a success. He had thought it best to cut his losses and had agreed to give Fay an amicable divorce, which had gone through without rancour. He possessed a wide choice of obliging and attractive girl friends and was in no hurry at all to get himself tied up again. It was by his own desire that he had come alone to San Bernardo, as when he was working he did not care for company,

female or otherwise. *Simon* was planned to open after Christmas and he had promised to deliver the completed script by the end of October.

He replaced the cover on his typewriter and rose to his feet. It would have to be the pool, and afterwards he would walk round the garden before coming in for his first drink of the day, not that he would have to stick to such a strict regime for the remainder of his stay. He unbuttoned his dazzling shirt of printed cotton and let it drop on to a chair then, clad only in the most abbreviated of white bathing trunks, stepped out of an archway on to terracotta tiles that struck painfully hot on the soles of his feet.

Around three sides of the swimming pool had been placed large Etruscan urns, some genuine -- others copies, and these were filled with climbing geraniums. Fragments of carved plaques and pieces of pottery leaned against the walls of the house, and a dressing-gown of striped towelling shrouded the torso of a dancing headless figure, reaching almost to the cloven hoofs.

Toby made a perfect dive. The water was warm, but far from clean. It took three days to fill the pool and he supposed that tomorrow he must give instructions to have it drained and scrubbed so that it would be in readiness for the incoming September tenants who would be arriving on Saturday, the same day that he would be leaving. It was now Wednesday, which was also the couple's day out. He wondered what arrangements they had made for his dinner. His Italian was practically non-existent and the housekeeping was conducted in animated pantomime, sometimes with surprising results.

He did an overarm crawl back to the iron ladder and climbed the slippery bars to the top where he stood with the water streaming from his body and forming a puddle round his feet as he stared across the enamelled bay towards the fishing village of Porto Ercole. His black hair was plastered to his skull and drops of water sparkled in the dark mat that covered his chest. He was burned walnut brown. He stripped off his trunks and lingered in the rays of the sun that just topped the summit of the rocky island to the west. He did some brisk double knee bends before he walked over to

remove the dressing-gown from the satyr and slip his toes into faded espadrilles.

The garden, populated with darting lizards, sloped steeply to the narrow road. Paths that were little more than tracks twisted down through gnarled olives interspersed with orange and peach trees and between herb covered banks of reddish clay. Occasionally they led to cloistered but more levelled spaces, and in these flower beds had been sketched, patchily bright with marigolds and zinnias and the blue-grey of dwarf lavender. Here and there was a broken statue of limestone or marble which Paula Long, who owned the villa, had collected; warriors impregnable in their breastplates, maidens in formal draperies, a child holding aloft a piece of jagged shard.

It was near to the child that Toby saw the big insect, azure blue and emerald green with a band of scarlet running down its spine.

It was lying, or rather squatting, with half of its length across a pointed leaf fallen from a shrub whose genus Toby did not recognize, while its other half was on the flint cobbles of which the platform that surrounded the dry and cracked fountain had been constructed.

He estimated that the creature must measure at least six inches. He bent down to examine it more closely. It made no movement. Seen near to, it was of exquisite beauty, the eight multi-jointed legs being graceful and iridescent. The band of scarlet running through the azure and emerald was studded at regular intervals with tiny circles of a slightly darker shade which put him in mind of buttons. Astonishingly, the face had but a single eye of amethyst purple, and the head itself was capped with a sheath that shone in the late afternoon sunshine as if it had been painted with a solution of liquid crystal.

Toby had never before come across a bug with only one eye, nor had he heard of the existence of such a thing. It was like nothing that he had ever encountered. He picked up a twig and gave the jewelled insect a gentle prod. The reaction to this was an instinctive waving of its black antennae in protest, which showed him that it was still living.

Toby realized that he had discovered something that must

be extremely rare, perhaps even unique. He was ignorant of such things, which were the speciality of his sister, Mary. In fact, they were her career, for she was a dedicated scientist with an important job at Oxford, where she studied centipedes and scorpions and other lowly and unattractive species of lepidoptera. Mary had gone so far as to write several learned monographs on their habits which had been made standard reading. Dear old Mary! So sweet and painstaking and clever . . . and so plain. He had heard an aunt of his father's once bewailing the fact that it was he, and not his sister, who had stolen all the family looks.

He surmised that this very unusual specimen had probably been blown across from the coast of Africa. He would take it back with him to England and would present it to Mary for her museum. In the past he had given her various offerings of a somewhat similar nature which he had found during the course of holidays but, with the exception of a rather vile looking moth which he had caught in Crete, she had not been markedly enthusiastic about his prizes, having identified them as belonging to well known species. This fellow was different, of that he was sure.

Should he kill it at once by impaling it on a pin, or would it be wiser to try and nurture it and hand it over to her alive? He would choose the latter course. 'Fellow' or not, and he had no way of determining its sex, it might conceivably lay eggs, and if it should turn out to be a rarity that would be all to the good.

He made his way back to the empty house and into the kitchen. On the neatly laid out shelves there were no empty jars to be seen as he had hoped that there might have been, but there was a massive glass container half filled with coffee beans and this he took down and emptied out on to the wooden table. Next he found a sheet of thick paper from which he cut a square to fit over the neck of the jar, jabbing a peppering of holes to admit air. In the sitting-room he had a roll of Sellotape to secure the cover once the occupant had been safely incarcerated.

When he reached the spot where he had left the strange insect he discovered it to be in exactly the same place. He did not care for the idea of touching it so he slipped the piece of pierced paper warily beneath it, tilting the jar and

solicitously easing the creature inside, where it rested on the bottom, feebly raising and flexing its legs.

Toby's next problem was what to give it to eat. He scrutinized the leaf across which it had been stretched and picked several more from the bush that grew nearby. Then he gathered a selection of other leaves and these also he inserted into the jar. Surely among such a wide range there would be some that his captive would find palatable? He wedged the cover into place and, carrying his prisoner, toiled up the steep paths and steps to the villa.

When he had deposited the jar on the dressing table in his bedroom Toby got dressed and went out to the garage where he kept his hired Fiat. He would drive over to San Stefano and dine in the hotel where Charles and Carla Sydney were staying, and a young man by the name of Robin Riven, who was a friend of Mary's. It would make an amusing break in his routine. He should be with them soon after six, when they would have come up from the beach. A change of scene would do him good now that the play had been temporarily put aside.

It was two o'clock when he got back. He had drunk more than he allowed himself usually when he was driving, and he had gone cautiously along the winding hillside roads on the return journey. He had taken a shower and was about to get into bed when he remembered Mary's insect. He picked up the jar and took it over to the light. So far as he could perceive none of the leaves had been nibbled. The brilliantly coloured creature had crawled into an erect position and seemed to be gazing straight at him with its amethyst eye. He frowned at it. Doubtless it would eat when it grew hungry. He was delighted to be home without mishap. He had been a fool to have stayed so long at the party. Hangovers on holidays should be avoided. Toby slid under the sheet, switched off the lamp and was soon asleep.

He must have woken three hours later when, behind the flimsy curtains, dawn was turning the darkness to grey. He could not be certain just what it had been that had disturbed him. He stared up at the ceiling, barely discernible as a paler patch above the lemon painted walls and huge peasant wardrobe.

From the dressing table there came the sound of tapping,

reminiscent of that made by a death-watch beetle, but of greater volume. It gave the effect of having a definite but irregular rhythm. He turned his head in the direction of the sound. As he did so he saw a brief gleam from the interior of the jar and while he watched this, too, appeared to glow intermittently in a meaningful pattern almost like that of a miniature heliograph sending out intelligible signals. This delusion he knew to be ridiculous. The insect must be phosphorescent . . . like a glowworm . . . that was all. After a while the flashes and the tapping stopped and in the ensuing silence he went back to sleep once more.

When Luisa came in with his tea, an English custom which he had insisted should be kept up during his Ancedonian sojourn, she gave a shrill shriek of surprise as she saw the jar and its peculiar occupant. Toby pointed to the dressing table, raising his bushy eyebrows interrogatively: 'Do you know what that thing is called?' he asked.

The girl giggled, as she did always whenever he addressed her, which he found an irritating habit. Her giggles were apt to grow somewhat hysterical when this happened to occur in the mornings when he was sitting up in bed and naked to the waist, maybe, for all she knew, naked altogether. She broke into a flood of disclamatory Italian, shrugging her shoulders and shaking her head in emphatic denial. 'It was best left alone. It would most certainly have a poisonous sting. She refused to go near it.' Toby took it that she had never seen its like before.

After he had breakfasted on the terrace and had had his swim Toby drove off on a visit to the Etruscan tombs, some of which, or so he had heard tell the night before, had been newly excavated and had been found to contain the most shocking frescoes of a frankly Rabelaisian character.

It was a long and dusty drive, and he had learned nothing new from the erotic paintings. On the way back he had made a considerable detour to inspect a charming mediaeval town perched on a hilltop, so that it was past dinner time when he turned in through the gateway that led to Casa Long. Tomorrow he would have to take the car to the hire firm, and he would also have to pack, for on the day following he must catch the early train to Rome if he was to make the mid-day flight.

He spent the evening reading the English papers and some mail which he had neglected, and was in bed soon after eleven.

Towards dawn the events of the previous night repeated themselves, but this time the flashes were dimmer and the tappings had grown less distinct. He had noticed that the leaves still had not been touched and he resolved, as soon as he was called, to replace them with different varieties. This he did, adding a spoonful of honey which he obtained from Luisa, but when he came back to his bedroom with the assorted bunch clutched in one hand and the honey spoon in the other the insect was lying on its back and he could see that it was dying, or already dead. The colours of its body were losing their shine, the delicate legs were arched and stiff, and the solitary eye was veiled by a crêpey lid which reminded him of that of a hen.

Toby felt a momentary pang. Mary would probably have known how to keep it alive, but perhaps its demise had been for the best. It would be easier for him to take it back to London in a box padded with cotton-wool rather than in a big glass jar, so long, that was, as the corpse did not start to decay. Later in the morning he would dig out something in which to pack it. He removed the Sellotape that held the punctured lid and shook the cadaver out on to the linen mat beside his hair brushes.

He drove himself down to the bay for the last time, parking the car under the shade of the pine trees that grew in the sandy soil and, spread-eagled on his back, baked his body by the water's edge before swimming far out in the salt warm sea prior to further sessions of sunbathing and immersion. He could not help noticing the two pretty girls under the beach umbrella a few yards away. He summed them up as Swedes, and they were showing every sign of awareness and appreciation. He pondered the wisdom of making their acquaintance, which would not be difficult, but since he would be leaving so soon there was very little point in his doing so. He contented himself by striking a provocative, muscle-man pose and giving them a friendly grin when he jumped to his feet.

It was not until he was sitting on his own terrace, and with a gin and tonic at his side, that he remembered the insect.

He hoped that Luisa had not found it and thrown it away. He finished his drink and walked down the book-lined passage that led to his room.

Zeon was utterly exhausted, numbed by the enormity of the total disaster which had overwhelmed the expedition. After such exhaustive tests and so many, many checks and rehearsals, what could have gone wrong? Had it been metal fatigue? An unlikely explanation, for *juru*, of which the ship had been built, was as indestructible as matter itself.

All that he could remember was climbing through the escape hatch seconds before the ship had disintegrated. Zarazzon could have been the only other survivor. Zeon had seen him struggling out after him, but once in the void they had very shortly lost touch with one another.

Zeon had drifted over endless dun coloured desert country and over an expanse of sparkling blue dotted with islands, until finally he had touched down in a glade surrounded by immense shrubs and trees. He had been crouched there, prostrated and confused, when the alarming giant had loomed over him and had scooped him up without a word and imprisoned him with a quantity of disagreeable vegetable rubbish in a transparent cell.

The giant had been a horrible sight, practically limbless, hairy and hot-blooded and semi-naked, and a disgusting odour had emanated from his skin. Zeon had tried his best to establish communication with him, at first by telepathy, then by means of sound and of light, but all attempts to do so had proved fruitless. He supposed that the gigantic animal must have some glimmer of higher intelligence, for during the period of darkness there had been a moment when a fleeting 'rapport' had been established, a brief stirring of his interest, if not of his understanding, but it had been short lived. In the end, since he could make no useful contact and had no weapons, he had pretended to be dead, so that he could wait for a chance to escape, and his plan had worked for the giant had overcome his curiosity and had gone away.

What had worried Zeon most was not the threat of starvation, for he could live for a long while without food, but the fact that a weakness had developed in the fabric of his helmet,

through which the precious *marzo* gas was gradually seeping, and when the *marzo* gas had gone there would be no hope of obtaining more. He thought that were he to regain his liberty he would find a means somehow of stopping the leak. When he had built up his strength he would have once more the power to get into touch with his base and so contrive to survive in this alien world until such time as the next ship should arrive. A series of expeditions had been planned, of which his had been the forerunner. Given his freedom he could contrive to exist indefinitely. He had been caught only because he had been stunned and physically fatigued. As soon as he was recovered he would arrange a rendezvous with the next ship, however long he might have to wait.

He had been accumulating his energy to make the supreme effort to free and unfurl his wings. There had been no opportunity of so doing when he had been forced to abandon ship so precipitately. The layer of *marzo* gas under the space suit and the supply in his helmet had kept him buoyant in the planet's atmosphere and had prevented a crash landing. His wings would need extreme care since, owing to the cramped space aboard, they had not been used after embarkation, and they were folded tightly along his back.

He had been engaged on this complicated task when the brown beasts had started to climb up and invade the plateau where he had been marooned, finding him doubly defenceless. A lone scout had come to reconnoitre, nudging its head experimentally against his side. A second one had joined it. They had appeared to consult together, and had hurried blindly away. Zeon had managed to undo his space suit and had freed one wing, when suddenly they had poured up by their scores and each had been the length of a segment in his leg. There had been too many of them, an engulfing mindless stream, strong jawed and voracious. As he had twisted and turned in an endeavour to evade the cruel mandibles that attacked him, he had sent out appeals of desperation to the giant, a demented drumming and frantic sparking signals for assistance, his lustrous body curved in agony; but the giant had not heard, and rescue had not come.

Breshka looked across to where four of her colleagues

were grouped around the big screen. She removed her earphones. She had to let them know that the ship no longer answered, and never would answer again, that the last word had been from Zeon when he had warned of the threat of imminent disintegration. Gallant, brave . . . and beautiful Zeon! She had been quite young when the *Krant* had set out two centuries ago.

So much work had gone into the project, 500 years of untiring effort, five centuries of trial and error. One of these days they would achieve success, one of these days, perhaps even at the next attempt, they would be able to migrate from their withering world to colonize a more fecund planet by peaceful means, for war and violence, except as final self protection, had long been outlawed.

They had so much to bring to more primordial peoples, so much to give and share in the way of knowledge and technique, healing, science and advancement. Sometime in the future it would be recognized that Zeon had not died needlessly.

Toby Lewis paused in the doorway. The top of the dressing-table was black with a seething mass of ants, and of the exotic bug there was no sign. He stepped forward with an exclamation of disgust. On the table beside his bed there was a tin of fly killing spray. Picking it up he directed the nozzle toward the milling scurrying horde and pressed the plastic knob, enveloping the scavengers in a cloud of pungent mist. Where there had been so much frenzied activity there was now none save for an occasional spasmodic twitch.

Toby brushed the tiny carcases to the floor and knelt down on to the red tiles. Maybe the ants had managed to push Mary's present over the side of the dressing-table preparatory to manoeuvring it away to their nest. Perhaps he was not too late. There was nothing to be seen except a dozen confused stragglers of the ant army that were darting aimlessly from side to side.

As he straightened up something by the linen mat glinted. It was, he thought, probably a fragment of the wretched creature's carapace. He held it gingerly between thumb and forefinger. It was as colourless as a piece of cellophane, and

like a minute helmet in shape, and it felt malleable under the slight pressure that he gave it. Toby held it up to the light, lifting his broad shoulders in exasperation, and flicked it with his nail through the open window.

His empty suitcases were gaping on the bed. He would do most of his packing directly after luncheon. He was rather annoyed about the mishap to the fabulous insect. Now there would be no trophy of his travels – no amusing specimen. No more for Mary.

INVASION OF PRIVACY

BOB SHAW

'I saw Granny Cummins again today', Sammy said through a mouthful of turnip and potato.

May's fork clattered into her plate. She turned her head away, and I could see there were tears in her eyes. In my opinion she had always been much too deeply attached to her mother, but this time I could sympathize with her – there was something about the way the kid had said it.

'Listen to me, Sammy.' I leaned across the table and gripped his shoulder. 'The next time you make a dumb remark like that I'll paddle your backside good and hard. It wasn't funny.'

He gazed at me with all the bland defiance a seven-year-old can muster. 'I wasn't trying to be funny. I saw her.'

'Your granny's been dead for two weeks', I snapped, exasperated both at him and at May, who was letting the incident get too far under her skin. Her lips had begun to tremble.

'Two weeks', Sammy repeated, savouring the words. He had just discovered sarcasm and I could tell by his eyes he was about to try some on. 'If she'd only been dead two days it woulda been all right, I suppose. But not two weeks, huh?' He rammed a huge blob of creamed potato into his mouth with a flourish.

'George!' May's brown eyes were spilling as she looked at me and the copper strands of her hair quivered with anger. 'Do something to that *child*! Make him drop dead.'

'I can't smack him for that, hon', I said reasonably. 'The kid was only being logical. Remember in *Decline and Fall* where a saint got her head chopped off, then was supposed to get up and walk a mile or so to the burial ground, and religious writers made a great fuss about the distance she'd covered, and Gibbon said in a case like that the distance wasn't the big thing – it was the taking of the first step? Well . . .' I broke off as May fled from the table and ran upstairs. The red sunlight of an October evening glowed on her empty chair, and Sammy continued eating.

'See what you've done?' I rapped his blond head with my

knuckles, but not sharply enough to hurt. 'I'm letting you off this time – for the *last* time – but I can't let you go on upsetting your mother with a stupid joke. Now cut it out.'

Sammy addressed the remains of his dinner. 'I wasn't joking. I . . . saw . . . Granny . . . Cummins.'

'She's been dead and buried for . . .' I almost said two weeks again, but stopped as an expectant look appeared on his face. He was quite capable of reproducing the same sarcasm word for word. 'How do you explain that?'

'Me?' A studied look of surprise. '*I* can't explain it. I'm just telling you what I seen.'

'All right – where did you see her?'

'In the old Guthrie place, of course.'

Of course, I thought with a thrill of something like nostalgia. *Where else*? Every town, every district in every city, has its equivalent of the old Guthrie place. To find it, you simply stop any small boy and ask him if he knows of a haunted house where grisly murders are committed on a weekly schedule and vampires issue forth at night. I sometimes think that if no suitable building existed already the community of children would create one to answer a dark longing in their collective mind.

But the building is always there – a big, empty, ramshackle house, usually screened by near-black evergreens, never put up for sale, never pulled down, always possessing a magical immunity to property developers. And in the small town where I live the old Guthrie house was the one which filled the bill. I hadn't really thought about it since childhood, but it looked just the same as ever – dark, shabby and forbidding – and I should have known it would have the same associations for another generation of kids. At the mention of the house Sammy had become solemn and I almost laughed aloud as I saw myself, a quarter of a century younger, in his face.

'How could you have seen anything in there?' I decided to play along a little further as long as May was out of earshot. 'It's too far from the road.'

'I climbed through the fence.'

'Who was with you?'

'Nobody.'

'You went in alone?'

'Course I did.' Sammy tilted his head proudly and I recalled that as a seven-year-old nothing in the world would have induced me to approach that house, even in company. I looked at my son with a new respect, and the first illogical stirrings of alarm.

'I don't want you hanging around that old place, Sammy – it could be dangerous.'

'It isn't dangerous.' He was scornful. 'They just sit there in big chairs, and never move.'

'I meant you could fall or . . . *What?*'

'The old people just sit there.' Sammy pushed his empty plate away. 'They'd never catch me in a hundred years even if they seen me, but I don't let them see me, cause I just take one quick look through the back window and get out of there.'

'You mean there are people living in the Guthrie place?'

'Old people. Lots of them. They just sit there in big chairs.'

I hadn't heard anything about the house being occupied, but I began to guess what had been going on. It was big enough for conversion to a private home for old people – and to a child one silver-haired old lady could look very much like another. Perhaps Sammy preferred to believe his grandmother had moved away rather than accept the idea that she was dead and buried beneath the ground in a box.

'Then you were trespassing as well as risking . . .' I lowered my voice to a whisper as May's footsteps sounded on the stairs again. 'You didn't see your Granny Cummins, you're not to go near the old Guthrie place again, and you're not to upset your mother. Got that?'

Sammy nodded, but his lips were moving silently and I knew he was repeating his original statement over and over to himself. Any anger I felt was lost in a tide of affection – my entire life had been one of compromise and equivocation, and it was with gratitude I had discovered that my son had been born with enough will and sheer character for the two of us.

May came back into the room and sat down, her face wearing a slightly shamefaced expression behind the gold sequins of its freckles. 'I took a tranquillizer.'

'Oh? I thought you were out of them.'

'I was, but Doctor Pitman stopped by this afternoon and he let me have some more.'

'Did you call him?'

'No – he was in the neighbourhood and he looked in just to see how I was. He's been very good since . . . since . . .'

'Since your mother died – you've got to get used to the idea, May.'

She nodded silently and began to gather up the dinner plates. Her own food had scarcely been touched.

'Mom?' Sammy tugged her sleeve. I tensed, waiting for him to start it all over again, but he had other things on his mind. His normally ruddy cheeks were pale as tallow and his forehead was beaded with perspiration. I darted from my chair barely in time to catch him as he fell sideways to the floor.

Bob Pitman had been a white-haired, apple-cheeked old gentleman when he was steering me through boyhood illnesses, and he appeared not to have aged any further in the interim. He lived alone in an unfashionably large house, still wore a conservative dark suit with a watch-chain's gold parabola spanning the vest, played chess as much as possible and drank specially-imported non-blended Scotch. The sight of his square hands, with their ridged and slab-like fingernails, moving over Sammy's sleeping figure comforted me even before he stood up and folded the stethoscope.

