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Mandrake

Susan Cooper

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Her first novel was *Mandrake* and her most recent *Behind the Golden Curtain*, a commentary on American life. Susan Cooper has also written a book for children, *Over Sea, Under Stone*, and was a contributor to *Age of Austerity: 1945–51* (published by Penguins).

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THE CHARACTERS IN THIS BOOK ARE ENTIRELY IMAGINARY AND BEAR NO RELATION TO ANY LIVING PERSON

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Time will say nothing but I told you so
W. H. Auden

Part One

Queston was never quite sure afterwards whether he really heard the shot. Probably it was the noise of the bullet smacking into the concrete wall three feet behind his head; the small crunching thwack that made him turn and notice the white scar in the blue paint, and the white grains still floating in the air. Then the shouts came, farther away, high and shrill over the boom of the amplifiers' voice still tolling: 'Pan American Flight 201 to London, passengers to Gate Six, please . . .'

There were confused shouts, from a struggling knot of figures behind the immigration barrier. He turned back, buffeted by the crowd, and caught sight briefly of the man held there by police. A thin face, twisted with yelling, stared up from a body bent double by the law's willingly expert blue-shirted arm. The scream came suddenly clear as the man vanished, dragged out of sight: 'Murderer! Murderer . . . !' It was an English voice.

'What gives?'

'What's going on?'

'Someone took a pot shot at a guy –'

Queston was taller than most of the other passengers; they bubbled under his gaze in a quacking sea. Tailored American matrons with blue hair, two small blonde English girls with jaws like horses, round bald men in grey suits. A big mid-Westerner near him, impassive between crew cut and bow-tie, said loudly, public and important: 'He was trying to get that guy over there. The dark one with the cops. I saw him. Fired one shot before they grabbed him – real nutty-looking character, missed by a mile . . .'

'Jeeze, we might have been killed – '

'Who was it? Who's the guy he shot at?'

'Hey, I think I've seen him before – isn't he a film star or something?'

Like smiling sheepdogs the airline stewardesses came persuading them to move on down the long corridor, reciting gently, 'Flight 201, please,' as if nothing had broken the airport's scampering routine. Queston side-stepped an imperturbable sweet-threatening blonde for long enough to stare at the man the mid-Westerner had indicated. He saw a small group of men by the barrier, talking to the immigration officer who had put him through so peculiarly searching an interrogation five minutes before. Among the uniforms and the holsters there were several men in dark suits, with the indefinable self-contained look of travellers. One