'The boy has eaten something he shouldn't', he said, drawing the covers up to Sammy's chin.

'But he'll be all right?' May and I spoke simultaneously.

'Right as rain.'

'Thank God', May said and sat down very suddenly. I knew she had been thinking about her mother and wondering if we were going to lose Sammy with as little warning.

'You'd better get some rest.' Dr Pitman looked at her with kindly severity. 'Young Sammy here will sleep all night, and you should follow his example. Take another of those caps I gave you this morning.'

I'd forgotten about his earlier visit. 'We seem to be monopolizing your time today, Doctor.'

'Just think of it as providing me with a little employment

– everybody's far too healthy these days.' He shepherded us out of Sammy's room. 'I'll call again in the morning.'

May wasn't quite satisfied – she was scrupulously hygienic in the kitchen and the idea that our boy had food poisoning was particularly unacceptable to her. 'But what could Sammy have eaten, Doctor? We've had everything he's had and we're all right.'

'It's hard to say. When he brought up his dinner did you notice anything else there? Berries? Exotic candies?'

'No. Nothing like that', I said, 'but they wouldn't always be obvious, would they?' I put my arm around May's shoulders and tried to force her to relax. She was rigid with tension and it came to me that if Sammy ever were to contract a fatal illness or be killed in an accident it would destroy her. We of the Twentieth Century have abandoned the practice of holding something in reserve when we love our children, assuming – as our ancestors would never have dared to do – that they will reach adulthood as a matter of course.

The doctor nodded – and smiling and wheezing – exuded reassurance for a couple more minutes before he left. When I took May to bed she huddled in the crook of my left arm, lonely in spite of our intimacy, and it was a long time before I was able to soothe her to sleep.

In spite of her difficulty in getting to sleep, or perhaps because of it, May failed to waken when I slipped out of the bed early next morning. I went into Sammy's room, and knew immediately that something was wrong. His breathing was noisy and rapid as that of a pup which has been running. I went to the bed. He was unconscious, mouth wide open in the ghastly breathing, and his forehead hotter than I would have believed it possible for a human's to be.

Fear spurted coldly in my guts as I turned and ran for the phone. I dialled Dr Pitman's number. While it was ringing I debated shouting upstairs to waken May, but far from being able to help Sammy she would probably have become hysterical. I decided to let her sleep as long as possible. After a seemingly interminable wait the phone clicked.

'Dr Pitman speaking.' The voice was sleepy.

'This is George Ferguson. Sammy's very ill. Can you get

over here right away?' I babbled a description of the symptoms.

'I'll be right there.' The sleepiness had left his voice. I hung up, opened the front door wide so that the doctor could come straight in, then went back upstairs and waited beside the bed. Sammy's hair was plastered to his forehead and his every breath was accompanied by harsh metallic clicks in his throat. My mind became an anvil for the hammer blows of the passing seconds. Bleak eons went by before I heard Dr Pitman's footsteps on the stairs.

He came into the room, looking uncharacteristically dishevelled, took one look at Sammy and lifted him in his arms in a cocoon of bedding.

'Pneumonia', he said tersely. 'The boy will have to be hospitalized immediately.'

Somehow I managed to speak. 'Pneumonia! But you said he'd eaten something.'

'There's no connection between this and what was wrong yesterday. There's a lightning pneumonia on the move across the country.'

'Oh. Shall I ring for an ambulance?'

'No. I'll drive him to the clinic myself. The streets are clear at this hour of the morning and we'll make better time.' He carried Sammy towards the door with surprising ease.

'Wait. I'm coming with you.'

'You could help more by phoning the clinic and alerting them, George. Where's your wife?'

'Still asleep – she doesn't know.' I had almost forgotten about May.

He raised his eyebrows, paused briefly on the landing. 'Ring the clinic first, tell them I'm coming, then waken your wife. Don't let her get too worried, and don't get too tensed up yourself – I've an emergency oxygen kit in the car, and Sammy should be all right once we get him into an intensive care unit.'

I nodded gratefully, watching my son's blindly lolling face as he was carried down the stairs, then went to the phone and called the clinic. The people I spoke to sounded both efficient and sympathetic, and it was only a matter of seconds before I was sprinting upstairs to waken May. She was sitting on the edge of the bed as I entered the room.

'George?' Her voice was cautious. 'What's happening?'

'Sammy has pneumonia. Dr Pitman's driving him to the clinic now, and he's going to be well taken care of.' I was getting dressed as I spoke, praying she would be able to take the news with some semblance of calm. She stood up quietly and began to put on clothes, moving with mechanical exactitude, and when I glimpsed her eyes I suddenly realized it would have been better had she screamed or thrown a fit. We went down to the car, shivering in the thick grey air of the October morning, and drove towards the clinic. At the end of the street I remembered I had left the front door of the house open, but didn't turn back. I think I'd done it deliberately, hoping – with a quasi-religious irrationality – that we might be robbed and thus appease the Fates, diverting their attention from Sammy. There was little traffic on the roads but I drove at moderate speed, aware that I had virtually no power of concentration for anything extraneous to the domestic tragedy. May sat beside me and gazed out of the windows with the air of a child reluctantly returning from a long vacation.

It was with a sense of surprise that, on turning into the clinic grounds, I saw Dr Pitman's blue Buick sliding to a halt under the canopy of the main entrance. In my estimation he should have been a good ten minutes ahead of us. May's fingers clawed into my thigh as she saw the white bundle being lifted out and carried into the building by a male nurse. I parked close to the entrance, heedless of painted notices telling me the space was for doctors only, and we ran into the dimness of the reception hall. There was no sign of Sammy, but Dr Pitman was waiting for us.

'You just got here', I accused. 'What held you up?'

'Be calm, George. Getting into a panic won't help things in the least.' He urged us towards a row of empty chairs. 'Nothing held me back – I was driving with one hand and feeding your boy oxygen with the other.'

'I'm sorry, it's just . . . How is he?'

'Still breathing, and that's the main thing. Pneumonia's never to be taken lightly – especially this twelve-hour variety we've been getting lately – but there's every reason for confidence.'

May stirred slightly at that – I think she had been expect-

ing to hear the worst – but I had a conviction Dr Pitman was merely trying to let us down as gently as he could. He had always had an uncompromisingly level stare, but now his gaze kept sliding away from mine. We waited a long time for news of Sammy's condition, and on the few occasions when I caught Dr Pitman looking directly at me his eyes were strangely like those of a man in torment.

I thought, too, that he was relieved when one of the doctors on the staff of the clinic used all his authority to persuade May it would be much better for everybody if she waited at home.

The house was lonely that evening. May had refused sedation and was sitting with the telephone, nursing it in her lap, as though it might at any minute speak with Sammy's own voice. I made sandwiches and coffee but she wouldn't eat, and this somehow made it impossible for me to take anything. Tiny particles of darkness came drifting at dusk, gathering in all the corners and passageways of the house, and I finally realized I would have to get out under the sky. May nodded abstractedly when I told her I was going for a short walk. I switched on all the lights in the lounge before leaving, but when I looked back from the sidewalk she had turned them off again.

Go ahead, I raged. *Sit in the darkness – a lot of good that will do him.*

My anger subsided when I remembered that May was at least clinging to hope; whereas I had resigned myself, betraying my own son by not daring to believe he would recover in case I'd be hurt once more. I walked quickly but aimlessly, trying to think practical thoughts about how long I'd been absent from the drafting office where I worked, and if the contract I was part way through could be taken over by another man. But instead I kept seeing my boy's face, and at times sobbed aloud to the uncomprehending quietness of suburban avenues.

I don't know what took me in the direction of the old Guthrie place – perhaps some association between it and dark forces threatening Sammy – but there it was, looming up at the end of a short cul-de-sac, looking exactly as it had

done when I was at school. The stray fingers of light reaching it from the road showed boarded-up windows, sagging gutters and unpainted boards which were silver-grey from exposure. I examined the building soberly, feeling echoes of the childhood dread it had once inspired. My theory about it having been renovated and put to use had been wrong, I realized – I'd been a victim of Sammy's hyperactive imagination and mischievousness.

I was turning away when I noticed fresh car tracks in the gravel of the leaf-strewn drive leading up to the house. Nothing very odd about that, I thought. Curiosity could lead anybody to drive up to the old pile for a closer look, and yet . . .

Suddenly I could see apples in a tree at the rear of the house.

The fruit appeared as blobs of yellowish luminescence in the tree's black silhouette, and I stared at them for several seconds wondering why the sight should fill me with unease. Then the answer came. At that distance from the street lights the apples should have been invisible, but they were glowing like dim fairy lanterns – which meant they were being illuminated from another, nearer source. This simple application of the inverse square law led me to the astonishing conclusion that there was a lighted window at the back of the Guthrie house.

On the instant, I was a small boy again. I wanted to run away, but in my adult world there was no longer any place to which I could flee – and I was curious about what was going on in the old house. There was enough corroboration of Sammy's story to make it clear that he had seen something. But old people sitting in big chairs? I went slowly and self-consciously through the drifts of moist leaves, inhaling the toadstool smell of decay, and moved along the side of the house towards crawling blackness. It seemed impossible that there could be anybody within those flaking walls – the light must have been left burning, perhaps weeks earlier, by a careless real estate man.

I skirted a heap of rubbish and reached the back of the house. A board had been loosened on one of the downstairs windows, creating a small triangular aperture through which streamed a wan lemon radiance. I approached it quietly and

looked in. The room beyond was lit by a naked bulb and contained perhaps eight armchairs, each of which was occupied by an old man or an old woman. Most were reading magazines, but one woman was knitting. My eyes took in the entire scene in a single sweep, then fastened on the awful, familiar face of the woman in the chair nearest the window.

Sammy had been right – it was the face of his dead grandmother.

That was when the nightmare really began. The frightened child within me and the adult George Ferguson both agreed they had stumbled on something monstrous, and that adrenalin-boosted flight was called for; yet – as in a nightmare – I was unable to do anything but move closer to the focus of horror. I stared at the old woman in dread. Her rawboned face, the lump beneath one ear, the very way she held her magazine – all these told me I was looking at May's mother, Mrs Martha Cummins, who had died suddenly of a brain haemorrhage more than two weeks earlier, and was buried in the family plot.

Of its own accord, my right hand went snaking into the triangular opening and tapped the dusty glass. It was a timid gesture and none of the people within responded to the faint sound, but a second later one of the men raised his head briefly as he turned a page, and I recognized him. Joe Bryant, the caretaker at Sammy's school. He had died a year ago of a heart attack.

Explanation? I couldn't conceive one, but I had to speak to the woman who appeared to be May's mother.

I turned away from the window and went to the black rectangle of the house's rear door. It was locked in the normal way and further secured by a bolted-on-padlock. A film of oil on its working parts told me the padlock was in good condition. I moved further along and tried another smaller window in what could have been the kitchen. It too was boarded up, but when I pulled experimentally at the short planks the whole frame moved slightly with a pulpy sound. A more determined tug brought the entire metal window frame clear of its surround of rotting wood, creating a dark opening. The operation was noisier than I had expected, but the house remained still and I set the window down against the wall.

Part of my mind was screaming its dismay, but I used the window frame as a ladder and climbed through on to a greasy complicated surface which proved to be the top of an old-fashioned gas stove. My cigarette lighter shed silver sparks as I flicked it on. Its transparent blue shoot of flame cast virtually no light, so I tore pages from my notebook and lit them. The kitchen was a shambles, and obviously not in use – a fact which, had I thought about it, would have increased my sense of alarm. A short corridor led from it in the general direction of the lighted room. Burning more pages, I went towards the room, freezing each time a bare floorboard groaned or a loose strip of wallpaper brushed my shoulder, and soon was able to discern a gleam of light coming from below a door. I gripped the handle firmly and, afraid to hesitate, flung open the door. The old people in the big armchairs turned their pink, lined faces towards mine. Mrs Cummins stared at me, face lengthening with what could have been recognition or shock.

'It's George', I heard myself say in the distance. 'What's happening here?'

She stood up and her lips moved. 'Nigi olon prittle o czanig *sovisess*!' On the final word the others jumped to their feet with strangely lithe movements.

'Mrs Cummins?' I said. 'Mr Bryant?'

The old people set their magazines down, came towards the door and I saw that their feet were bare. I backed out into the corridor, shaking my head apologetically, then turned to run. Could I get out through the small kitchen window quickly enough? A hand clawed down my back. I beat it off and ran in the direction opposite to the kitchen, guided by the light spilling from the room behind me. A door loomed up on my left. I burst through into pitch darkness, slammed it, miraculously found a key in the lock and twisted it. The door quivered as something heavy thudded against the wood from the other side, and a woman's voice began an unerving wail – thin, high, anxious.

I groped for the light switch and turned it on, but nothing happened. Afraid to take a step forward, I stared into the blackness that pressed against my face, gradually becoming aware of a faint soupy odour and a feeling of warmth. I guessed I was in a room at the front of the house and might

be able to break out if only I could find a window. The wallpaper beside the switch had felt loose. I gripped a free edge, pulled off a huge swathe and rolled it into the shape of a torch while the hammering on the door grew more frantic. The blue cone of flame from my cigarette lighter ignited the dry paper immediately. I held the torch high and got a flickering view of a large square room, a bank of electronic equipment along one wall, and a waist-high tank which occupied most of the floor space. The sweet soupy smell appeared to be coming from the dark liquid in the tank. I looked into it and saw a half-submerged *thing* floating face upwards. It was about the size of a seven-year-old boy and the dissolving jellied features had a resemblance to . . .

No!

I screamed and threw the flaming torch from me, seeking my former state of blindness. The torch landed close to a wall and trailing streamers of wallpaper caught alight. I ran around the tank to a window, wadded its mouldering drapes and smashed the glass outwards against the boards. The planking resisted the onslaught of my feet and fists for what seemed an eternity, then I was out in the cool fresh air and running, barely feeling the ground below my feet, swept along by the dark winds of night.

When I finally looked back, blocks away, the sky above the old Guthrie place was already stained red, and clouds of angry sparks wheeled and wavered in the ascending smoke.

How does one assimilate an experience like that? There were some aspects of the nightmare which my mind was completely unable to handle as I walked homewards, accompanied by the sound of distant fire sirens. There was, for example, the hard fact that I had started a fire in which at that very instant a group of old people could be perishing – but, somehow, I felt no guilt. In its place was a conviction that if the blaze hadn't begun by accident I would have been entitled, *obliged,* to start one to rid the world of something which hadn't any right to exist. There was no element of the religious in my thinking, because the final horror in the house's front room had dispelled the aura of the supernatural surrounding the previous events.

I had seen an array of electronic equipment – unfamiliar in type, but unmistakable – and I had seen a *thing* floating in a tank of heated organic-smelling fluid, a thing which resembled . . .

No! Madness lay along that avenue of thought. Insupportable pain.

What else had I stumbled across? Granny Cummins was dead – but she had been sitting in the back room of a disused house, and had spoken in a tongue unlike any language I'd ever heard. Joe Bryant was dead, for a year, yet he too had been sitting under that naked bulb. My son was seriously ill in the hospital, and yet . . .

No!

Retreating from monstrosities as yet unguessed, my mind produced an image of Dr Pitman. He had attended Granny Cummins. He had, I was almost certain, been the Bryants' family doctor. He had attended Sammy that morning. He had been in my home the previous day – perhaps when Sammy had come in and spoken of seeing people in the old Guthrie place. My mind then threw up another image – that of the long-barrelled .22 target pistol lying in a drawer in my den. I began to walk more quickly.

On reaching home the first impression was that May had gone out, but when I went in she was sitting in exactly the same place in the darkness of the lounge. I glanced at my watch and discovered that, incredibly, only 40 minutes had passed since I had gone out. That was all the time it had taken for reality to rot and dissolve.

'May?' I spoke from the doorway. 'Did the clinic call?'

A long pause. 'No.'

'Don't you want the light on?'

Another pause. 'No.'

This time I didn't mind, because the darkness concealed the fact that my clothes were smeared with dirt and blood from my damaged hands. I went upstairs, past the aching emptiness of Sammy's room, washed in cold water, taped my knuckles and put on fresh clothes. In my den I discovered that the saw-handled target pistol was never meant for concealment, but I was able to tuck it into my belt on the left side and cover it fairly well with my jacket. Coming downstairs, I hesitated at the door of the lounge before telling

May I was going out again. She nodded without speaking, without caring what I might do. If Sammy died she would die too – not physically, not clinically, but just as surely – which meant that two important lives depended on my actions of the next hour.

I went out and found the atmosphere of the night had changed to one of feverish excitement. The streets were alive with cars, pedestrians, running children, all converging on the gigantic bonfire which had appeared, gratuitously, to turn a dull evening into an event. Two blocks away to the south the old Guthrie house was an inferno which streaked the windows of the entire neighbourhood with amber and gold. Its timbers, exploding in ragged volleys, were fireworks contributing to the Fourth of July atmosphere. A group of small boys scampering past me whooped with glee, and one part of my mind acknowledged that I had made a major contribution to the childish lore of the district. Legends would be born tonight, to be passed in endless succession from the mouths of ten-year-olds to the ears of five-year-olds. *The night the old Guthrie place burned down.*

Dr Pitman lived only a mile from me, and I decided it would be almost as quick and a lot less conspicuous to go on foot. I walked automatically, trying to balance the elements of reality, nightmare and carnival, and reached the doctor's home in a little over ten minutes. His Buick was sitting in the driveway and lights were showing in the upper windows of the house. I looked around carefully – the fire was further away now and neighbours were less likely to be distracted by it – before stepping into the shadowed drive and approaching the front door. It burst open just as I was reaching the steps and Dr Pitman came running out, still struggling on his coat. I reached for the pistol but there was no need to bring it into view, for he stopped as soon as he saw me.

'George!' His face creased with concern. 'What brings you here? Is it your boy?'

'You've guessed it.' I put my hand on his chest and pushed him back into the orange-lit hall.

'What is this?' He surged against my hand with surprising strength and I had to fight to contain him. 'You're acting a little strangely, George.'

'You made Sammy sick', I told him. 'And if you don't make him well again I'll kill you.'

'Hold on, George – I told you not to get overwrought.'

'I'm not overwrought.'

'It's the strain . . .'

'That's enough!' I shouted at him, almost losing control. 'I know you're making Sammy ill, and I'm going to make you stop.'

'But why should I . . .?'

'Because he was in back of the old Guthrie place and saw too much – that's why.' I pushed harder on his chest and he took a step backwards into the hall.

'The Guthrie house! No. George, *no!*'

Until that moment I had been half-prepared to back down, to accept the idea that I'd gone off the rails with worry, but his face became a slack grey mask. The strength seemed to leave his body, making him smaller and older.

'Yes, the old Guthrie place.' I closed the door behind me. 'What do you do there, Doctor?'

'Listen, George, I can't talk to you now – I've just heard there's a fire in the district and I've got to go to it. My help will be needed.' Dr Pitman drew himself up into a semblance of the authoritative figure I had once known, and tried to push past me.

'You're too late', I said blocking his way. 'The place went up like a torch. Your equipment's all gone.' I paused and stared into his eyes. '*They* are all gone.'

'I . . . I don't know what you mean.'

'The things you make. The things which look like people, but which aren't because the original people are dead. Those are all gone, doctor – burnt up.' I was shooting wildly in the dark, but I could tell some of my words were finding a mark and I pressed on. 'I was there, and I've seen it, and I'll tell the whole world – so Sammy isn't alone now. His death won't cover up anything. Do you hear me, Doctor?'

He shook his head, then walked away from me and went up the broad carpeted stairs. I reached for the pistol, changed my mind and ran after him, catching him just as he reached the landing. He brushed my hands away. Using all my strength, I bundled him against the wall with my forearm pressed across his throat, determined to force the truth out

of him – no matter what it might be. He twisted away, I grabbed again, we over-balanced and went on a jarring roller-coaster ride down the stairs, bouncing and flailing, caroming off wall and banisters. Twice on the way down I felt, and heard, bones breaking; and I lay on the hall floor a good ten seconds before being certain they weren't mine.

I raised myself on one arm and looked down into Dr Pitman's face. His teeth were smeared with blood and for a moment I felt the beginnings of doubt. He was an old man, and supposing he genuinely hadn't understood a word I had been saying . . .

'You've done it now, George', he whispered. 'You've finished us.'

'What do you mean?'

'There's one thing I want you to believe . . . we never harmed anybody . . . we've seen too much pain for that . . .' He coughed and a transparent crimson film spanned his lips.

'What are you saying?'

'It was to be a very quiet, very gradual invasion . . . invasion's the wrong word . . . no conquest or displacement intended . . . physical journey from our world virtually impossible . . . we observed incurably ill humans, terminal cases . . . built duplicates and substituted them . . . that way we too could live normally, almost normally, for a while . . . until death returned . . .'

'Dr Pitman', I said desperately, 'you're not making sense.'

'I'm not the real Dr Pitman . . . he died many years ago . . . first subject in this town – a doctor is in best position for our . . . I was *skorded* – you have no word for it – transmitted into a duplicate of his body . . .'

The hall floor seemed to rock beneath me. 'You're saying you're from another planet!'

'That's right, George.'

'But, for God's sake, *why*? Why would anybody . . .?'

'Just be thankful you can't imagine the circumstances which made such a project . . . desirable.' His body convulsed with sudden pain.

'I still don't understand', I pleaded. 'Why should you duplicate the bodies of dying people if it means being locked in an old house for the rest of your life?'

'Usually it doesn't mean that . . . we substitute and inte-

grate . . . the dying person appears to recover . . . but the duplication process takes time, and sometimes the subject dies suddenly, at home, providing us with no chance to take his place . . . and there can be no going back . . .'

I froze as a brilliant golden light flooded through the hall. It was followed by the sound of wheels on gravel and I realized a car had pulled into the driveway of the house. The man I knew as Dr Pitman closed his eyes and sighed deeply, with an awful finality.

'But what about Sammy?' I shook the inert figure. 'You've told me nothing about my son.'

The eyes blinked open, slowly, and in spite of the pain there I saw – kindness. 'It was all a mistake, George.' His voice was distant as he attempted more of the broken sentences. 'I had no idea he had been around the old house . . . aren't like you – we're bad organizers . . . *nald denbo sovisegg* . . . sorry . . . I had nothing to do with his illness . . .'

A car door slammed outside. I wanted to run, but there was one more question which had to be asked. 'I was in the old house. I saw the tank and . . . something . . . which looked like a boy. Does that mean Sammy's dying? That you were going to replace him?'

'Sammy's going to be all right, George . . . though at first I wasn't hopeful . . . I haven't known you and May as long as Dr Pitman did, but I'm very fond of . . . I knew May couldn't take the loss, so I arranged a substitution . . . tentatively, you understand, *kleyl nurr* . . . not needed now . . . Sammy will be fine . . .' He tried to smile at me and blood welled up between his lips just as the doorbell rang with callous stridency.

I stared down at the tired, broken old man with – in spite of everything – a curious sense of regret. What kind of hell had he been born into originally? What conditions would prompt anybody to make the journey he had made for such meagre rewards? The bell rang again and I opened the door.

'Call an ambulance', I said to the stranger on the steps. 'Dr Pitman seems to have fallen down the stairs – I think he's dying.'

It was quite late when the police cruiser finally dropped

me outside my home, but the house was ablaze with light. I thanked the sergeant who had driven me from the mortuary where they had taken the body of Dr Pitman (I couldn't think of him by any other name) and hurried along the white concrete of the path to the door. The lights seemed to signal a change in May's mood but I was afraid to begin hoping, in case . . .

'George!' May met me at the door, dressed to go out, face pale but jubilant. 'Where've you been? I tried everywhere. The clinic called me half an hour ago. You've been out for hours. Sammy's feeling better and he's asking to see us. I brought the car out for you. Should I drive? We're allowed in to see him, and I . . .'

'Slow down, May. Slow down.' I put my arms around her, feeling the taut gratification in her slim body, and made her go over the story again. She spilled it out eagerly.'

Sammy's response to drug treatment had been dramatic and now he was fully conscious and asking for his parents. The senior doctor had decided to bend regulations a little and let us in to talk with the boy for a few minutes. A star-shell of happiness burst behind my eyes as May spoke, and a minute later we were on our way to the clinic. A big moon, the exact colour of a candle flame, was rising behind the rooftops, trees were stirring gently in their sleep, and the red glow from the direction of the Guthrie house had vanished. May was at the wheel driving with zestful competence, and for the first time in hours the pressure was off me.

I relaxed into the seat and discovered I had forgotten to rid myself of the pistol which had nudged my ribs constantly the whole time I was talking to the police. It was on the side next to May so there was little chance of slipping it into the glove compartment unnoticed. Shame at having carried the weapon, plus a desire not to alarm May in any way after what she had been through, made me decide to keep it out of sight a little longer. Suddenly very tired, I closed my eyes and allowed the mental backwash of the night's events to carry me away.

The disjointed fragments from Dr Pitman made an unbelievable story when pieced together, yet I had seen the ghastly proof. There was something macabre about the idea of the group of alien beings, duplications of dead people,

cooped up in a dingy room in a disused house, patiently waiting to die. The memory of seeing Granny Cummins's face again, two weeks after her funeral, was going to take a long time to fade. She, the duplicate, had recognized me, which meant that the copying technique used by the aliens was incredibly detailed, extending right down to the arrangement of the brain cells. Presumably, the only physical changes they would introduce would be improvements – if a person was dying of cancer the duplicate would be cancer free. Ageing muscles might be strengthened – Dr Pitman and those who had been in the house all moved with exceptional ease. But would they have been able to escape the fire? Perhaps some code of their own would not allow them to leave the house, even under peril of death, unless a place had been prepared to enable them to enter our society without raising any alarms . . .

The aliens may have a code of ethics, I thought, *but could I permit them to come among us unhindered*? For that matter, had I any idea how far their infiltration had proceeded? I'd been told that Dr Pitman was the first subject in *this town* – did that mean the invasion covered the entire state? The country? The world? There was also the question of its intensity. The dying man had said the substitution technique failed when a person's death occurred suddenly *at home,* which implied the clinic was well infiltrated – but how thoroughly? Would there come a day when every old person in the world, and a proportion of younger people as well, would be substitutes?

Street lights flicking past the car pulled redly through my closed eyelids, and fresh questions pounded in my mind to the same rhythm. Could I believe anything 'Dr Pitman' had said about the aliens' objectives? True, he had appeared kind, genuinely concerned about Sammy and May – but how did one interpret facial expressions controlled by a being who may once have possessed an entirely different form? Another question came looming – and something in my subconscious cowered away from it – why, if secrecy was so vital to the aliens' scheme, had 'Dr Pitman' told me the whole fantastic story? Had he been manipulating me in some way I had not yet begun to understand? Once again I saw my

son's face blindly lolling as he was carried down the stairs, and a fear greater than any I had known before began to unfold its black petals.

I jerked my eyes open, unwilling to think any further.

'Poor thing – you're tired', May said. 'You keep everything bottled up, and it takes far more out of you that way.'

I nodded. *She's mothering me,* I thought. *She's happy, serene, confident again – and it's because our boy is getting better. Sammy's life is her life.*

May slowed the car down. 'Here we are. We musn't stay too long – it's very good of Dr Milligan even to let us in at this time.'

I remembered Dr Milligan – tall, stooped and *old.* Another Dr Pitman? It came to me suddenly that I had told May nothing at all about the events of the evening, but before I could work out a suitably edited version we were getting out of the car. I decided to leave it till later. In contrast to the boisterous leaf-scented air outside, the atmosphere in the clinic seemed inert, dead. The reception office was empty but a blond young doctor with an in-twisted foot limped up to us, then beckoned to a staff nurse when we gave our names. The nurse, a tall woman with mottled red forearms, ushered us into the elevator and pressed the button for the third floor.

'Samuel is making exceptional progress', she said to May. 'He's a very strong little boy.'

'Thank you.' May nodded gratefully. 'Thank you.'

I wanted to change the subject, because Sammy had never appeared particularly strong in my eyes, and the loathsome blossom of fear was fleshing its leaves within me. 'How's business been tonight?'

'Quiet, for once. Very quiet.'

'Oh. I heard there was a fire.'

'It hasn't affected us.'

'That's fine', I said vaguely. If the aliens were constructed with precisely the same biological blocks as humans their remains would appear like those of normal fire victims. *There'll be hell to pay,* I told myself and desperately tried to adhere to that line of thought, but the black flower was getting bigger now, unmanageable, reaching out to swallow

me. Biological building blocks – where did they come from? The dark soupy liquid in the tank – was it of synthetic or natural origin? The thing I'd seen floating in there – was it a body being constructed?

Or was it being dissolved and fed into a stockpile of organic matter?

Had I seen my son's corpse?

Other thoughts came yammering and cavorting like demons. 'Dr Pitman' had taken Sammy to the clinic in his own car, but he had been strangely delayed in arriving. Obviously he had taken the boy to the Guthrie place. Why? Because, according to his own dying statement, he had despaired of Sammy's life, wanted to spare May the shock of losing her son and had arranged for a substitution – just in case. Altruistic. Unbelievably altruistic. How gullible did 'Dr Pitman' think I was going to be? If Sammy had died naturally, or had been killed, and replaced by a being from beyond the stars I was going to make trouble for the aliens. I was going to shout and burn and kill . . .

With an effort I controlled the sudden trembling in my limbs as the nurse opened the door to a small private room. The shaded light within showed Sammy sleeping peacefully in a single bed. My heart ached with the recognition of the flesh of my flesh.

'You may go in for a minute, but *just* a minute', the nurse said. Her eyes lingered for a moment on May's face and something she saw there prompted her to remain in the corridor while we went into the room. Sammy was pale but breathing easily. The skin of his forehead shone with gold borrowed from last summer's sun. May held my arm with both hands as we stood beside the bed.

'He's all right', she breathed. 'Oh, George – I would have died.'

At the sound of her voice Sammy's eyelids seemed to flicker slightly, but he remained still. May began to sob, silently and effortlessly, adjusting emotional potentials.

'Take it easy, hon', I said. 'He's all right, remember.'

'I know, but I felt it was my fault.'

'Your fault?'

'Yes. Yesterday at dinner he made me so angry by talking

that way about my mother . . . I said I wanted him to drop dead.'

'That's being silly.'

'I know, but I *said* it, and you should never say anything like that in case . . .'

'Fate isn't so easily tempted', I said with calm reasonableness I had no right to assume. 'Besides you didn't mean it. Every parent knows that when a kid starts wearing you down you can say anything.'

Sammy's eyes opened wide. 'Mom?'

May dropped to her knees. 'I'm here, Sammy, I'm here.'

'I'm sorry I made you mad.' His voice was small and drowsy.

'You didn't make me mad, darling.' She took his hand and pressed her lips to it.

'I did. I shouldn't have talked that way about seeing Gran.' He shifted his gaze to my face. 'It was all a stupid joke like Dad said. I never saw Granny Cummins anywhere.' His eyes were bright and deliberate, holding mine.

I took a step back from the bed and the black flower, which had been poised and waiting, closed its hungry petals around me. Sammy, *my* Sammy, had seen the duplicate of Granny Cummins in the old Guthrie place – and no amount of punishment or bribery would have got him to back down on that point. Unlike me, my son had never compromised in his whole life.

Of its own accord, my right hand slid under my jacket and settled on the butt of the target pistol. My boy was dead and this – right here and now – was the time to begin avenging him.

But I looked down on May's bowed, gently shaking shoulders, and all at once I understood why 'Dr Pitman' had told me the whole story. Had the macabre scenes in the Guthrie place remained a mystery to me, had I not understood their purpose, I could never have remained silent. Eventually I would have to go to the police, start investigations, cause trouble . . .

Now I knew that the very first casualty of any such action would be May – she would be destroyed, on learning the truth, as surely as if I had put a bullet through her head.

My hand moved away from the butt of the pistol.
Sammy's life, I thought, is her life.

In a way it isn't a bad thing to be the compromising type – it makes life easier not only for yourself but for those around you. May smiles a lot now and she is very happy over the way Sammy has grown up to be a handsome, quick-minded fourteen-year-old. The discovery of a number of 'human' remains in the ashes of the Guthrie house was a nine-day wonder in our little town, but I doubt if May remembers it now. As I said, she smiles a lot.

I still think about my son, of course, and occasionally it occurs to me that if May were to die, say in an accident, all restraints would be removed from me. But the years are slipping by and there's no sign of the human race coming to harm as a result of the quiet invasion. For all I know it never amounted to anything more than a local phenomenon, an experiment which didn't quite work out.

And when I look at Sammy growing up tall and straight – looking so much like his mother – it is easy to convince myself that I could have made a mistake. After all, I'm only human.

THE RUUM

ARTHUR PORGES

The cruiser *Ilkor* had just gone into her interstellar overdrive beyond the orbit of Pluto when a worried officer reported to the Commander.

'Excellency', he said uneasily, 'I regret to inform you that because of a technician's carelessness a Type H-9 Ruum has been left behind on the third planet, together with anything it may have collected.'

The Commander's triangular eyes hooded momentarily, but when he spoke his voice was level.

'How was the ruum set?'

'For a maximum radius of 30 miles, and 160 pounds plus or minus 15.'

There was silence for several seconds, then the Commander said: 'We cannot reverse course now. In a few weeks we'll be returning, and can pick up the ruum then. I do not care to have one of those costly, self-energizing models charged against my ship. You will see', he ordered coldly, 'that the individual responsible is severely punished.'

But at the end of its run, in the neighbourhood of Rigel, the cruiser met a flat, ring-shaped raider; and when the inevitable fire-fight was over, both ships, semi-molten, radioactive, and laden with dead, were starting a billion-year orbit around the star.

And on the Earth, it was the age of reptiles.

When the two men had unloaded the last of the supplies, Jim Irwin watched his partner climb into the little seaplane. He waved at Walt.

'Don't forget to mail that letter to my wife', Jim shouted.

'The minute I land', Walt Leonard called back, starting to rev the engine. 'And you find us some uranium – a strike is just what Cele needs. A fortune for your son and her, hey?' His white teeth flashed in a grin. 'Don't rub noses with any grizzlies – shoot 'em, but don't scare 'em to death!'

Jim thumbed his nose as the seaplane speeded up, leaving

a frothy wake. He felt a queer chill as the amphibian took off. For three weeks he would be isolated in this remote valley of the Canadian Rockies. If for any reason the plane failed to return to the icy blue lake, he would surely die. Even with enough food, no man could surmount the frozen peaks and make his way on foot over hundreds of miles of almost virgin wilderness. But, of course, Walt Leonard would return on schedule, and it was up to Jim whether or not they lost their stake. If there was any uranium in the valley, he had 21 days to find it. To work then, and no gloomy forebodings.

Moving with the unhurried precision of an experienced woodsman, he built a lean-to in the shelter of a rocky overhang. For this three weeks of summer, nothing more permanent was needed. Perspiring in the strong morning sun, he piled his supplies back under the ledge, well covered by a waterproof tarpaulin, and protected from the larger animal prowlers. All but the dynamite; that he cached, also carefully wrapped against moisture, 200 yards away. Only a fool shares his quarters with a box of high explosives.

The first two weeks went by all too swiftly, without any encouraging finds. There was only one good possibility left, and just enough time to explore it. So early one morning towards the end of his third week, Jim Irwin prepared for a last-ditch foray into the north-east part of the valley, a region he had not yet visited.

He took the Geiger counter, slipping on the earphones, reversed to keep the normal rattle from dulling his hearing, and reaching for the rifle, set out, telling himself it was now or never so far as this particular expedition was concerned. The bulky .30-06 was a nuisance and he had no enthusiasm for its weight, but the huge grizzlies of Canada are not intruded upon with impunity, and take a lot of killing. He'd already had to dispose of two, a hateful chore, since the big bears were vanishing all too fast. And the rifle had proved a great comfort on several ticklish occasions when actual firing had been avoided. The .22 pistol he left in its sheepskin holster in the lean-to.

He was whistling at the start, for the clear, frosty air, the bright sun on blue-white ice fields, and the heady smell of summer, all delighted his heart despite his bad luck as a prospector. He planned to go one day's journey to the new region,

spend about 36 hours exploring it intensively, and be back in time to meet the plane at noon. Except for his emergency packet, he took no food or water. It would be easy enough to knock over a rabbit, and the streams were alive with firm-fleshed rainbow trout of the kind no longer common in the States.

All morning Jim walked, feeling an occasional surge of hope as the counter chattered. But its clatter always died down. The valley had nothing radioactive of value, only traces. Apparently they'd made a bad choice. His cheerfulness faded. They needed a strike badly, especially Walt. And his own wife, Cele, with a kid on the way. But there was still a chance. These last 36 hours – he'd snoop at night, if necessary – might be the pay-off. He reflected a little bitterly that it would help quite a bit if some of those birds he'd staked would make a strike and return his dough. Right this minute there were close to 8000 bucks owing to him.

A wry smile touched his lips, and he abandoned unprofitable speculations for plans about lunch. The sun, as well as his stomach, said it was time. He had just decided to take out his line and fish a foaming brook, when he rounded a grassy knoll to come upon a sight that made him stiffen to a halt, his jaw dropping.

It was like some enterprising giant's outdoor butcher shop: a great assortment of animal bodies, neatly lined up in a triple row that extended almost as far as the eye could see. And what animals! To be sure, those nearest him were ordinary deer, bear, cougars, and mountain sheep – one of each, apparently – but down the line were strange, uncouth, half-formed, hairy beasts; and beyond them a nightmare conglomeration of reptiles. One of the latter, at the extreme end of the remarkable display, he recognized at once. There had been a much larger specimen, fabricated about an incomplete skeleton, of course, in the museum at home.

No doubt about it – it was a small stegosaur, no bigger than a pony!

Fascinated, Jim walked down the line, glancing back over the immense array. Peering more closely at one scaly, dirty-yellow lizard, he saw an eyelid tremble. Then he realized the truth. The animals were not dead, but paralysed and miraculously preserved. Perspiration pricked his forehead. How long

since stegosaurs had roamed this valley?

All at once he noticed another curious circumstance: the victims were roughly of a size. Nowhere, for example, was there a really large saurian. No tyrannosaurus. For that matter, no mammoth. Each specimen was about the size of a large sheep. He was pondering this odd fact, when the underbrush rustled a warning behind him.

Jim Irwin had once worked with mercury, and for a second it seemed to him that a half-filled leather sack of the liquid-metal had rolled into the clearing. For the quasi-spherical object moved with just such a weighty, fluid motion. But it was not leather; and what appeared at first a disgusting wartiness, turned out on closer scrutiny to be more like the functional projections of some outlandish mechanism. Whatever the thing was, he had little time to study it, for after the spheroid had whipped out and retracted a number of metal rods with bulbous, lens-like structures at their tips, it rolled towards him at a speed of about five miles an hour. And from its purposeful advance, the man had no doubt that it meant to add him to the pathetic heap of living-dead specimens.

Uttering an incoherent exclamation, Jim sprang back a number of paces, unslinging his rifle. The ruum that had been left behind was still some 30 yards off, approaching at that moderate but invariable velocity, an advance more terrifying in its regularity than the headlong charge of a mere brute beast.

Jim's hand flew to the bolt, and with practised deftness he slammed a cartridge into the chamber. He snuggled the battered stock against his cheek, and using the peep sight, aimed squarely at the leathery bulk – a perfect target in the bright afternoon sun. A grim little smile touched his lips as he squeezed the trigger. He knew what one of those 180-grain, metal-jacketed, boat-tail slugs could do at 2700 feet per second. Probably at this close range it would keyhole and blow the foul thing into a mush, by God!

Wham! The familiar kick against his shoulder. E-e-e-e! The whining screech of a ricochet. He sucked in his breath. There could be no doubt whatever. At a mere twenty yards, a bullet from this hard-hitting rifle had glanced from the ruum's surface.

Frantically Jim worked the bolt. He blasted two more rounds, then realized the utter futility of such tactics. When the ruum was six feet away, he saw gleaming finger-hooks flick from warty knobs, and a hollow, sting-like probe, dripping greenish liquid, poised snakily between them. The man turned and fled.

Jim Irwin weighed exactly 149 pounds.

It was easy to pull ahead. The ruum seemed incapable of increasing its speed. But Jim had no illusions on that score. The steady five-mile-an-hour pace was something no organism on Earth could maintain for more than a few hours. Before long, Jim guessed, the hunted animal had either turned on its implacable pursuer, or, in the case of more timid creatures, run itself to exhaustion in a circle out of sheer panic. Only the winged were safe. But for anything on the ground the result was inevitable: another specimen for the awesome array. And for whom the whole collection? Why? Why?

Coolly, as he ran, Jim began to shed all surplus weight. He glanced at the reddening sun, wondering about the coming night. He hesitated over the rifle; it had proved useless against the ruum, but his military training impelled him to keep the weapon to the last. Still, every pound raised the odds against him in the gruelling race he foresaw clearly. Logic told him that military reasoning did not apply to a contest like this; there would be no disgrace in abandoning a worthless rifle. And when weight became really vital, the .30-06 would go. But meanwhile he slung it over one shoulder. The Geiger counter he placed as gently as possible on a flat rock, hardly breaking his stride.

One thing was damned certain. This would be no rabbit run, a blind, panicky flight until exhausted, ending in squealing submission. This would be a fighting retreat, and he'd use every trick of survival he'd learned in his hazard-filled lifetime.

Taking deep, measured breaths, he loped along, watching with shrewd eyes for anything that might be used for his advantage in the weird contest. Luckily the valley was sparsely wooded; in brush or forest his straightway speed would be almost useless.

Suddenly he came upon a sight that made him pause. It was a point where a huge boulder overhung the trail, and

Jim saw possibilities in the situation. He grinned as he remembered a Malay mantrap that had once saved his life. Springing to a hillock, he looked back over the grassy plain. The afternoon sun cast long shadows, but it was easy enough to spot the pursuing ruum, still oozing along on Jim's trail. He watched the thing with painful anxiety. Everything hinged upon this brief survey. He was right! Yes, although at most places the man's trail was neither the only route nor the best one, the ruum dogged the footsteps of his prey. The significance of that fact was immense, but Irwin had no more than twelve minutes to implement the knowledge.

Deliberately dragging his feet, Irwin made it a clear trail directly under the boulder. After going past it for about ten yards, he walked backwards in his own prints until just short of the overhang, and then jumped up clear of the track to a point behind the balanced rock.

Whipping out his heavy-duty belt knife, he began to dig, scientifically, but with furious haste, about the base of the boulder. Every few moments, sweating with apprehension and effort, he rammed it with one shoulder. At last, it teetered a little. He had just jammed the knife back into his sheath, and was crouching there, panting, when the ruum rolled into sight over a small ridge on his back trail.

He watched the grey spheroid moving towards him and fought to quiet his sobbing breath. There was no telling what other senses it might bring into play, even though the ruum seemed to prefer just to follow in his prints. But it certainly had a whole battery of instruments at its disposal. He crouched low behind the rock, every nerve a charged wire.

But there was no change of technique by the ruum, seemingly intent on the footprints of its prey, the strange sphere rippled along, passing directly under the great boulder. As it did so, Irwin gave a savage yell, and thrusting his whole muscular weight against the balanced mass, toppled it squarely on the ruum. Five tons of stone fell from a height of twelve feet.

Jim scrambled down. He stood there, staring at the huge lump and shaking his head dazedly. 'Fixed that son of a bitch!' he said in a thick voice. He gave the boulder a kick. 'Hah! Walt and I might clear a buck or two yet from your little meat market. Maybe this expedition won't be a total

loss. Enjoy yourself in hell where you came from!'

Then he leaped back, his eyes wild. The giant rock was shifting! Slowly its five-ton bulk was sliding off the trail, raising a ridge of soil as it grated along. Even as he stared, the boulder tilted, and a grey protuberance appeared under the nearest edge. With a choked cry, Jim Irwin broke into a lurching run.

He ran a full mile down the trail. Then, finally, he stopped and looked back. He could just make out a dark dot moving away from the fallen rock. It progressed as slowly and as regularly and as inexorably as before, and in his direction. Jim sat down heavily, putting his head in his scratched, grimy hands.

But that despairing mood did not last. After all, he had gained a twenty-minute respite. Lying down, trying to relax as much as possible, he took the flat packet of emergency rations from his jacket, and eating quickly but without bolting, disposed of some pemmican, biscuit, and chocolate. A few sips of icy water from a streamlet, and he was almost ready to continue his fantastic struggle. But first he swallowed one of the three benzedrine pills he carried for physical crises. When the ruum was still an estimated ten minutes away, Jim Irwin trotted off, much of his wiry strength back, and fresh courage to counter bone-deep weariness.

After running for fifteen minutes, he came to a sheer face of rock about 30 feet high. The terrain on either side was barely passable, consisting of choked gullies, spiky brush, and knife-edged rocks. If Jim could make the top of this little cliff, the ruum surely would have to detour, a circumstance that might put it many minutes behind him.

He looked up at the sun. Huge and crimson, it was almost touching the horizon. He would have to move fast. Irwin was no rock climber but he did know the fundamentals. Using every crevice, roughness, and minute ledge, he fought his way up the cliff. Somehow – unconsciously – he used that flowing climb of a natural mountaineer, which takes each foothold very briefly as an unstressed pivot point in a series of rhythmic advances.

He had just reached the top when the ruum rolled up to the base of the cliff.

Jim knew very well that he ought to leave at once, taking

advantage of the few precious remaining moments of daylight. Every second gained was of tremendous value; but curiosity and hope made him wait. He told himself that the instant his pursuer detoured he would get out of there all the faster. Besides, the thing might even give up and he could sleep right here.

Sleep! His body lusted for it.

But the ruum would not detour. It hesitated only a few seconds at the foot of the barrier. Then a number of knobs opened to extrude metallic wands. One of these, topped with lenses, waved in the air. Jim drew back too late – their uncanny gaze had found him as he lay atop the cliff, peering down. He cursed his idiocy.

Immediately all the wands retracted, and from a different knob a slender rod, blood-red in the setting sun, began to shoot straight up to the man. As he watched, frozen in place, its barbed tip gripped the cliff's ledge almost under his nose.

Jim leaped to his feet. Already the rod was shortening as the ruum reabsorbed its shining length. And the leathery sphere was rising off the ground. Swearing loudly, Jim fixed his eyes on the tenacious hook, drawing back one heavy foot.

But experience restrained him. The mighty kick was never launched. He had seen too many rough-and-tumbles lost by an injudicious attempt at the boot. It wouldn't do at all to let any part of his body get within reach of the ruum's superb tools. Instead he seized a length of dry branch, and inserting one end under the metal hook, began to pry.

There was a sputtering flash, white and lacy, and even through the dry wood he felt the potent surge of power that splintered the end. He dropped the smouldering stick with a gasp of pain, and wringing his numb fingers, backed off several steps, full of impotent rage. For a moment he paused, half inclined to run again but then his upper lip drew back and, snarling, he unslung his rifle. By God; he knew he had been right to lug the damned thing all this way – even if it had beat a tattoo on his ribs. Now he had the ruum right where he wanted it!

Kneeling to steady his aim in the failing light Jim sighted at the hook and fired. There was a soggy thud as the ruum fell. Jim shouted. The heavy slug had done a lot more than

he expected. Not only had it blasted the metal claw loose, but it had smashed a big gap in the cliff's edge. It would be pretty damned hard for the ruum to use that part of the rock again!

He looked down. Sure enough, the ruum was back at the bottom. Jim Irwin grinned. Every time the thing clamped a hook over the bluff, he'd blow that hook loose. There was plenty of ammunition in his pocket and, until the moon rose, bringing a good light for shooting with it, he'd stick the gun's muzzle inches away if necessary. Besides, the thing – whatever it might be – was obviously too intelligent to keep up a hopeless struggle. Sooner or later it would accept the detour. And then, maybe the night would help to hide his trail.

Then – he choked and, for a brief moment, tears came to his eyes. Down below, in the dimness, the squat, phlegmatic spheroid was extruding three hooked rods simultaneously in a fanlike spread. In a perfectly co-ordinated movement, the rods snagged the cliff's edge at intervals of about four feet.

Jim Irwin whipped the rifle to his shoulder. All right – this was going to be just like the rapid fire for record back at Benning. Only, at Benning, they didn't expect good shooting in the dark!

But the first shot was a bull's-eye, smacking the left-hand hook loose in a puff of rock dust. His second shot did almost as well, knocking the gritty stuff loose so the centre barb slipped off. But even as he whirled to level at number three, Jim saw it was hopeless.

The first hook was back in place. No matter how well he shot, at least one rod would always be in position, pulling the ruum to the top.

Jim hung the useless rifle muzzle down from a stunted tree and ran into the deepening dark. The toughening of his body, a process of years, was paying off now. So what? Where was he going? What could he do now? Was there anything that could stop the damned thing behind him?

Then he remembered the dynamite.

Gradually changing his course, the weary man cut back towards his camp by the lake. Overhead the stars brightened, pointing the way. Jim lost all sense of time. He must have eaten as he wobbled along, for he wasn't hungry. Maybe he

could eat at the lean-to . . . no, there wouldn't be time . . . take a benzedrine pill. No, the pills were all gone and the moon was up and he could hear the ruum close behind. Close.

Quite often phosphorescent eyes peered at him from the underbrush and once, just at dawn, a grizzly whoofed with displeasure at his passage.

Sometimes during the night his wife, Cele, stood before him with outstretched arms. 'Go away!' he rasped. 'Go away! You can make it! It can't chase both of us!' So she turned and ran lightly alongside of him. But when Irwin panted across a tiny glade, Cele faded away into the moonlight and he realized she hadn't been there at all.

Shortly after sunrise Jim Irwin reached the lake. The ruum was close enough for him to hear the dull sounds of its passage. Jim staggered, his eyes closed. He hit himself feebly on the nose, his eyes jerked open and he saw the explosive. The sight of the greasy sticks of dynamite snapped Irwin wide awake.

He forced himself to calmness and carefully considered what to do. Fuse? No. It would be impossible to leave fused dynamite in the trail and time the detonation with the absolute precision he needed. Sweat poured down his body, his clothes were sodden with it. It was hard to think. The explosion *must* be set off from a distance and at the exact moment the ruum was passing over it. But Irwin dared not use a long fuse. The rate of burning was not constant enough. Couldn't calibrate it perfectly with the ruum's advance. Jim Irwin's body sagged all over, his chin sank toward his heaving chest. He jerked his head up, stepped back – and saw the .22 pistol where he had left it in the lean-to.

His sunken eyes flashed.

Moving with frenetic haste, he took the half-filled case, piled all the remaining percussion caps among the loose sticks in a devil's mixture. Weaving out to the trail, he carefully placed box and contents directly on his earlier tracks some twenty yards from a rocky ledge. It was a risk – the stuff might go any time – but that didn't matter. He would far rather be blown to rags than end up living but paralysed in the ruum's outdoor butcher's stall.

The exhausted Irwin had barely hunched down behind the

thin ledge of rock before his inexorable pursuer appeared over a slight rise 500 yards away. Jim scrunched deeper into the hollow, then saw a vertical gap, a narrow crack between rocks. That was it, he thought vaguely. He could sight through the gap at the dynamite and still be shielded from the blast. If it was a shield . . . when that half-caste blew only twenty yards away . . .

He stretched out on his belly, watching the ruum roll forward. A hammer of exhaustion pounded his ballooning skull. Jesus! When had he slept last? This was the first time he had lain down in hours. Hours? Ha! it was days. His muscles stiffened, locked into throbbing, burning knots. Then he felt the morning sun on his back, soothing, warming, easing . . . No! If he let go, if he slept now, it was the ruum's macabre collection for Jim Irwin! Stiff fingers tightened around the pistol. He'd stay awake! If he lost – if the ruum survived the blast – there'd still be time to put a bullet through his brain.

He looked down at the sleek pistol, then out at the innocent-seeming booby trap. If he timed this right – and he would – the ruum wouldn't survive. No. He relaxed a little, yielding just a bit to the gently insistent sun. A bird whistled softly somewhere above him and a fish splashed in the lake.

Suddenly he was wrenched to full awareness. Damn! Of all times for a grizzly to come snooping about! With the whole of Irwin's camp ready for greedy looting, a fool bear had to come sniffing around the dynamite! The furred monster smelled carefully at the box, nosed around, rumbled deep displeasure at the alien scent of man. Irwin held his breath. Just a touch would blow a cap. A single cap meant . . .

The grizzly lifted his head from the box and growled hoarsely. The box was ignored, the offensive odour of man was forgotten. Its feral little eyes focused on a plodding spheroid that was now only 40 yards away. Jim Irwin snickered. Until he had met the ruum the grizzly bear of the North American continent was the only thing in the world he had ever feared. And now – why the hell was he so calm about it? – the two terrors of his existence were meeting head on and he was laughing. He shook his head and the great side muscles in his neck hurt abominably. He looked down at his pistol, then out at the dynamite. *These* were the only real things in his world.

About six feet from the bear, the ruum paused. Still in the grip of that almost idiotic detachment, Jim Irwin found himself wondering again what it was, where it had come from. The grizzly arose on its haunches, the embodiment of utter ferocity. Terrible teeth flashed white against red lips. The business-like ruum started to roll past. The bear closed in, roaring. It cuffed at the ruum. A mighty paw, armed with black claws sharper and stronger than scythes, made that cuff. It would have disembowelled a rhinoceros. Irwin cringed as that side-swipe knocked dust from the leathery sphere. The ruum was hurled back several inches. It paused, recovered, and with the same dreadful casualness it rippled on, making a wider circle, ignoring the bear.

But the lord of the woods wasn't settling for any draw. Moving with that incredible agility which has terrified Indians, Spanish, French and Anglo-Americans since the first encounter of any of them with his species, the grizzly whirled, side-stepped beautifully and hugged the ruum. The terrible, shaggy forearms tightened, the slavering jaws champed at the grey surface. Irwin half rose. 'Go it!' he croaked. Even as he cheered the clumsy emperor of the wild, Jim thought it was an insane tableau: the village idiot wrestling with a beach ball.

Then silver metal gleamed bright against grey. There was a flash, swift and deadly. The roar of the king abruptly became a whimper, a gurgle and then there was nearly a ton of terror wallowing in death – its throat slashed open. Jim Irwin saw the bloody blade retract into the grey spheroid, leaving a bright-red smear on the thing's dusty hide.

And the ruum rolled forward past the giant corpse, implacable, still intent on the man's spoor, his footprints, his pathway. Okay, baby, Jim giggled at the dead grizzly, this is for you, for Cele, for – lots of poor dumb animals like us – come to, you damned fool, he cursed at himself. And aimed at the dynamite. And very calmly, very carefully, Jim Irwin squeezed the trigger of his pistol.

Briefly, sound first. Then giant hands lifted his body from where he lay, then let go. He came down hard, face in a patch of nettles, but he was sick, he didn't care. He remembered that the birds were quiet. Then there was a fluid thump

as something massive struck the grass a few yards away. Then there was quiet.

Irwin lifted his head . . . all men do in such a case. His body still ached. He lifted sore shoulders and saw . . . an enormous, smoking crater in the earth. He also saw, a dozen paces away, grey-white because it was covered now with powdered rock, the ruum.

It was under a tall, handsome pine tree. Even as Jim watched, wondering if the ringing in his ears would ever stop, the ruum rolled toward him.

Irwin fumbled for his pistol. It was gone. It had dropped somewhere out of reach. He wanted to pray, then, but couldn't get properly started. Instead, he kept thinking, idiotically, 'My sister Ethel can't spell Nebuchadnezzar and never could. My sister Ethel—'

The ruum was a foot away now, and Jim closed his eyes. He felt cool, metallic fingers touch, grip, lift. His unresisting body was raised several inches, and juggled oddly. Shuddering, he waited for the terrible syringe with its green liquid, seeing the yellow, shrunken face of a lizard with one eyelid a-tremble.

Then, dispassionately, without either roughness or solicitude, the ruum put him back on the ground. When he opened his eyes, some seconds later, the sphere was rolling away. Watching it go, he sobbed dryly.

It seemed a matter of moments only, before he heard the seaplane's engine, and opened his eyes to see Walt Leonard bending over him.

Later, in the plane, 5000 feet above the valley, Walt grinned suddenly, slapped him on the back, and cried: 'Jim, I can get a whirlybird, a four-place job! Why, If we can snatch up just a few of those prehistoric lizards and things while the museum keeper's away, it's like you said – the scientists will pay us plenty.'

Jim's hollow eyes lit up. 'That's the idea', he agreed. Then, bitterly: 'I might just as well have stayed in bed. Evidently the damned thing didn't want me at all. Maybe it wanted to know what I paid for these pants! Barely touched me, then

let go. And how I ran!'

'Yeah', Walt said. 'That was damned queer. And after that marathon. I admire your guts, boy.' He glanced sideways at Jim Irwin's haggard face. 'That night's run cost you plenty. I figure you lost over ten pounds.'

THE FIRST DAYS OF MAY

CLAUDE VEILLOT

Translated by Damon Knight

It's the noise that has drawn me toward the slit between the closed shutters. A furtive noise of crumbling, of crushed mica, of walnut shells being slowly cracked. For two days, not a sound has risen from that street which I can see with my eyes closed: the grocery across the way, with its windows broken by looters, its bags of dried beans spilled out as far as the gutter; the apartment house on the corner, half fallen down – its façade tumbled into the street, exposing the cross-sections of apartments, furniture hanging out mockingly over emptiness; abandoned cars, some parked along the side of the street, others left where they stopped, blocking the way, tires flat; and then those incongruous remnants strewn across the flagstones and asphalt – handbags, bundles of laundry, a baby carriage, broken bottles, scraps of newspaper, a roll of blankets, a few mismated shoes, a sewing machine.

Four days ago – only four days – that street was full of people. You couldn't know then that the bed in the third-floor apartment of the building opposite was covered with pink cretonne, because the façade was still in place. Customers went into the grocery. 'And what will it be today, madam?' A baby was drooling in the carriage, the sewing machine was purring behind an unbroken window, cars were running in the streets where no ragpickers' clutter was strewn.

Only four days, and already you have the feeling that all that never existed. Wasn't it all a dream? Did I really, one day, a long time ago, walk in the sun with my fellows? Come home to a woman I loved in the evening? Listen to records? Complain about the high cost of living? Read books? Make love?

Today, the reality is this vile sound, this quiet and continuous grating noise whose significance I now know. There are two of them, coupling right under my shutters, near an automobile with its windows broken, and that horrible

crunching means simply that the female is in the act of devouring the male.

They have been compared to praying mantises too often. In fact, when it's a question of that praying mantis that has such an effect on us, standing upright on a twig, with its globular eyes and its armoured claws, we always have the recourse of crushing it with a blow, at the cost of fighting back a spasm of nausea. But when the mantis is as big as a kangaroo . . .

And then what kind of mantises were they, that they could conceive and use those machines that we saw on the first day, the day it all began? (Or should I say the day when it all ended?)

I can't take my eyes away from the terrible sight. A faintness of horror makes me go on staring at that monstrous copulation, the clinging of those greenish abdomens, the vibrating wing cases, and, above all, that kind of parrot's beak grinding the corselet of the still living male, who trembles gently in all his limbs, as if in a horrible ecstasy.

Now there is another sound, thin as a cricket's chirp, then swelling to a piercing whistle, like the sound of those defective mikes at the meetings and the neighbourhood dances not so long ago. I can't help moving back a step. It's the female who is shrilling. That's where their name comes from: the Shrills. Nobody had time or inclination to think of anything else, and, all things considered, it's the best name for them.

Their true, their only power lies not in being so frightful and cruel as to make us forget our worst nightmares. Nor in being so many that no one has ever been able to estimate their numbers exactly. Their true, their only superiority is in their ability to shrill. When that modulated whistling goes into the supersonic, becomes inaudible to any terrestrial ear, you can see men and beasts fall like flies, not to rise again as long as the sound lasts.

But there's worse to come, for they have succeeded in analysing that physiological peculiarity, defining it and then applying it to instruments of war, multiplying its effectiveness. The Shrills needed no cannon to gut our apartment buildings: the ultrasonics were enough.

Below, in the street, the female Shrill goes on modulating her love whistle. A wave of fear and hatred washes over me.

Stop that hideous noise, that disgusting nibbling, the whole obscene business! I've snatched up my revolver out of the open valise on the table. The shutters fly back against the wall. Suddenly the sun cleanses this miserable hotel room where I've lived four days alone, glued in my fear, after everyone else has run off.

Shots crash out, echoing, almost joyful in the sinister silence of the empty suburb. One, two, three shots . . . The head with its monstrous eyes is burst open. The female Shrill is dead between one spasm and the next, but I can't stop firing, four, five, six, before the hammer falls on an empty cartridge.

After all these hours of isolation, of shadow and muffled silence, let there be light, noise, action! I'm not afraid any longer. The smell of the powder is still floating in the air. The fact that the half-devoured Shrill is still trembling doesn't frighten me; on the contrary, it sends me into a mad rage.

I've sprung out of my room, hurled myself down the stairs, torn apart the barricade of furniture and mattresses I had piled up in front of the entrance. There's a fuel can tied on to the abandoned car; I've cut the string with one or two strokes of my knife and pulled it down. I've soaked the two Shrills. Ten, twenty litres of gasoline . . .

I'm watching their bodies burn, crackle, snap, split open, burst, suppurate in the red bonfire, which, at the very beginning, carried off their wings and wing cases in a quick, high blaze. I'm so close to the flames that I'm sweating, gasping – so close that charred scraps thrown out by the crackling fire lodge in my hair. And I'm laughing.

Hours of walking through the silent streets choked with wreckage and rubble. The smell that comes from the demolished buildings is terrible.

I couldn't stay in my hotel room any longer. Maybe the Shrills patrol past there? If they'd found the two burned monsters, they would have been quick to pluck me out of my hole in turn.

It's true that there's no lack of Shrill corpses. Crossing an amusement park, I've seen more than 50 of them rotting on the paths, on the edge of the pond and even in the middle

of the little red cars and the miniature bicycles of a ride. They had been ripped apart by bullets.

I've also seen those who brought off this fine butchery: the crew of two heavy machine guns set up at the exits of the park. They were twisted on the ground, fists over their ears, in the poignant stillness of violent death. A big helmet had rolled to the base of a plane tree. Some machine-gun belts were strewn about.

There must have been some of them nearly everywhere in the city, these elements of the rear guard who'd been left there to permit the evacuation of the civil population. Sacrifices, ordered to slow up the invasion by a few minutes, a few seconds, before the buildings started to come apart around them and repellent silhouettes appeared at the street corners, carrying in their faceted eyes the hundredfold reflection of the same horrified human face.

Isn't what I've been doing pure idiocy? There isn't a single person still living in the city, that's clear. Why should Maria have stayed? Even if she'd wanted to, they would have made her go with the rest. The first day, I remember, radio cars went through every district: 'Your attention, please! It is necessary to evacuate the city temporarily – the invader has succeeded in overrunning our troops! Get out to the country! Don't stay in the city! Get out to the country! Any person who ignores this order will be in mortal danger!'

From the window of my hotel I saw that infernal stampede, the brutality, fear and disorder, that frothing exodus to which all the half-hearted official appeals couldn't bring even a semblance of dignity.

I couldn't leave. Not without Maria. And perhaps also because I was more frightened than the rest, frightened enough to stay cooped up four days in a dark room. Like a coward, after all. But what is a coward, what a hero, when it comes to the Shrills?

I'm frozen to the spot when I hear the noise. In the deathly silence of the abandoned city, it echoes like an explosion. Nevertheless, as soon as my heartbeat slows down a little, I identify the sound. Memories of coffee with cream, smells of anisette, Martinis, cognac, hubbub of voices and laughter . . . It's the authoritative bell of a cash register.

I push open the glass door of the café. Moleskin cushions.

Marble tables. Is it possible that this familiar décor has anything to do with all that ridiculous horror outside?

The man hasn't seen me. Leaning over the showcase, he's carefully counting some bills, pausing every so often to lick his finger.

I barely touch his shoulder. With remarkable agility, he turns and in the same movement draws a big blue-barrelled Colt. In his thin, whiskery face, his eyes are cruel and nervous at the same time; and he shows his teeth like a dog. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

He's a noncom; there's a stripe on his dirty, torn khaki sleeve.

'I haven't seen anyone for four days', I say. 'I'm looking for my wife.' And after a pause, 'What's the news?'

He spins the pistol gracefully around his forefinger before holstering it again. 'Don't waste your breath!' And, tapping himself on the ear: 'Stone deaf! See what they've done with their vibrations, those lousy bugs!'

Suspicious again, he examines me from head to foot. 'Say, don't you know all civilians were supposed to evacuate the city?'

Then he shrugs, goes around the counter, takes down a bottle and two glasses. 'Civilian, military, what the hell difference does all that stuff make now? Two days ago I was in position near the plastics works – you know, on the other side of the river. Had to watch the people filing past, trucks, buses, cars, bikes, carts, people on foot. Couldn't have been one out of two that knew what was happening to them. The radio hardly had time to explain what was going on and bang! No more radio! "It's the Russians!" they said, or else, "It's the Americans!" Nobody wanted to believe the official statement, that story about invaders that they called – how'd it go again? – "extraterrestrial." '

He lifts his glass to clink it with mine. 'Never mind telling me bottoms up, I won't hear you! . . . It was the same with us, anyhow, we didn't put much stock in that story. It was hard to swallow, am I right? Well, they explained it to us, anyhow, that these characters came from another planet. But which one? They told us they had them already in the U.S., Canada, England too, maybe even in Russia. But how could we tell? They said we'd have to fight, this time, not for terri-

tory or for ideas, but for our own skin. Okay, but what with?'

Aiming his two forefingers one behind the other, he whistles between his teeth. 'Oh, the flame throwers, they didn't go so bad at the beginning. We went at it hot and heavy, I can tell you! Have you seen those bugs up close? Don't know why, you get a crazy urge to kill them, crush them, destroy 'em. Maybe because they're scary and disgusting? We went after them, with our torches! We burned piles and piles of them! But that didn't last. They started in shrilling. Nearly the whole company went down. We fell back to this side of the river, and, if you'll believe it, the Genius blew up the bridge!'

He bursts into laughter which suggests anything but gaiety.

'As if that would keep them from jumping, those bugs! A Shrill can hop a good twenty metres, and with those damned wings they can keep going a little longer. I understand they could do a lot better, even, if Earth gravity didn't bother them! No, no, don't bother to open your mouth, I tell you! I can't hear a thing! You know what we're going to do, you and me? We're going to try to find a car, or an army jeep, and we're going to get out of this damned town. The people must be somewhere, right?'

I shake my head.

'What? You don't want to stay here the rest of your life, do you?'

I open my mouth, then change my mind, tear a sheet out of my notebook and write: 'I've got to find my wife.'

Leaning his elbows on the counter, in the familiar attitude of a saloonkeeper, he scratches his ear, at once ironic and compassionate. 'Oh well, anyhow, that's love for you!'

What a strange feeling to go through this series of motions: take a key out of my pocket, slide it into a lock. I've entered my apartment this way hundreds of times. Maria would be waiting for me. That seemed natural. There'll never be enough time to regret the indifference with which I took that simple happiness.

The apartment is full of darkness; all the shutters are closed. I don't recognize the familiar smell that means home. In its place, there's an intrusive odour, persistent and heavy: the scent of a cigar.

I open a door. A man is sitting crosswise in an upholstered chair, his legs hanging over the armrest. He has on a grayish undershirt; he's smoking an enormous cigar and reading one of my books, while he scratches a three-day beard.

To top it all, it's he who looks at me and exclaims, 'Well! Don't stand on ceremony!'

The only light on him comes from three candles stuck to the top shelf of the bookcase. He has hollow cheeks, anxious eyes. Do I too have that hunted look?

I take a step. 'Maybe you don't know it, but you're in *my* chair!'

He puffs. 'The persistence of bourgeois concepts after the disappearance of the society which created them is one of the most hilarious aspects of the event.'

A phrasemaker. Good. He can't be very dangerous. See him encompass space with a gesture. 'Nothing left! All consumed! Everything is broken down in the most frenetic, most repugnant, most definitive of routs! And what do we behold now? A survivor – who knows? the last, perhaps. And what does he do? Does he repent? Does he swear to rebuild a better world? No. He demands *his* chair.'

I let myself fall on the sofa; fatigue cuts my hamstrings. In the wavering light of the candles, I watch the man suck on his cigar. He takes it out of his mouth and says quietly, '*"And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle . . ."*' His voice rises slowly. '*". . . and their faces were as the faces of men."*' Eyes on the ceiling, he seems to be deciphering the prophetic text up there. '*"And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions."*'

The Apocalypse!

'I recognize you! You live on the sixth floor. You're the one who writes books.'

'I lived on the sixth floor, correct! But this is bigger, more comfortable. And then there's the bar, and the library as well. My word, you were a man of taste!'

'I'm looking for my wife.'

'That way too, you were a man of taste! But I must tell you she's not here. When I picked your lock, it was because I knew there was nobody left in here.'

'She's gone?'

He makes a vague gesture which flattens the candle flames for a moment. 'Gone with all the rest, when they passed with their loudspeakers. Idiots! Leave, to go where?'

She is gone. She didn't wait for me. She was afraid. But didn't I myself stay shut up four days in a hotel, too terrified even to open the shutters?

'What about you? You decided to stay.'

He puts on a profoundly disgusted expression. 'It's because I can't stand crowds. During the exodus, in 'forty, when I was a kid, too many people stepped on my feet. Morning and evening, for weeks, the crowds of people that mashed my feet! Anyhow, do you want me to tell you where they ended up, the ones who listened to the loudspeakers? In camps.'

'Camps?'

'Camps, yes. Prison camps. That's what I don't understand. After that slaughter, the Shrills cared for the survivors. As soon as we stopped resisting, they stopped destroying. Curious, isn't it?'

He relights his dead cigar. 'You think I've been here all this time without budging? You're mistaken. I've gone out, I've walked, I've pinched bicycles and even a car. Not to escape – to look. I've seen some things, some things – What a spectacle! Have you gone down in the subway passages? There are thousands of burned Shrills. You walk in pulp up to the knees. They installed their first colonies down there. The Army poured in tons of incendiary fluids through all the entrances and the air holes. You can bet, after that there was a shrilling!

'I also argued with dozens of people, soldiers, civil-defence guys, chemists, biologists, scientists. They were looking for something, a method. Some of them talked about making contact, negotiating a settlement. Pitiful! The Shrills have never tried to communicate. They arrive, they shrill and that's all! Some say they're organized, therefore intelligent. Oh, certainly! After all, so are the ants and the bees! But you've got to attack the problem from the other end. Imagine for a moment that in their eyes *we're* the ants. Would it bother you much to break up an anthill with a few kicks? And did you ever think about negotiating in any way with the ants?'

He gets up, opens my bar with great ease of manner and

takes out two glasses, into which he pours stingily. 'I'm saving the whiskey. There isn't much left. You know, actually these Shrills interest me. What do they want? We don't even know where they come from. From one of the moons of Jupiter, a scientist claimed the other night on the radio – before the radio stopped like everything else. But what did he know about it, hm? I ask you. In any case, one thing is certain: they have absolutely no interest in us as thinking beings. They don't even seem to be aware of that peculiarity of which we're so proud. They're intelligent and highly developed, too, undoubtedly, but in a way so different from ours that it doesn't pay to look for points of comparison.'

He points his cigar butt at me. 'Have you seen a Shrill visit just one house? Examine a machine? Try to start a car? Show any trace of curiosity in a heavy machine gun or a telephone booth? No. Except for the machines that brought them here, you'd think they lack even the idea of technology. Of course, I haven't forgotten the shrilling machines, the ones that knock buildings down, but who can say he's seen one? I heard a biologist remark that they could get the same results just as well by simply shrilling in chorus. So?'

He goes on talking as if to himself, getting rid of thoughts he's repeated over and over, in his hours and days of solitude. 'They haven't tried to rebuild, or even occupy, damaged cities. Even the colonies in the subway were provisional. Later they were satisfied to set up their gelatinous towns out in the open fields, like heaps of yellowish cocoons, piles of insect nests. A collectivist activity, a purely functional civilization, whose standards are entirely alien to human intelligence.'

He slaps his knee. 'But just the same, by heaven, if they've come all this way there's a reason for it!'

I drain my glass and get up suddenly. 'I have no intention of looking for the reason here while I jabber into a glass of whiskey. I want to find my wife.'

He salutes me with a nonchalant hand at his brow. 'Good luck, noble spouse! Close the door carefully as you leave.'

'Those camps you were talking about – where are they?'

'At the city exits. They're not camps, properly speaking. They look more like gypsy tents, or vacationers' campsites. No fences, no barbed wire. They're surrounded by Shrills, that's all. I've watched one – at a distance, naturally, with a

pair of field glasses, from the top of an HLM building. The people seemed to be in good condition. There were kitchen details. Things were organized. I saw women doing their laundry in tubs, some guys playing ball. I saw kids, too.'

He falls silent. In his burning eyes I see again the anguished flame they had at the beginning. 'Don't ask me to go with you. I won't go. That camp with the wooden barracks, the tents, the washing on the lines, kids playing, and then all around, here and there, those goddam big grasshoppers . . .' His shoulders shake with disgust. 'Those people guarded by – by that . . . it was more horrible than anything else, than houses destroyed, corpses in the streets, the crazy soldiers with their hands over their ears, the stink of the subway. I don't want to see that camp again.'

'If I recognize my wife there, can I get to her?'

'Oh certainly! The Shrills are understanding, just think of it! While I was watching, up on that roof, I saw a lot of people go in, poor starved characters, attracted by the smell of cooking. But as for getting out again . . . No, I won't go with you, even if I have to croak here of hunger and thirst.'

I put my glass down, move slowly toward the door and turn. I can't help smiling. 'Have you looked in the kitchen, on the top shelf of the cabinet? There must be still a full bottle there.'

I didn't get as far as the camp. I met a man long before that. He was walking in the middle of the street with a self-assurance, a lack of caution, that was absolutely stupefying. His leather-visored cap, the bandoleer he'd squeezed on over his overalls, the carbine he was carrying by the strap – were these really enough to give him that swaggering confidence, that complete detachment, as if he were convinced of his own invulnerability?

All the same, when I hailed him he seized the weapon quickly and brought it up to his hip. He handled it with impressive skill.

I stepped away from the bus with the flat tires, behind which I'd hidden when I first heard his footsteps.

'What are you doing there? Aren't you in camp with the

rest?' He stared at me, finger on the trigger.

'That's just it, I'm looking for the camp – my wife may be there. I've got to find her, you understand?'

He relaxed a little. His teeth showed in a smile. 'Are you really trying to get into a camp?'

'Into the one where I'll find my wife, yes. I've got to find her. The war is over, isn't it?'

His smile widened. 'Sure, it's good and over. For a long time! And as long as you want to go to the camp, why, I'll just take you there.'

He turned, holding his weapon by the strap again. Another man, a skinny little guy with the thick glasses of the nearsighted, had just appeared at the corner of a devastated bakery. The Garand rifle sticking up over the shoulder of his checkered jacket seemed as huge as it was incongruous. Five others followed him, but these were weaponless, their shoulders drooping, eyes full of pain. They were being pushed along from behind by the barrels of machine pistols.

'This gentleman wants to go to the camp!'

The tone of his voice chilled me. The armed men broke into astonishing smiles; the others were staring at me with bewilderment, and the little nearsighted man let out a sort of yelp: 'A volunteer! Now I've seen everything, everything!' He stamped his feet with joy.

The man with the leather visor was bowing with artificial politeness. 'Will the gentleman allow himself to be searched?'

The nearsighted little guy began to go awkwardly through my pockets. He finished by taking out my billfold, examined it, closed it, then made as if to hand it back. When I went to take the billfold, it slipped through his fingers, and it almost seemed to me that he'd done it on purpose.

I bent over, feeling as if I were in the midst of a nightmare, watching myself live through a story invented by myself with God knows what goal of horrid pleasure. At the moment when I was about to pick up the billfold, somebody's foot sent me flying into the middle of the street.

I got up. Behind the porthole-thick glasses, the nearsighted little man's eyes were like those of a fish. No more malignant, no more friendly.

Now I'm marching with the rest. The man with the leather

visor walks 150 feet ahead of us across the wreckage and rubble. The nearsighted little man and his skirmishers follow us in dispersed order.

'What came over you? Are you crazy or what?' It's the man next to me, muttering between his teeth, without turning his head toward me. On the collar of his navy-blue uniform are the gilded insignia of the Public Transportation Service. To keep his hands from trembling he's squeezing them together behind his back.

'I want to find my wife. She must be in a camp.'

'My wife was at the camp, too. She was there with me. Then yesterday they came looking for her.'

'The Shrills?'

'No, of course not. The Shrills don't come into the camps. They're satisfied to hang around the outside. It's these guys here that come looking for people.'

'These men? But who are they? I thought . . .'

He chuckles. 'You see the little guy with the big glasses? Don't argue with him – do whatever he tells you. I saw him kill two women with his rifle, that tried to escape from camp.'

A nauseating thing. I had thought the Shrills were rotten; but the Shrills aren't men.

'What now? Where are they taking us?'

'I don't know. When they take away a bunch like this, you never see them again. I waited for my wife. They didn't bring her back.'

'Maybe they're regrouping people in other camps? Maybe we're going to the camp where your wife is already?'

He shrugs. 'You're kidding! You've seen what happened, haven't you? You've seen how those vermin destroyed everything, killed everybody, in four days? You've seen these characters that are guarding us? If they're taking us someplace else, it's because it's useful to them – the Shrills. That's all.'

'If that's how it really is, why not run for it?'

He turns his head toward me with a wan smile. 'Go ahead, try!'

At the entrance to the Winter Circus, a number of Shrills

are crouching on their barbed legs. They're the first I've seen since the ones I burned this morning, in front of the hotel. I stop short, my blood frozen. It goes beyond fear – it's an unconquerable repulsion that glues my feet to the ground.

A hand pushes me between the shoulder blades; it's the little nearsighted man. 'Keep going – they won't eat you!'

The other guards guffaw.

Does that curious noise come from the Circus – that whirring sound, thin and yet loud, that reminds me of the sound of crickets in the wastelands of Provence? And where does that heavy, thick, stale odour come from, that *green* smell? . . .

I don't see anything at first except the circular fence set up on the outside of the track. And in that cage, a Shrill. He's standing upright, the anterior legs stiffened horizontally, and pivoting slowly around. I realize immediately why he's turning that way, and I feel the hairs prickle on the back of my neck: a man is facing him, walking slowly around him, with a sabre bayonet in his hand.

I hear one of the men next to me whisper, 'My God!' while our guards push us into a box. I go closer to the railing, fascinated. Down there, the man and the Shrill are keeping their faces turned toward each other. They're both on the defensive, watching each other, waiting. Sweat is streaming down the torso of the man with the bayonet. He has leather leggings on his calves; he's a soldier. I can't tell if it's brute fear or the courage of despair that I see in his eyes. Both, maybe.

Those legs, sharp as saw blades, have suddenly lashed the air. The man has leaped aside, with astonishing agility. A notch is cut into his bare shoulder.

The low grating sound which fills the whole Circus is suddenly amplified, and at the same instant I see what the terrible spectacle in the cage has kept me from noticing. They are there, filling the seats, in the penumbra surrounding the track. Hundreds and hundreds of them. Almost frozen motionless, prodigiously attentive. The Shrills.

But that isn't the worst. Among the Shrills I can make out men, and some women too, their faces pale with anxious pleasure, their mouths half open, eyes fixed, riveted in the same expectancy. One of them is dressed in her best. She's

wearing a white hat, and a resplendent clip in the lapel of her tailored suit. I can't take my eyes off that clip.

Once more, the heavy collective vibration has turned feverish. There's a yell from the jewelled woman. The man in the cage tears himself out of a clinch at the very moment when that parrot's beak is about to seize him by the nape. Blood spurts out of his torn back. From where I am, I can hear the whistling in his lungs.

'You're next! Get ready!' The man with the leather visor is looking at us through the railing in which we're confined. He shows his uneven teeth in an open smile.

'You can't let it go on! You can't! Don't you understand?' One of my companions, a fat man who till now has never stopped taking off his rimless glasses and putting them on again, is clinging to the bars, making them shake with his own trembling. 'You can't! You're a man like us!'

The other man falls back a step. 'Why can't I? It's a fair fight, isn't it? For one thing, we give you a bayonet. And then, your opponent doesn't have the right to shrill. The audience either, of course.'

He adds, turning his head away, 'What do you think, I invented this game?'

Others are throwing themselves on the bars, too. One of them, a big young man in blue jeans, sobs hysterically and falls to his knees. Only the man in the navy-blue bus driver's jacket, the one who spoke to me before, remains to one side. He's pale, his nostrils are pinched; he holds himself very straight, closing his eyes. If he weren't here, I'd grab hold of the bars, too, I'd howl, too, the way the rest are doing.

The murmur has suddenly turned to an intense humming, like the sound that comes from an overturned hive. I can't help looking. The soldier has managed to leap on to his enemy's back. His courage is too much for me. Why so much vitality, when there's no hope?

Then everything happens very quickly. The bayonet scythes through the air. The Shrill's head leaps like a football, while the huge trembling body, in a final spasm, sends the man rolling in the sawdust. He springs up, hurls himself back. His weapon rips open the green abdomen, which bursts and empties itself; then he attacks the corselet and splits it. But it's all over. The long, armoured legs are moving only in an

imperceptible, interminable shiver. The feverish humming fills my ears. I hear the voice of the man with the leather visor:

'You're in luck! It's not often that one of them gets it in the neck! When that happens, the games are postponed till the next day. Come on, get going!'

'The first days of May, they're the best for vacations. Remember the woods? The smell of the woods? The smell of leaves? Remember the squirrel in Mervent forest? The mill at the water's edge? Remember the lost clearing, where the silence is so beautiful that it makes you weep? The only sound is that of the green woodpecker. Rap, rap! It sounds like a stubborn elf who's knocking endlessly at the door. His wife doesn't want to let him in, so he knocks, he knocks . . . In May we'll go back there!'

So spoke Maria.

It's May, and I'm rolling across the countryside, but it's in a truck that stinks of fuel oil and sweat, packed in with strangers, dejected men and women, their eyes empty.

Those who guard us have metal helmets or cloth caps. With their weapons between their knees, they are at the same time watchful and distant, as if detached from us.

I watch them. Some are dull brutes, others half mad, still others are cowards. But they are men. Don't they understand what they're doing? I look at them, but they will not meet my gaze. I know how they react when questions are added to these looks. One of us is lying on the floor, his forehead laid open by a blow from a rifle butt . . .

When the truck stops, the first thing I see is the farmhouse. It seems so simple, so natural, with its old rough-cast walls, its untrimmed vines climbing around the garret windows, so simple and so beautiful that tears come to my eyes. But it is immured in silence, and no one moves in the house, nor in the deserted stable, nor in the vacant barnyard. Even the doghouse is empty. On the tractor seat is a baby doll, one of those big celluloid dolls that little girls dress up in wool jumpers. It has an arm missing.

Then I look beyond, at the fields.

'Gelatinous masses, like heaps of yellowish cocoons, piles

of insect nests.' That was the way my neighbour, the writer, described the Shrill towns.

The paths we follow to get to it are hard and beaten, as if thousands of feet have trodden them before us. When the first Shrills show themselves, a few of my companions fall to their knees and have to be dragged . . .

I don't think I'll ever go insane, or I would be insane now. How could we have let ourselves be pushed, dragged, into the interior of . . . of what, in fact? What kind of town are these domes joined together, piled up one on another, these hills of moist cotton secreted no doubt by the same creatures who live in them?

Someone laughs nearby, a girl with short hair who looks around her with a happy expression, as if in a dream. That one, perhaps, has found her deliverance.

In the tunnels, the stale, viscous smell grows so thick you can almost feel it. A pale, cold daylight, without brilliance, springs from no visible source, maybe just from these fibrous walls which, when you bump into them accidentally – and not without repulsion – deposit on your sleeves cottony, gluey particles, feebly luminous.

Other guards have replaced the first ones, and there are Shrills with them now. We walk, but we no longer know where we're going. Some are crying soundlessly, but they don't know they're crying. Are we really living through this, have we forgotten who we are?

The tunnels cross and multiply without ever rising or descending. And why should we be surprised when we cross that larger gallery, as big as a subway station, with walls pierced by a thousand cells? Why should we be surprised if, in each one of these cells, an oblong form is stretched out, enveloped as in a cocoon by that cottony, gluey substance? We're no longer of this world, are we? And the outside has never existed.

They don't move, but their eyes are open. They don't speak, their features are frozen, but in their pupils shines the wavering spark of life. Horror and despair, incredulity, hatred and madness.

More tunnels. More cells. Hundreds, thousands of cells, and then the end. Time is suddenly suspended. Silence, and the waiting Shrills.

Their bellies are gigantic, swollen to the bursting point. These are the females. The first days of May – egg-laying time.

Why does that old man suddenly begin to struggle, and that woman with the dyed hair too? Since three guards can hold them easily? Since the sting of the female Shrill is so quick? Since ankylosis and paralysis, in a few minutes at most, will seize their numbed members, their defeated muscles, leaving only the vital organs functioning, and the brain clear?

That blonde hair, spread out on the floor of a cell, is like Maria's hair, and those golden eyes that stare at me are like Maria's eyes. This blonde woman looking at me, entangled in her nightmare, frozen with horror – does she already feel inside her the slow working of incubation? How long has she been there, and how many little Shrills will be born inside her, to feed on her, before they emerge from her torn flesh into the gray light of the tunnels?

I've found you, Maria. For you might easily be Maria, mightn't you? Do you want to be? You're of my race and you're my wife, and I've searched for you and found you. The Shrills don't understand what we are. The Shrills keep us in camps the way we keep herds on the range, but we're not cattle. The Shrills lead us to combat like bulls in the ring, but we're men, just the same. The Shrills store us and pile us up the way wasps store up their provision of flies for the winter, but we're not flies. And the female Shrills lay their eggs in us and leave us to be devoured alive by their little ones, but in spite of everything you are Maria and I'm the one you loved. The Shrills don't understand that, never will understand it and that's why we're greater than the Shrills, Maria.

Two guards take me by the elbows. I point with my chin toward the shadow from which the wide-open golden eyes still stare at me.

'Next to that one is where I want to be!'

'All right', says one of the two without looking at me. And he adds, with an odd catch in his voice. 'You realize, we're not responsible!'

Not responsible? No, of course not. No one is responsible, or else everyone is.

The man who drank my whiskey had it by heart: *'And*

the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle . . . and their faces were as the faces of men . . . And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions.'

The female Shrill is coming nearer . . . She doesn't even seem horrible to me.

SPECIALIST

ROBERT SHECKLEY

The photon storm struck without warning, pouncing upon the Ship from behind a bank of giant red stars. Eye barely had time to flash a last second warning through Talker before it was upon them.

It was Talker's third journey into deep space, and his first light-pressure storm. He felt a sudden pang of fear as the Ship yawed violently, caught the force of the wave-front and careened end for end. Then the fear was gone, replaced by a strong pulse of excitement.

Why should he be afraid, he asked himself – hadn't he been trained for just this sort of emergency?

He had been talking to Feeder when the storm hit, but he cut off the conversation abruptly. He hoped Feeder would be all right. It was the youngster's first deep space trip.

The wirelike filaments that made up most of Talker's body were extended throughout the Ship. Quickly he withdrew all except the ones linking him to Eye, Engine, and the Walls. This was strictly their job now. The rest of the Crew would have to shift for themselves until the storm was over.

Eye had flattened his disclike body against a Wall, and had one seeing organ extended outside the Ship. For greater concentration, the rest of his seeing organs were collapsed, clustered against his body.

Through Eye's seeing organ, Talker watched the storm. He translated Eye's purely visual image into a direction for Engine, who shoved the Ship around to meet the waves. At appreciably the same time, Talker translated direction into velocity for the Walls who stiffened to meet the shocks.

The co-ordination was swift and sure – Eye measuring the waves, Talker relaying the messages to Engine and Walls, Engine driving the ship nose-first into the waves, and the Walls bracing to meet the shock.

Talker forgot any fear he might have had in the swiftly functioning teamwork. He had no time to think. As the Ship's communication system, he had to translate and flash

his messages at top speed, co-ordinating information and directing action.

In a matter of minutes, the storm was over.

'All right', Talker said. 'Let's see if there was any damage.' His filaments had become tangled during the storm, but he untwisted and extended them through the Ship, plugging everyone into circuit. 'Engine?'

'I'm fine', Engine said. The tremendous old fellow had dampened his plates during the storm, easing down the atomic explosions in his stomach. No storm could catch an experienced spacer like Engine unaware.

'Walls?'

The Walls reported one by one, and this took a long time. There were almost a thousand of them, thin, rectangular fellows making up the entire skin of the Ship. Naturally, they had reinforced their edges during the storm, giving the whole Ship resiliency. But one or two were dented badly.

Doctor announced that he was all right. He removed Talker's filament from his head, taking himself out of circuit, and went to work on the dented Walls. Made mostly of hands, Doctor had clung to an Accumulator during the storm.

'Let's go a little faster now', Talker said, remembering that there still was the problem of determining where they were. He opened the circuit to the four Accumulators. 'How are you?' he asked.

There was no answer. The Accumulators were asleep. They had had their receptors open during the storm and were bloated on energy. Talker twitched his filaments around them, but they didn't stir.

'Let me', Feeder said. Feeder had taken quite a beating before planting his suction cups to a Wall, but his cockiness was intact. He was the only member of the Crew who never needed Doctor's attention; his body was quite capable of repairing itself.

He scuttled across the floor on a dozen or so tentacles, and booted the nearest Accumulator. The big, conical storage unit opened one eye, then closed it again. Feeder kicked him again, getting no response. He reached for the Accumulator's safety valve and drained off some energy.

'Stop that', the Accumulator said.

'Then wake up and report', Talker told him.

The Accumulators said testily that they were all right, as any fool could see. They had been anchored to the floor during the storm.

The rest of the inspection went quickly. Thinker was fine, and Eye was ecstatic over the beauty of the storm. There was only one casualty.

Pusher was dead. Bipedal, he didn't have the stability of the rest of the Crew. The storm had caught him in the middle of a floor, thrown him against a stiffened Wall, and broken several of his important bones. He was beyond Doctor's skill to repair.

They were silent for a while. It was always serious when a part of the Ship died. The Ship was a co-operative unit, composed entirely of the Crew. The loss of any member was a blow to all the rest.

It was especially serious now. They had just delivered a cargo to a port several thousand light-years from Galactic Centre. There was no telling where they might be.

Eye crawled to a Wall and extended a seeing organ outside. The Walls let it through, then sealed around it. Eye's organ pushed out, far enough from the Ship so he could view the entire sphere of stars. The picture travelled through Talker, who gave it to Thinker.

Thinker lay in one corner of the room, a great shapeless blob of protoplasm. Within him were all the memories of his space-going ancestors. He considered the picture, compared it rapidly with others stored in his cells, and said, 'No galactic planets within reach.'

Talker automatically translated for everyone. It was what they had feared.

Eye, with Thinker's help, calculated that they were several hundred light-years off their course, on the galactic periphery.

Every Crew member knew what that meant. Without a Pusher to boost the Ship to a multiple of the speed of light, they would never get home. The trip back, without a Pusher, would take longer than most of their lifetimes.

'What would you suggest?' Talker asked Thinker.

This was too vague a question for the literal-minded Thinker. He asked to have it rephrased.

'What would be our best line of action', Talker asked, 'to

get back to a galactic planet?'

Thinker needed several minutes to go through all the possibilities stored in his cells. In the meantime, Doctor had patched the Walls and was asking to be given something to eat.

'In a little while we'll all eat', Talker said, twitching his tendrils nervously. Even though he was the second youngest Crew member – only Feeder was younger – the responsibility was largely on him. This was still an emergency; he had to co-ordinate information and direct action.

One of the Walls suggested that they get good and drunk. This unrealistic solution was vetoed at once. It was typical of the Walls' attitude, however. They were fine workers and good shipmates, but happy-go-lucky fellows at best. When they returned to their home planets, they would probably blow all their wages on a spree.

'Loss of the Ship's Pusher cripples the Ship for sustained faster-than-light speeds', Thinker began without preamble. 'The nearest galactic planet is four hundred and five light-years off.'

Talker translated all this instantly along his wave-packet body.

'Two courses of action are open. First, the Ship can proceed to the nearest galactic planet under atomic power from Engine. This will take approximately two hundred years. Engine might still be alive at this time, although no one else will.

'Second, locate a primitive planet in this region, upon which are latent Pushers. Find one and train him. Have him push the Ship back to galactic territory.'

Thinker was silent, having given all the possibilities he could find in the memories of his ancestors.

They held a quick vote and decided upon Thinker's second alternative. There was no choice, really. It was the only one which offered them any hope of getting back to their homes.

The body of the dead Pusher was shoved into the mouth of Engine, who consumed it at once, breaking down the atoms to energy. Engine was the only member of the Crew who lived on atomic energy.

For the rest, Feeder dashed up and loaded himself from the nearest Accumulator. Then he transformed the food

within him into the substances each member ate. His body chemistry changed, altered, adapted, making the different foods for the Crew.

Eye lived entirely on a complex chlorophyl chain. Feeder reproduced this for him, then went over to give Talker his hydrocarbons, and the Walls their chlorine compound. For Doctor he made a facsimile of a silicate fruit that grew on Doctor's native planet.

Finally, feeding was over and the Ship back in order. The Accumulators were stacked in a corner, blissfully sleeping again. Eye was extending his vision as far as he could, shaping his main seeing organ for high-powered telescopic reception. Even in this emergency, Eye couldn't resist making verses. He announced that he was at work on a new narrative poem, called *Peripheral Glow.* No one wanted to hear it, so Eye fed it to Thinker, who stored everything, good or bad, right or wrong.

Engine never slept. Filled to the brim on Pusher, he shoved the Ship along at several times the speed of light.

The Walls were arguing among themselves about who had been the drunkest during their last leave.

Talker decided to make himself comfortable. He released his hold on the Walls and swung in the air, his small round body suspended by his crisscrossed network of filaments.

He thought briefly about Pusher. It was strange. Pusher had been everyone's friend and now he was forgotten. That wasn't because of indifference; it was because the Ship was a unit. The loss of a member was regretted, but the important thing was for the unit to go on.

The Ship raced through the suns of the periphery.

Thinker laid out a search spiral, calculating their odds on finding a Pusher planet at roughly four to one. In a week they found a planet of primitive Walls. Dropping low, they could see the leathery, rectangular fellows basking in the sun, crawling over rocks, stretching themselves thin in order to float in the breeze.

All the Ship's Walls heaved a sigh of nostalgia. It was just like home.

These Walls on the planet hadn't been contacted by a galactic team yet, and were still unaware of their great destiny – to join in the vast Cooperation of the Galaxy.

There were plenty of dead worlds in the spiral, and worlds too young to bear life. They found a planet of Talkers. The Talkers had extended their spidery communication lines across half a continent.

Talker looked at them eagerly, through Eye. A wave of self-pity washed over him. He remembered home, his family, his friends. He thought of the tree he was going to buy when he got back.

For a moment, Talker wondered what he was doing here, part of a Ship in a far corner of the Galaxy.

He shrugged off the mood. They were bound to find a Pusher planet, if they looked long enough.

At least, he hoped so.

There was a long stretch of arid worlds as the Ship speeded through the unexplored periphery. Then a planetful of primeval Engines, swimming in a radioactive ocean.

'This is rich territory', Feeder said to Talker. 'Galactic should send a Contact party here.'

'They probably will, after we get back', Talker said.

They were good friends, above and beyond the all-enveloping friendship of the Crew. It wasn't only because they were the youngest Crew members, although that had something to do with it. They both had the same kind of functions and that made for a certain rapport. Talker translated languages; Feeder transformed foods. Also, they looked somewhat alike. Talker was a central core with radiating filaments; Feeder was a central core with radiating tentacles.

Talker thought that Feeder was the next most aware being on the Ship. He was never really able to understand how some of the others carried on the processes of consciousness.

More suns, more planets. Engine started to overheat. Usually, Engine was used only for taking off and landing, and for fine manoeuvring in a planetary group. Now he had been running continuously for weeks, both over and under the speed of light. The strain was telling on him.

Feeder, with Doctor's help, rigged a cooling system for him. It was crude, but it had to suffice. Feeder rearranged nitrogen, oxygen and hydrogen atoms to make a coolant for the system. Doctor diagnosed a long rest for Engine. He said that the gallant old fellow couldn't stand the strain for more than a week.

The search continued, with the Crew's spirits gradually dropping. They all realized that Pushers were rather rare in the Galaxy, as compared to the fertile Walls and Engines.

The Walls were getting pock-marked from interstellar dust. They complained that they would need a full beauty treatment when they got home. Talker assured them that the company would pay for it.

Even Eye was getting bloodshot from staring into space so continuously.

They dipped over another planet. Its characteristics were flashed to Thinker, who mulled over them.

Closer, and they could make out the forms.

Pushers! Primitive Pushers!

They zoomed back into space to make plans. Feeder produced 23 different kinds of intoxicants for a celebration.

The Ship wasn't fit to function for three days.

'Everyone ready now?' Talker asked, a bit fuzzily. He had a hangover that burned all along his nerve ends. What a drunk he had thrown! He had a vague recollection of embracing Engine, and inviting him to share his tree when they got home.

He shuddered at the idea.

The rest of the Crew were pretty shaky, too. The Walls were letting air leak into space; they were just too wobbly to seal their edges properly. Doctor had passed out.

But the worst off was Feeder. Since his system could adapt to any type of fuel except atomic, he had been sampling every batch he made, whether it was an unbalanced iodine, pure oxygen or a supercharged ester. He was really miserable. His tentacles, usually a healthy aqua, were shot through with orange streaks. His system was working furiously, purging itself of everything, and Feeder was suffering the effects of the purge.

The only sober ones were Thinker and Engine. Thinker didn't drink, which was unusual for a spacer, though typical of Thinker, and Engine couldn't.

They listened while Thinker reeled off some astounding facts. From Eye's picture of the planet's surface, Thinker had detected the presence of metallic construction. He put forth the alarming suggestion that these Pushers had constructed a mechanical civilization.

'That's impossible', three of the Walls said flatly, and most of the Crew were inclined to agree with them. All the metal they had ever seen had been buried in the ground or lying around in worthless oxidized chunks.

'Do you mean that they make things out of metal?' Talker demanded. 'Out of just plain dead metal? What could they make?'

'They couldn't make anything', Feeder said positively. 'It would break down constantly. I mean metal doesn't *know* when it's weakening.'

But it seemed to be true. Eye magnified his pictures, and everyone could see that the Pushers had made vast shelters, vehicles, and other articles from inanimate material.

The reason for this was not readily apparent, but it wasn't a good sign. However, the really hard part was over. The Pusher planet had been found. All that remained was the relatively easy job of convincing a native Pusher.

That shouldn't be too difficult. Talker knew that cooperation was the keystone of the Galaxy, even among primitive peoples.

The Crew decided not to land in a populated region. Of course, there was no reason not to expect a friendly greeting, but it was the job of a Contact Team to get in touch with them as a race. All they wanted was an individual.

Accordingly, they picked out a sparsely populated landmass, drifting in while that side of the planet was dark.

They were able to locate a solitary Pusher almost at once.

Eye adapted his vision to see in the dark, and they followed the Pusher's movements. He lay down, after a while, beside a small fire. Thinker told them that this was a well-known resting habit of Pushers.

Just before dawn, the Walls opened, and Feeder, Talker and Doctor came out.

Feeder dashed forward and tapped the creature on the shoulder. Talker followed with a communication tendril.

The Pusher opened his seeing organs, blinked them, and made a movement with his eating organ. Then he leaped to his feet and started to run.

The three Crew members were amazed. The Pusher hadn't even waited to find out what the three of them wanted!

Talker extended a filament rapidly, and caught the Pusher,

50 feet away, by a limb. The Pusher fell.

'Treat him gently', Feeder said. 'He might be startled by our appearance.' He twitched his tendrils at the idea of a Pusher – one of the strangest sights in the Galaxy, with his multiple organs – being startled at someone else's appearance.

Feeder and Doctor scurried to the fallen Pusher, picked him up and carried him back to the Ship.

The Walls sealed again. They released the Pusher and prepared to talk.

As soon as he was free, the Pusher sprang to his limbs and ran at the place where the Walls had sealed. He pounded against them frantically, his eating organ open and vibrating.

'Stop that', the Wall said. He bulged, and the Pusher tumbled to the floor. Instantly, he jumped up and started to run forward.

'Stop him', Talker said. 'He might hurt himself.'

One of the Accumulators woke up enough to roll into the Pusher's path. The Pusher fell, got up again, and ran on.

Talker had his filaments in the front of the Ship also, and he caught the Pusher in the bow. The Pusher started to tear at his tendrils, and Talker let go hastily.

'Plug him into the communication system!' Feeder shouted. 'Maybe we can reason with him!'

Talker advanced a filament toward the Pusher's head, waving it in the universal sign of communication. But the Pusher continued his amazing behaviour, jumping out of the way. He had a piece of metal in his hand and he was waving it frantically.

'What do you think he's going to do with that?' Feeder asked. The Pusher started to attack the side of the Ship, pounding at one of the Walls. The Walls stiffened instinctively and the metal snapped.

'Leave him alone', Talker said. 'Give him a chance to calm down.'

Talker consulted with Thinker, but they couldn't decide what to do about the Pusher. He wouldn't accept communication. Every time Talker extended a filament, the Pusher showed all the signs of violent panic. Temporarily, it was an impasse.

Thinker vetoed the plan of finding another Pusher on the planet. He considered this Pusher's behaviour typical; nothing

would be gained by approaching another. Also, a planet was supposed to be contacted only by a Contact Team.

If they couldn't communicate with this Pusher, they never would with another on the planet.

'I think I know what the trouble is', Eye said. He crawled up on an Accumulator. 'These Pushers have evolved a mechanical civilization. Consider for a minute how they went about it. They developed the use of their fingers, like Doctor, to shape metal. They utilized their seeing organs, like myself. And probably countless other organs.' He paused for effect. 'These Pushers have become unspecialized!'

They argued over it for several hours. The Walls maintained that no intelligent creature could be unspecialized. It was unknown in the Galaxy. But the evidence was before them – the Pusher cities, their vehicles . . . This Pusher, exemplifying the rest, seemed capable of a multitude of things.

He was able to do everything except Push!

Thinker supplied a partial explanation. 'This is not a primitive planet. It is relatively old and should have been in the Cooperation thousands of years ago. Since it was not, the Pushers upon it were robbed of their birthright. Their ability, their speciality was to Push, but there was nothing *to* Push. Naturally, they have developed a deviant culture.

'Exactly what this culture is, we can only guess. But on the basis of the evidence, there is reason to believe that these Pushers are – uncooperative.'

Thinker had a habit of uttering the most shattering statement in the quietest possible way.

'It is entirely possible', Thinker went on inexorably, 'that these Pushers will have nothing to do with us. In which case, our chances are approximately 283 to one against finding another Pusher planet.'

'We can't be sure he won't cooperate', Talker said, 'until we get him into communication.' He found it almost impossible to believe that any intelligent creature would refuse to cooperate willingly.

'But how?' Feeder asked. They decided upon a course of action. Doctor walked slowly up to the Pusher, who backed away from him. In the meantime, Talker extended a filament outside the Ship, around, and in again, behind the Pusher.

The Pusher backed against a Wall – and Talker shoved

the filament through the Pusher's head, into the communication socket in the centre of his brain.

The Pusher collapsed.

When he came to, Feeder and Doctor had to hold the Pusher's limbs, or he would have ripped out the communication line. Talker exercised his skill in learning the Pusher's language.

It wasn't too hard. All Pusher languages were of the same family, and this was no exception. Talker was able to catch enough surface thoughts to form a pattern.

He tried to communicate with the Pusher.

The Pusher was silent.

'I think he needs food', Feeder said. They remembered that it had been almost two days since they had taken the Pusher on board. Feeder worked up some standard Pusher food and offered it.

'My God! A steak!' the Pusher said.

The Crew cheered along Talker's communication circuits. The Pusher had said his first words!

Talker examined the words and searched his memory. He knew about 200 Pusher languages and many more simple variations. He found that this Pusher was speaking a cross between two Pusher tongues.

After the Pusher had eaten, he looked around. Talker caught his thoughts and broadcast them to the Crew.

The Pusher had a queer way of looking at the Ship. He saw it as a riot of colours. The walls undulated. In front of him was something resembling a gigantic spider, coloured black and green, with his web running all over the Ship and into the heads of all the creatures. He saw Eye as a strange, naked little animal, something between a skinned rabbit and an egg yolk – whatever those things were.

Talker was fascinated by the new perspective the Pusher's mind gave him. He had never seen things that way before. But now that the Pusher was pointing it out, Eye *was* a pretty funny-looking creature.

They settled down to communication.

'What the hell *are* you things?' the Pusher asked, much calmer now than he had been during the two days. 'Why did you grab me? Have I gone nuts?'

'No', Talker said, 'you are not psychotic. We are a galactic

trading ship. We were blown off our course by a storm and our Pusher was killed.'

'Well, what does that have to do with me?'

'We would like you to join our Crew', Talker said, 'to be our new Pusher.'

The Pusher thought it over after the situation was explained to him. Talker could catch the feeling of conflict in the Pusher's thoughts. He hadn't decided whether to accept this as a real situation or not. Finally, the Pusher decided that he wasn't crazy.

'Look, boys', he said, 'I don't know what you are or how this makes sense. I have to get out of here. I'm on a furlough, and if I don't get back soon, the U.S. Army's going to be very interested.'

Talker asked the Pusher to give him more information about 'army', and he fed it to Thinker.

'These Pushers engage in personal combat', was Thinker's conclusion.

'But *why*?' Talker asked. Sadly he admitted to himself that Thinker might have been right; the Pusher didn't show many signs of willingness to cooperate.

'I'd like to help you lads out', Pusher said, 'but I don't know where you get the idea that I could push anything this size. You'd need a whole division of tanks just to budge it.'

'Do you approve of these wars?' Talker asked, getting a suggestion from Thinker.

'Nobody likes war – not those who have to do the dying at least.'

'Then why do you fight them?'

The Pusher made a gesture with his eating organ, which Eye picked up and sent to Thinker. 'It's kill or be killed. You guys know what war is, don't you?'

'We don't have any wars', Talker said.

'You're lucky', the Pusher said bitterly. 'We do. Plenty of them.'

'Of course', Talker said. He had the full explanation from Thinker now. 'Would you like to end them?'

'Of course I would.'

'Then come with us. Be our Pusher.'

The Pusher stood up and walked up to an Accumulator. He sat down on it and doubled the ends of his upper limbs.

'How the hell can I stop all wars?' the Pusher demanded. 'Even if I went to the big shots and told them —'

'You won't have to', Talker said. 'All you have to do is come with us. Push us to our base. Galactic will send a Contact Team to your planet. That will end your wars.'

'The hell you say', the Pusher replied. 'You boys are stranded here, huh? Good enough. No monsters are going to take over Earth.'

Bewildered, Talker tried to understand the reasoning. Had he said something wrong? Was it possible that the Pusher didn't understand him?

'I thought you wanted to end wars', Talker said.

'Sure I do. But I don't want anyone *making* us stop. I'm no traitor. I'd rather fight.'

'No one will make you stop. You will just stop because there will be no further need for fighting.'

'Do you know why we're fighting?'

'It's obvious.'

'Yeah? What's your explanation?'

'You Pushers have been separated from the main stream of the Galaxy', Talker explained. 'You have your speciality – pushing – but nothing to Push. Accordingly, you have no real jobs. You play with things – metal, inanimate objects – but find no real satisfaction. Robbed of your true vocation, you fight from sheer frustration.

'Once you find your place in the galactic Cooperation – and I assure you that it is an important place – your fighting will stop. Why should you fight, which is an unnatural occupation, when you can Push? Also, your mechanical civilization will end, since there will be no need for it.'

The Pusher shook his head in what Talker guessed was a gesture of confusion. 'What is this pushing?'

Talker told him as best he could Since the job was out of his scope, he had only a general idea of what a Pusher did.

'You mean to say that *that* is what every Earthman should be doing?'

'Of course', Talker said. 'It is your great speciality.'

The Pusher thought about it for several minutes. 'I think you want a physicist or a mentalist or something. I could never do anything like that. I'm a junior architect. And besides – well, it's difficult to explain.'

But Talker had already caught Pusher's objection. He saw a Pusher female in his thoughts. No, two, three. And he caught a feeling of loneliness, strangeness. The Pusher was filled with doubts. He was afraid.

'When we reach galactic', Talker said, hoping it was the right thing, 'you can meet other Pushers. Pusher females, too. All you Pushers look alike, so you should become friends with them. As far as loneliness in the Ship goes – it just doesn't exist. You don't understand the Cooperation yet. No one is lonely in the Cooperation.'

The Pusher was still considering the idea of there being other Pushers. Talker couldn't understand why he was so startled at that. The Galaxy was filled with Pushers, Feeders, Talkers, and many other species, endlessly duplicated.

'I can't believe that anybody could end all war', Pusher said. 'How do I know you're not lying?'

Talker felt as if he had been struck in the core. Thinker must have been right when he said these Pushers would be uncooperative. Was this going to be the end of Talker's career? Were he and the rest of the Crew going to spend the rest of their lives in space, because of the stupidity of a bunch of Pushers?

Even thinking this, Talker was able to feel sorry for the Pusher. It must be terrible, he thought. Doubting, uncertain, never trusting anyone. If these Pushers didn't find their place in the Galaxy, they would exterminate themselves. Their place in the Cooperation was long overdue.

'What can I do to convince you?' Talker asked.

In despair, he opened all the circuits to the Pusher. He let the Pusher see Engine's good-natured gruffness, the devil-may-care humour of the Walls; he showed him Eye's poetic attempts, and Feeder's cocky good nature. He opened his own mind and showed the Pusher a picture of his home planet, his family, the tree he was planning to buy when he got home.

The pictures told the story of all of them, from different planets, representing different ethics, united by a common bond – the galactic Cooperation.

The Pusher watched it all in silence.

After a while, he shook his head. The thought accompanying the gesture was uncertain, weak – but negative.

Talker told the Walls to open. They did, and the Pusher stared in amazement.

'You may leave', Talker said. 'Just remove the communication line and go.'

'What will you do?'

'We will look for another Pusher planet.'

'Where? Mars? Venus?'

'We don't know. All we can do is hope there is another in this region.'

The Pusher looked at the opening, then back at the Crew. He hesitated and his face screwed up in a grimace of indecision.

'All that you showed me was true?'

No answer was necessary.

'All right', the Pusher said suddenly. 'I'll go. I'm a damned fool, but I'll go. If this means what you say – it *must* mean what you say!'

Talker saw the agony of the Pusher's decision had forced him out of contact with reality. He believed that he was in a dream, where decisions are easy and unimportant.

'There's just one little trouble', Pusher said with the lightness of hysteria. 'Boys, I'll be damned if I know how to Push. You said something about faster-than-light? I can't even run the mile in an hour.'

'Of course you can Push', Talker assured him, hoping he was right. He knew what a Pusher's abilities were; but this one . . .

'Just try it.'

'Sure', Pusher agreed. 'I'll probably wake up out of this, anyhow.'

They sealed the ship for takeoff while Pusher talked to himself.

'Funny', Pusher said. 'I thought a camping trip would be a nice way to spend a furlough and all I do is get nightmares!'

Engine boosted the Ship into the air. The Walls were sealed and Eye was guiding them away from the planet.

'We're in open space now', Talker said. Listening to Pusher, he hoped his mind hadn't cracked. 'Eye and Thinker will give a direction, I'll transmit it to you, and you Push along it.'

'You're crazy', Pusher mumbled. 'You must have the wrong

planet. I wish you nightmares would go away.'

'You're in the Cooperation now', Talker said desperately. 'There's the direction. Push!'

The Pusher didn't do anything for a moment. He was slowly emerging from his fantasy, realizing that he wasn't in a dream, after all. He felt the Cooperation. Eye to Thinker, Thinker to Talker, Talker to Pusher, all intercoordinated with Walls, and with each other.

'What is this?' Pusher asked. He felt the oneness of the Ship, the great warmth, the closeness achieved only in the Cooperation.

He Pushed.

Nothing happened.

'Try again', Talker begged.

Pusher searched his mind. He found a deep well of doubt and fear. Staring into it, he saw his own tortured face.

Thinker illuminated it for him.

Pushers had lived with this doubt and fear for centuries. Pushers had fought through fear, killed through doubt.

That was where the Pusher organ was!

Human – specialist – Pusher – he entered fully into the Crew, merged with them, threw mental arms around the shoulders of Thinker and Talker.

Suddenly, the Ship shot forward at eight times the speed of light. It continued to accelerate.

NO MORNING AFTER

ARTHUR C. CLARKE

'But this is terrible!' said the Supreme Scientist. 'Surely there is *something* we can do!'

'Yes, Your Cognizance, but it will be extremely difficult. The planet is more than five hundred light-years away, and it is very hard to maintain contact. However, we believe we can establish a bridgehead. Unfortunately, that is not the only problem. So far, we have been quite unable to communicate with these beings. Their telepathic powers are exceedingly rudimentary – perhaps even nonexistent. And if we cannot talk to them, there is no way in which we can help.'

There was a long mental silence while the Supreme Scientist analysed the situation and arrived, as he always did, at the correct answer.

'Any intelligent race must have *some* telepathic individuals', he mused. 'We must send out hundreds of observers, tuned to catch the first hint of stray thought. When you find a single responsive mind, concentrate all your efforts upon it. We *must* get our message through.'

'Very good, Your Cognizance. It shall be done.'

Across the abyss, across the gulf which light itself took half a thousand years to span, the questing intellects of the planet Thaar sent out their tendrils of thought, searching desperately for a single human being whose mind could perceive their presence. And as luck would have it, they encountered William Cross.

At least, they thought it was luck at the time, though later they were not so sure. In any case, they had little choice. The combination of circumstances that opened Bill's mind to them lasted only for seconds, and was not likely to occur again this side of eternity.

There were three ingredients in the miracle: it is hard to say if one was more important than another. The first was the accident of position. A flask of water, when sunlight falls upon it, can act as a crude lens, concentrating the light into a small area. On an immeasurably larger scale, the dense core

of the Earth was converging the waves that came from Thaar. In the ordinary way, the radiations of thought are unaffected by matter – they pass through it as effortlessly as light through glass. But there is rather a lot of matter in a planet, and the whole Earth was acting as a gigantic lens. As it turned, it was carrying Bill through its focus, where the feeble thought impulses from Thaar were concentrated a hundredfold.

Yet millions of other men were equally well placed: they received no message. But they were not rocket engineers: they had not spent years thinking and dreaming of space until it had become part of their very being.

And they were not, as Bill was, blind drunk, teetering on the last knife-edge of consciousness, trying to escape from reality into the world of dreams, where there were no disappointments and setbacks.

Of course, he could see the Army's point of view. 'You are paid, Dr Cross', General Potter had pointed out with unnecessary emphasis, 'to design missiles, *not* – ah – spaceships. What you do in your spare time is your own concern, but I must ask you not to use the facilities of the establishment for your hobby. From now on, all projects for the computing section will have to be cleared by me. That is all.'

They couldn't sack him, of course: he was too important. But he was not sure that he wanted to stay. He was not really sure of anything except that the job had back-fired on him, and that Brenda had finally gone off with Johnny Gardner – putting events in their order of importance.

Wavering slightly, Bill cupped his chin in his hands and stared at the whitewashed brick wall on the other side of the table. The only attempt at ornamentation was a calendar from Lockheed and a glossy six-by-eight from Aerojet showing L'il Abner Mark I making a boosted take-off. Bill gazed morosely at a spot midway between the two pictures, and emptied his mind of thought. The barriers went down . . .

At that moment, the massed intellects of Thaar gave a soundless cry of triumph, and the wall in front of Bill slowly dissolved into a swirling mist. He appeared to be looking down a tunnel that stretched to infinity. As a matter of fact, he was.

Bill studied the phenomenon with mild interest. It had a

certain novelty, but was not up to the standard of previous hallucinations. And when the voice started to speak in his mind, he let it ramble on for some time before he did anything about it. Even when drunk, he had an old-fashioned prejudice against starting conversations with himself.

'Bill', the voice began, 'listen carefully. We have had great difficulty in contacting you, and this is extremely important.'

Bill doubted this on general principles. *Nothing* was important any more.

'We are speaking to you from a very distant planet', continued the voice in a tone of urgent friendliness. 'You are the only human being we have been able to contact, so you *must* understand what we are saying.'

Bill felt mildly worried, though in an impersonal sort of way, since it was now rather hard to focus on his own problems. How serious was it, he wondered, when you started to hear voices? Well, it was best not to get excited. You can take it or leave it, Dr Cross, he told himself. Let's take it until it gets to be a nuisance.

'O.K.', he answered with bored indifference. 'Go right ahead and talk to me. I won't mind as long as it's interesting.'

There was a pause. Then the voice continued, in a slightly worried fashion.

'We don't quite understand. Our message isn't merely *interesting*. It's vital to your entire race, and you must notify your government immediately.'

'I'm waiting', said Bill. 'It helps to pass the time.'

Five hundred light-years away, the Thaarns conferred hastily among themselves. Something seemed to be wrong, but they could not decide precisely what. There was no doubt that they had established contact, yet this was not the sort of reaction they had expected. Well, they could only proceed and hope for the best.

'Listen, Bill', they continued. 'Our scientists have just discovered that your sun is about to explode. It will happen three days from now – seventy-four hours, to be exact. Nothing can stop it. But there's no need to be alarmed. We can save you, if you'll do what we say.'

'Go on', said Bill. This hallucination was ingenious.

'We can create what we call a bridge – it's a kind of tunnel

through space, like the one you're looking into now. The theory is far too complicated to explain, even to one of your mathematicians.'

'Hold on a minute!' protested Bill. 'I *am* a mathematician, and a darn good one, even when I'm sober. And I've read all about this kind of thing in the science-fiction magazines. I presume you're talking about some kind of short cut through a higher dimension of space. That's old stuff – pre-Einstein.'

A sensation of distinct surprise seeped into Bill's mind.

'We had no idea you were so advanced scientifically', said the Thaarns. 'But we haven't time to talk about the theory. All that matters is this – if you were to step into that opening in front of you, you'd find yourself instantly on another planet. It's a short cut, as you said – in this case through the thirty-seventh-dimension.'

'And it leads to your world?'

'Oh no – you couldn't live here. But there are plenty of planets like Earth in the universe, and we've found one that will suit you. We'll establish bridgeheads like this all over Earth, so your people will only have to walk through them to be saved. Of course, they'll have to start building up civilization again when they reach their new homes, but it's their only hope. You have to pass on this message, and tell them what to do.'

'I can just see them listening to me', said Bill. 'Why don't you go and talk to the president?'

'Because yours was the only mind we were able to contact. Others seemed closed to us: we don't understand why.'

'I could tell you', said Bill, looking at the nearly empty bottle in front of him. He was certainly getting his money's worth. What a remarkable thing the human mind was! Of course, there was nothing at all original in this dialogue: it was easy to see where the ideas came from. Only last week he'd been reading a story about the end of the world, and all this wishful thinking about bridges and tunnels through space was pretty obvious compensation for anyone who's spent five years wrestling with recalcitrant rockets.

'If the sun does blow up', Bill asked abruptly – trying to catch his hallucination unawares – 'what would happen?'

'Why, your planet would be melted instantly. All the planets, in fact, right out to Jupiter.'

Bill had to admit that this was quite a grandiose conception. He let his mind play with the thought, and the more he considered it, the more he liked it.

'My dear hallucination', he remarked pityingly, 'if I believed you, d'you know what I'd say?'

'But you *must* believe us!' came the despairing cry across the light-years.

Bill ignored it. He was warming to his theme.

'I'd tell you this. *It would be the best thing that could possibly happen.* Yes, it would save a whole lot of misery. No one would have to worry about the Russians and the atom bomb and the high cost of living. Oh, it would be wonderful! It's just what everybody really wants. Nice of you to come along and tell us, but just you go back home and pull your old bridge after you.'

There was consternation on Thaar. The Supreme Scientist's brain, floating like a great mass of coral in its tank of nutrient solution, turned slightly yellow about the edges – something it had not done since the Xantil invasion, 5000 years ago. At least fifteen psychologists had nervous breakdowns and were never the same again. The main computer in the College of Cosmophysics started dividing every number in its memory circuits by zero, and promptly blew all its fuses.

And on Earth, Bill Cross was really hitting his stride.

'Look at *me*', he said, pointing a wavering finger at his chest. 'I've spent years trying to make rockets do something useful, and they tell me I'm only allowed to build guided missiles, so that we can all blow each other up. The sun will make a neater job of it, and if you did give us another planet we'd only start the whole damn thing all over again.'

He paused sadly, marshalling his morbid thoughts.

'And now Brenda heads out of town without even leaving a note. So you'll pardon my lack of enthusiasm for your Boy Scout act.'

He couldn't have said 'enthusiasm' aloud, Bill realized. But he could still think it, which was an interesting scientific discovery. As he got drunker and drunker, would his cogitation – whoops, *that* nearly threw him! – finally drop down to words of one syllable?

In a final despairing exertion, the Thaarns sent their thoughts along the tunnel between the stars.

'You can't really mean it, Bill! Are *all* human beings like you?'

Now that was an interesting philosophical question! Bill considered it carefully – or as carefully as he could in view of the warm, rosy glow that was now beginning to envelop him. After all, things might be worse. He could get another job, if only for the pleasure of telling General Porter what he could do with his three stars. And as for Brenda – well, women were like streetcars: there'd always be another along in a minute.

Best of all, there was a second bottle of whisky in the Top Secret file. Oh, frabjous day! He rose unsteadily to his feet and wavered across the room.

For the last time, Thaar spoke to Earth.

'Bill!' it repeated desperately. 'Surely all human beings can't be like you!'

Bill turned and looked into the swirling tunnel. Strange – it seemed to be lighted with flecks of starlight, and was really rather pretty. He felt proud of himself: not many people could imagine *that.*

'Like me?' he said. 'No, they're not.' He smiled smugly across the light-years, as the rising tide of euphoria lifted him out of his despondency. 'Come to think of it', he added, 'there are a lot of people much worse off than me. Yes, I guess I must be one of the lucky ones, after all.'

He blinked in mild surprise, for the tunnel had suddenly collapsed upon itself and the whitewashed wall was there again, exactly as it had always been. Thaar knew when it was beaten.

'So much for *that* hallucination', thought Bill. 'I was getting tired of it, anyway. Let's see what the next one's like.'

As it happened, there wasn't a next one, for five seconds later he passed out cold, just as he was setting the combination of the file cabinet.

The next two days were rather vague and bloodshot, and he forgot all about the interview.

On the third day something was nagging at the back of his mind: he might have remembered if Brenda hadn't turned up again and kept him busy being forgiving.

And there wasn't a fourth day, of course.

SHIPWRECK

R. CHETWYND-HAYES

It came hurtling down from the night sky: a blazing ball of fire, a hissing globe of curling flame, with black smoke trails writhing from its tail. It crashed on to the gorse-covered moorland, making a two-foot deep crater, then settled down like some monstrous egg and spluttered angrily when the cold south-easterly wind fanned the flames into bright orange plumes.

The night retreated before the first platoons of day, advancing across the eastern sky. The flames died, the pitted surface glowed, first bright red, then dull amber, finally turning deep black. The sun was well over the horizon when the black surface cracked. A long, shuddering split ran round the globe, then widened so that a small section at the top became detached and, after a strange jerking movement, slid to the ground.

A few wisps of smoke drifted up from the aperture and went floating lazily out across the desolate moorland. Then for a while there was no movement of any kind. A wandering horsefly hovered over the ragged rim and inspected the hole and whatever lay beneath with alert curiosity, but, finding nothing of interest to warrant further attention, went darting out over the gorse and heather in search of more rewarding adventure.

It was high noon when the first trickle of blue jelly seeped over the rim and came slithering down to the coarse grass. Then, as though encouraged by the ease of its journey, the trickle thickened and deepened and became a stream. Transparent, blue, slightly pulsating, the stream of jelly curled round and became a pool. As the flow from the black ball widened even further, layer upon layer built up, until a shimmering transparent cone stood beside a gorse bush and faintly reflected the cold, cloud-flecked sky. At the peak of the cone, a thin tapering tip reared up and seemed to survey the surrounding countryside.

Sarcan was not frightened, for emotion was unknown to

his race, but he was prepared for danger and deeply interested in what he sensed and saw.

The ship had been hit half a light year beyond the rings of Ultra. The enemy had struck when his sensory-beam had been out of order and had hit him with one searing blast that had hurled his little ship clear across the wastes of space, until he was trapped by the gravitational pull of this small planet. He was alive, but forever marooned. A castaway on a lump of rotting rock that circled a third-rate sun.

He sent out mental waves to taste the atmosphere, noted the vegetation, the soil and the gravity pull, and stored the information in his limitless memory bank. There were signs of animal life, and without doubt there would be a dominant species, which could even have developed some form of primitive civilization. Then he remembered the first rule for survival on an alien planet – merge with the surroundings. Take on the form of the primitives, adopt their thinking patterns, but above all hide the sacred life-essence from alien sight.

Sarcan sent out a thin tentacle of his true-essence and curled it round the gorse bush. Instantly the yellow flowers shrivelled, the branches turned to a dull grey. Then the entire plant crumbled into a fine powder that was soon dispersed by the never-resting wind.

The true-essence of Sarcan, officer of the Imperial Ulterian Galactic Space Force, writhed, expanded and then split into thin slivers of shimmering jelly that took on the grey-brown colour of branches and the bright-yellow hue of the disintegrated gorse flowers. Presently it stood some two feet from the position originally occupied by its counterpart – a perfect duplicate in every detail. Sarcan allowed the wind to stir his branches while he pondered on his next move.

He had adapted to the surrounding countryside, but in his present form could not move from one place to another. Also, sooner or later he would have to revert to his natural state, for, without constant practice, his ability to maintain an alien shape was limited. No, he must find a life-form that could transport his true-essence to whatever crude civilization this planet possessed and try to find some kind of shelter. He sent out invisible mental fingers and explored the vegetation and moist earth. Insects . . . blind forms that wriggled their way

deep down below the soil . . . winged creatures that would be useless . . . then . . . at last . . . a life-form that could be used.

Sarcan concentrated a fraction of his essence-power and called the creature, planting pictures in its brain of green foodstuffs, even while he analysed its physical make-up. It came to him in swift, effortless bounds – a small, hairy creature with long ears and a quivering pink nose. When it was within reaching distance, Sarcan reverted to his natural form and shot out another thin tentacle. The hare disintegrated and its duplicate went leaping across the moor.

The swift movement was exhilarating, but the vehicle was small and the effort required to compress Sarcan's true-essence into such a limited space was exhausting. Also, the tiny brain was a mass of fear-inspired reflexes and they kept interfering with Sarcan's concentration, so that once or twice he found himself slipping back to the essence-form. No, he must find a larger vehicle that had a reasonably developed brain and a memory bank that could give him a clear picture of this planet and its environment.

He came to a wide strip of hard ground that must have been some kind of thoroughfare, for the vehicle's brain flashed a fear-tinted picture of fast-moving objects that made a loud noise and were dangerous if a living creature should get in their path. Such objects could only be the product of some form of life and therefore should contain the vehicle most suited to his needs. Sarcan stopped the four-legged vehicle, switched off its brain, and quickly reverted to his true-essence. Then he flopped down by the roadside and waited. He did not have to wait very long.

The object moved by means of two circular contraptions, made a loud noise and was propelled by some kind of primitive engine. Way back in the dim hinterlands of Sarcan's race – long before they achieved full essencehood – some such means of transportation had been used. But it was the biped life-form that rode the transportation object which claimed his full attention. It was equipped with two lower members that were astride the moving machine, and two higher ones that terminated in five digits. It was encased in artificial skins, which suggested the life-forms were a long way from essence-hood, but proved they had advanced some little way from

primeval savagery. Sarcan flung a mental barrier across the road and gave it the shape of a large tree that he could see standing some distance away.

The machine swerved, its engine screamed as brakes were hurriedly applied, then the biped seemed to leap into the air before it crashed down upon the road and lay still. Sarcan knew he must make full contact, for it was of the utmost importance that he drain the creature's memory bank to understand fully its physical and mental make-up. He liquefied his true-essence and seeped over the motionless figure.

First the artificial skins were analysed, before they disintegrated. Then the naked body, which moaned when the ice-cold essence crept over it, was examined in minute detail. The skin and flesh were broken down into their component parts, the blood tasted and its purpose understood; then the complicated network of veins, the intricate framework of bones, the organs – all yielded up their simple secrets. It took Sarcan a micro-second to ransack the memory bank and absorb all the hidden information; photostat the complicated language, dismiss the emotional undertones that meant nothing to him. He drained the limp carcass of all it contained and allowed it to crumble into dust, before he compressed his true-essence into a biped life-form. Less than three minutes had passed since Sarcan had first acted, when Sydney J. Beecham, male, aged 25 circles of the grade-three sun, British, married, junior advertising executive, resident of 23 Clondel Road, London, S.W.16 – at present on holiday . . . etc. . . . etc. . . . etc. . . . pulled the motorcycle upright, kicked the starting lever and rode away to complete the journey that had been so dramatically interrupted.

Mrs Hatfield was a mother-in-law who really believed that she had not lost a daughter at the wedding altar, but gained a son. Therefore, it stood to reason that having acquired this priceless possession she should guard it, advise it, correct it, move in with it, and finally accompany it when her daughter took it on holiday.

Although Sydney J. Beecham was not aware of the fact, several other applicants for the privilege of being Mrs Hatfield's son-in-law had been turned away because they had

displayed lamentable traits of independence. One had so far forgotten himself as to call her an interfering old buzzard, and hence had been banished to the waiting arms of a barmaid from Putney. But Sydney had, so to speak, been made to order. When Sylvia had suggested that her mother – being of a nervous disposition – could not possibly live alone and therefore must move in with them, he had expressed his agreement by redecorating the spare room. Mrs Hatfield's strictures were accepted as kindly advice, her occasional outbursts as summer storms, and her almost constant criticism as the voice of experience. In fact that same voice was being raised in protest that very minute as mother and daughter sat in the reception foyer of the 'Exeter Arms'.

'Why he wanted to hire a motorcycle and go bounding off on his own is beyond my comprehension.'

Sylvia Beecham was a pretty, fair-haired girl, with an enchanting air of quiet resignation.

'He said he wanted to explore the moors. I think . . .'

'Well, don't', Mrs Hatfield instructed. 'What's wrong with the car, I should like to know? Then we could have all gone. No, it was pure selfishness. Gadding about, while we sit here and twiddle our thumbs. I will have a few words to say when he comes back.'

'Don't you think . . .?'

'No, I don't. A husband – not to mention a son-in-law – has certain obligations. They do not include rampaging round the countryside on a motorcycle. Ah . . . unless I'm very much mistaken, here he comes. I ask you, what does he look like?'

As Sydney came through the swing-doors, he removed his crash helmet, and revealed himself as a tall young man with an open, ingenuous, fair-skinned face that at that moment seemed to be rather drawn. He advanced towards the two women and, after some hesitation, performed a low bow.

'Greetings, mother-in-law and wife.'

Sylvia giggled, assuming her husband had suddenly acquired a sense of humour, while Mrs Hatfield frowned, having hastily decided that respect had been replaced by insolence.

'Sydney, I am in no mood for frivolity. I understood that you would be gone for not less than one hour. We have been waiting three. Doubtless, you have a good explanation.'

Sydney turned cold, expressionless eyes in her direction, and Mrs Hatfield wondered if he had been drinking.

'The traffic was thick . . . dense . . . I also misdirect . . . lost my direction . . . went round in circles. Pardon, but I am not yet co-ordinated.'

'You mean you're not yet sober!' Mrs Hatfield exclaimed. 'Really, this is too bad. Sylvia, say something. After all he is your husband.'

Sylvia obediently creased her brow into what she thought might be a forbidding frown and said: 'Sydney, how could you?' Her husband shook his head slowly.

'No alcoholic beverage has passed my lips – this I so do swear. May we please retire to the upper regions where I can immerse the body in hot water and apply a coating of soap. I am covered with sweat excrement and experience some discomfort.'

When Mrs Hatfield had recovered from the first effects of shock, she rose, and with great, not to say fearsome dignity, walked towards the lift. Sylvia looked up at her husband with reluctant admiration.

'You must stop it. Honestly, I don't know what has come over you. You've made her so angry.'

Sydney scratched his head and looked from left to right as though seeking inspiration from the tired wallpaper.

'I spoke the right words, wife-Sylvia. Why is mother-in-law-Hatfield displaying signs of deep emotion?'

Sylvia broke into a fit of spasmodic giggling. 'There you go again. Please stop. I've never known you to be funny before.'

They were now in the lift, which was whisking them up to the second floor, and Sylvia's amusement was giving place to bewilderment. Her husband seemed to take a great interest in how the lift worked; the sliding doors, the row of buttons, the flashing lights. The girl expressed her concern.

'What *is* the matter with you? I say, you don't look very well. Is your stomach playing you up?'

'The stomach is in a state of great content.'

She waited until they had reached the second floor and were walking slowly towards their bedroom door. 'Look here, this is some kind of joke? Isn't it?'

For a moment his face was screwed up into an expression

of complete bewilderment, then it exploded – Sylvia could think of no better word – in a brilliant, if somewhat artificial smile.

'Joke, Humour! Sense of the ridiculous! That is correct. I create joke! As when a man slips on banana skin and breaks a leg. You must smile . . . roar . . . laugh. That is it. You must laugh.'

'If you say so.' She opened the bedroom door and walked slowly into the room which lay beyond. 'But Mother won't laugh if you keep referring to her as the mother-in-law. She was never fond of that kind of joke.'

Sydney did not answer, but sank down in the nearest armchair and stared across the room with dilated, watery eyes. Sylvia's sudden alarm bordered on panic.

'You are ill! Don't try to tell me different. Good heavens, your face is turning grey! And your eyes . . .'

She stopped short. How could any loving wife tell her husband that his eyes looked as if they might spill over at any moment and go coursing down his cheeks. He raised a hand that seemed strangely limp – one might say boneless.

'I think it beesh . . .' Could he have been drinking after all? His words were most oddly slurred. 'Youse leave the room.'

Sylvia accepted this advice, for the simple reason that she was suddenly aware of a surge of blind, unreasoning terror. Whatever sickness had struck Sydney down, it was without doubt, one that was beyond her experience or comprehension. The cheeks had now turned to a dull grey and were fast acquiring a blueish tinge. Sylvia ran to fetch her mother.

'Sounds like heart trouble', commented that lady a few minutes later. 'Drink and gallivanting. He's strained something.'

'His eyes were running', Sylvia pointed out.

'Debauchery', Mrs Hatfield said grimly. 'I always had my suspicions.'

'Please come and see him for yourself. I don't like the look of him.'

Mrs Hatfield, after a mammoth struggle, managed to rise from her chair.

'I never liked the look of him. Very well, lead the way.'

The room was much as Sylvia had left it, save for one

small detail. Sydney had disappeared. She peered into the bathroom, went out on to the verandah, even absentmindedly looked under the bed – all to no avail.

'I expect he's popped out for a moment', she informed a cynical Mrs Hatfield.

'I thought you said he was ill!'

'He must . . . have felt better.'

Her mother's eye flashed its inquiring glance round the room, then hardened into an interrogating glare when it alighted on the pink-quilted bedspread. She pointed a quivering forefinger.

'That's why he pushed off! Spilt something on the bedspread! What is it? Looks like blue gelatine.'

Together they approached the bed, where, after minutes spent in silent contemplation, they gradually assumed expressions of profound distaste. It was as though someone had spilt a large quantity of blue jelly in the centre of the bed and it had spread out into a rippling, rather bumpy pool, before congealing. There was a fairly large mound in the centre; a kind of blue, transparent island, surrounded by a shallow, frozen sea. It had even overflowed and dribbled down the valance as quivering blue spears that clung to Mrs Hatfield's skirt when she came too close to the bed. She drew back with a muffled cry of disgust.

'What on earth . . . ! Sylvia, this is really too much. Will you kindly inform me how your husband came to make a mess like this?'

Sylvia screwed her pretty face into an expression that was meant to suggest some form of mental activity.

'Perhaps', she exclaimed with more hope than conviction, 'he was sick.'

'Don't be so stupid.'

'Violently sick', Sylvia added, then thoughtlessly prodded a nearby lump of blue jelly. It retaliated by making a soft, popping sound.

'Stop that', Mrs Hatfield barked, 'and do try to talk sense. How you're going to explain this to the hotel management, is beyond me. But that is your affair. I am going to lie down. Perhaps when your husband does decide to put in a reappearance, you will ask him to come and see me.'

After her mother had departed, Sylvia stood looking un-

happily at the blue jelly on the bedspread. Despite her concern she thought it looked rather pretty, especially the central mound, which reflected the sunlight and glittered like a huge, polished diamond. Whatever it was, she wished Sydney had been more careful, or at any rate, had made some effort to clean up the mess. It was not like him to be so thoughtless, or to upset her mother so unnecessarily. She sat down and had a good worry. After a while her anxiety took on words.

'Sydney', she wailed, 'where are you?'

'Here', said a very healthy-looking Sydney, climbing off the bed and standing up. 'I feel much better after the requisite rest.'

It really was too much, and Sylvia promptly fainted.

Awareness came spinning up from a well of darkness.

A shape was sitting by the bedside. As Sylvia's awareness returned to normality, the shape took on the semblance of her husband – and with recognition came fear. Fear, which, it has been said, sharpens the senses wonderfully, came tripping along the dark avenues of her mind, and was closely followed by the shrouded form of truth. Despite the weak, rather pretty face, the thin shoulders, the narrow chest and long, lanky legs, Sylvia knew – and there was no reasonable explanation for this knowledge – that this Sydney-shaped figure was not her husband. The head was turned in her direction and she saw the eyes. They were as cold and inhuman as a clear pool of frozen water. The voice also made no pretence to be more than an inadequate medium of communication.

'I feel it is well if I make the position clear.' The Sydney-creature turned on its chair and watched her with a cold, unblinking stare. 'I gather from the brain and the store of racial memories that are stored there that the relationship between husband and wife is a very intimate one. They are – according to the words of your creed – of one flesh. I dimly understand that at certain times they are actually joined together in an act that results in reproduction. Therefore I find it necessary to explain my situation, so that you may co-operate to your limited capacity.'

Sylvia made a strange choking sound, and the Sydney-

creature lowered its head slightly and stared at her with increased intensity.

'Are you experiencing some discomfort? Is there some malfunction of your body that needs adjustment?'

After a while Sylvia was able to produce a sound that could have been roughly translated to mean – no.

'That is good, for I require your undivided attention. Your husband – mate – better half – has ceased to be. I disintegrated his crudely-assembled matter and shaped my true-essence into a duplicate. The question that must be foremost in your mind is – who am I? Is this not so?'

As Sylvia was unable to speak, she nodded. The Sydney-creature did likewise.

'I understand that curiosity is the besetting sin of earth-females and a quadruped animal called a cat. There appears to be an unexplained relationship between the two. Very well. Briefly, I am what you would call an alien life-form that originated in a star-cluster situated a few million light years beyond Orion. Your unfortunately low mental development could not begin to understand our environment, even if your language contained the word sounds to explain it. So, I will just say we have no bodies, but a mass of super-intelligent true-essence, that can adapt itself – for limited periods – to its surroundings. Therefore, when my space-craft crashed on to your tiny planet, I found it wise to take on the shape of its predominate life-form. Do you understand?'

Sylvia had not understood a word, but she thought it wise to nod vigorously.

'That is both surprising and gratifying. Now it must be understood that I cannot retain this shape for long, without taking short breaks for rest and recharging. A while ago, I spread my true-essence over this bed, trusting to escape detection, but the mother-in-law has sight, when blindness would be a virtue. Also, I have not yet achieved full control over all external parts. In moments of forgetfulness, portions are apt to revert to the true-essence. For example –' The Sydney-creature held up his left arm, 'You will see this extremity has become fluid, even while I have been speaking.'

Sylvia made some interesting sounds when she saw that a blob of blue jelly was dangling from the end of the thin wrist. The Sydney-creature shook it experimentally, then

turned his attention to the girl, whose complexion was now faintly tinged with green.

'I detect a certain disturbance in your abdomen regions. Can this be the result of your viewing a portion of my true-essence?'

Sylvia's bulging eyes and gaping mouth promised a practical demonstration that would both answer his question and ruin the pillowcase. The Sydney-creature nodded slowly.

'This is indeed unfortunate. You will have to be replaced by a reproduction. Let me explain further. To reproduce, we have only to detach a portion of our true-essence and leave it for a short while to develop. Therefore, you will understand that as I cannot return to my native planet it will be desirable for me to – what is your word? – people this one with my reproductions. A portion here, a portion there, then reproduction begetting reproduction. In no time at all, this gas-girded fragment of rock you call Earth will be home – from – home. Is that the right expression? I find my control of communication sounds is improving.'

Sylvia could not say the same, but she did manage to make one basic sound. She screamed.

The Sydney-creature instantly slapped his lump of true-essence over her mouth and the scream subsided to a muffled and not unmusical low gurgle. He then did something with his free – and complete – hand, which resulted in Sylvia becoming as limp and silent as a slab of fresh pork.

Had someone come into the room some five minutes later, they would have seen a sight that might have threatened sanity, or, at the very least, stretched credibility to breaking point. A long, transparent, blue sausage lay as a quivering mass across the carpet. Approximately one third of its length bulged and resembled a rapidly-expanding balloon. When it had grown to the size of a prize-winning pumpkin, it became detached from its plainly exhausted parent, and went rolling under the bed. Presently, the Sydney-creature rose slowly to his feet and staggered over to the armchair. There he sat and waited for his reproduction to come out and pay its filial respects. He did not have to wait very long. The progeny of the Ulterian life-forms mature very quickly.

Mrs Hatfield had enjoyed her afternoon nap.

She awoke refreshed, alert and in a mood that boded ill for erring sons-in-law and non-compliant daughters. She arose and, girding her loins for action, moved with the majesty of a frigate under full sail towards the door. She found her son-in-law seated in an armchair, while her daughter – who did look rather strange – reclined on the bed. As she unceremoniously opened the door, she was just in time to hear the tail end of a one-sided conversation.

'. . . you must keep control of all portions and ensure the true-essence does not . . .' The Sydney-creature broke off and looked up as his mother-in-law entered. The cold gleam in his eyes – which had recently caused her some disquiet – temporarily stemmed the proposed torrent of words. She said simply: 'So – you're back!'

Husband exchanged glances with wife. Male looked at female. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say – progenitor silently consulted its primogenitus. The Sydney-creature spoke.

'I am reassembled.'

'You are . . . what!'

Her son-in-law shook his head as though in exasperated self-rebuke, then creased his face in some kind of smile.

'I crave your pardon. As you have said – I have returned, and tender my apologies for any unease my unexplained absence may have caused you.'

He then turned to Sylvia and addressed her with the severity of a schoolmaster instructing a not-very-bright pupil.

'You will note the way I have construed the communication sounds, and have avoided the double meanings, which can be a trap for the unwary. Kindly give utterance.'

Sylvia promptly uttered.

'I find the brain which you have given me, revered producer, has an adequate memory bank of word sounds, but I am experiencing difficulty in maintaining this alien shape. Certain members have a tendency to dissolve – melt – become runny . . .'

'You must more fully concentrate', the Sydney-creature instructed. 'Alien shape must be complete at all times, or native life-forms make loud noise.'

Mrs Hatfield had a growing suspicion that her one-time respectful, even cowed family, had suddenly taken leave of

their senses and were daring to indulge in unseemly ridicule. She asked a very pertinent question.

'Are you both mad?'

The Sydney-creature turned to the rather glassy-eyed Sylvia.

'She means have you a derangement of the brain. You will answer in the negative.'

A face that was strangely distorted was raised in Mrs Hatfield's direction. She had the impression that one eye was out of alignment with the other.

'No. Not. Never. Not – no – how.'

Mrs Hatfield's rage grew to frightful proportions, although she could not entirely suppress a feeling that something really horrible was waiting to rear its head. She thrust the thought back into the mental lumber-room, where it nestled down among other fanciful notions that she had similarly banished over the years. Not least of these was the perfectly ridiculous idea that there could be any kind of intelligent life on other planets.

'I am not the most patient woman in the world', she informed the Sydney-shaped creature in the armchair, 'but I have so far displayed amazing forbearance in the face of your childish and perfectly incomprehensible behaviour. But there is a limit, and I have reached it. How –'

'Revered producer', Sylvia interrupted in a voice that expressed great urgency, 'my lower portions have reverted to the true-essence.'

It needed but a single glance to prove that this statement was indeed true, for in place of the pair of shapely limbs that had been Sylvia's by right of birth was a transparent, triangular slab of blue substance. She looked rather like the offspring of a mermaid who has dallied too long with an amorous jelly-fish. The creature that was shaped like Mrs Hatfield's son-in-law expressed its displeasure.

'You have neglected to practise rigid control. Reassemble at once.'

Mrs Hatfield witnessed the victory of inexperience over honest endeavour. The slab of blue jelly rippled, seethed and finally twisted. The result was a pair of fat legs, each endowed with a six-fingered hand. The Sydney-creature shook his head and completely ignored the gasping cries that were issuing from Mrs Hatfield's gaping mouth.

'Revert lower portions to true-essence. Then reassemble legs with feet. Memory bank will present mental picture of legs with feet.'

The next effort was more successful, insofar as two legs, complete with feet, did project from beneath Sylvia's mini-skirt. They were made from polished walnut and were equipped with claw-feet which might well have graced a Queen Anne dressing-table. The original Sylvia had quite a passion for antique furniture.

'Again. Revert to true-essence. Assemble dominant life-form legs. Full concentration.'

Presently a reasonable facsimile of Sylvia's legs lay upon the bed, but the effort required had caused a certain amount of deterioration in other parts of her anatomy. One eye was by now definitely out of alignment with the other, and there was a suggestion of instability about the nose. But the Sydney-creature apparently decided to let well alone for the time being, trusting that practice would sooner or later make perfect. In the meantime his full attention was drawn to Mrs Hatfield, who was displaying all the signs of deep distress.

Her large face had turned to the colour of fresh putty, in which erupted veins stood out like streaks of strawberry jam; her mouth gaped, her eyes bulged and she appeared to be trying to push her considerable bulk through the closed door.

The Sylvia-creature, who clearly had that thirst for knowledge which is so often lacking in the young, expressed a desire for information.

'What is the mother-in-law doing? Is she trying to reproduce?'

The Sydney-creature shook his head and examined Mrs Hatfield thoughtfully. Having failed in her attempt to pass through a closed door, she had sunk down on to the floor and was now counting the fingers of her right hand. The fact could not be ignored – she was in no fit state for public display.

'No. Their reproduction methods are of long duration and far too complicated to be explained now. However . . .'

For a while the silence was broken only by the sounds that continued to emerge from the seated Mrs Hatfield. Having confirmed that her right hand had the correct number of

digits, she was now checking the left. The Sydney-creature turned to his progeny.

'Are you prepared to reproduce?'

Mother-in-law, daughter and son-in-law presented themselves to the assistant manager, who, resplendent in black cut-away jacket and pin-stripe trousers, stood behind the reception desk. The son-in-law smiled and said: 'Our bill, please'.

The assistant manager, although young, had trained himself never to express surprise or alarm at the appearance or behaviour of his guests. Experience had taught him that the public were not, by and large, either prepossessing or beautiful. He was fully prepared to accept warts, wens, potato-shaped faces, protruding teeth, flapping ears and any other malformation that the human face is heir to. But there was one proviso that he considered both reasonable and obligatory. That guests – with the possible exception of the odd black eye and peeling nose – should depart with roughly the same appearance that they had booked in with. This was certainly not the case with either Mrs Hatfield or her daughter.

The younger woman – for whom the assistant manager had entertained a partiality – had somehow acquired an eye which not only resembled an egg that had passed the age of maturity, but had been elevated to a position of some three inches above its fellow. Also, her nose had become unaccountably prolonged and was inclined to flap from side to side whenever its owner turned her head.

Mrs Hatfield was in an even worse state. Her large face looked as if an unsuccessful attempt had been made to flatten it between the jaws of a powerful vice. The cheeks bulged out on either side, the mouth was a long slit, the nose resembled a blob of discarded chewing-gum and the eyes surveyed the disconcerted assistant manager from a position just under the hairline. The son-in-law – who, apart from a pair of cold, staring eyes – appeared to be remarkably intact, repeated his request.

'Our bill . . . please.'

Habit enabled the young man to carry out his normal

duties. He prepared the bill, accepted the money, passed over the receipt – and perhaps all would have been well if they had all not insisted on shaking hands. It was the son-in-law's fault.

'Extend the right upper-member', he instructed his companions, 'and grip that of the life-form's. It is the custom.'

He set an example and the assistant manager gasped when fingers of steel all but crushed his hand. He averted his eyes when the daughter slipped her soft palm into his and murmured something that sounded like: 'May you reproduce often.' He closed his eyes when the mother-in-law stepped forward to present her offering. This may not have been a wise action, because without doubt if the young man had seen what he was expected to shake, he would have declined the honour. As it was, his fingers felt, his stomach heaved and his eyes – once they were open – saw. His shriek went echoing across the foyer and up the broad stairs to the room above. The cry could have been interpreted as a clarion call announcing the birth of a new age.

The Mrs Hatfield-creature went trotting after the one-time daughter and son-in-law, while her voice was raised in a cry of anguish: 'Revered producers – my right upper member-extremity has reverted to the true-essence.'

It is interesting to try and imagine how many voices will be repeating those words five years from now.

Fontana Tales of Terror

Stories to chill your blood from every corner of the globe. Along with tidbits of haunting history and strange happenings never yet explained—for the truth is often even more hair-raising than the imaginary.

Tales of Terror from Outer Space
Welsh Tales of Terror
Edited by R. Chetwynd-Hayes

London Tales of Terror
Edited by Jacquelyn Visick

Scottish Tales of Terror
Edited by Angus Campbell

European Tales of Terror
Sea Tales of Terror
Edited by J. J. Strating

Fontana also publishes

The Invisible Man
The Valley of Spiders
H. G. Wells

Fontana Books

Fontana Books

Fontana is best known as one of the leading paperback publishers of popular fiction and non-fiction. It also includes an outstanding, and expanding, section of books on history, natural history, religion and social sciences.

Most of the fiction authors need no introduction. They include Agatha Christie, Hammond Innes, Alistair MacLean, Catherine Gaskin, Victoria Holt and Lucy Walker. Desmond Bagley and Maureen Peters are among the relative newcomers.

The non-fiction list features a superb collection of animal books by such favourites as Gerald Durrell and Joy Adamson.

All Fontana books are available at your bookshop or newsagent; or can be ordered direct. Just fill in the form below and list the titles you want.

FONTANA BOOKS, Cash Sales Department, G.P.O. Box 29, Douglas, Isle of Man, British Isles. Please send purchase price, plus 6p per book. Customers outside the U.K. send purchase price, plus 7p per book. Cheque, postal or money order. No currency.

NAME (Block letters)

ADDRESS

While every effort is made to keep prices low, it is sometimes necessary to increase prices at short notice. Fontana Books reserve the right to show new retail prices on covers which may differ from those previously advertised in the text or elsewhere.

Outer Space – where in the dark mists of infinity lurk alien creatures from far-flung galaxies. Weird monsters like . . .

The vampire **girl from Mars**
The spaceship manned by **living corpses**
The **hideous giant** trapped by time
The lump of **intelligent jelly**
The **huge insects** that overran the earth

Space-age horror comes down to earth in these chilling stories by such famous writers as Ray Bradbury, Brian Aldiss, Robert Bloch and Arthur C. Clarke.

U.K. 45p
Australia $1.50*
New Zealand $1.50*
Canada $1.75
*recommended price

0 00 613960 4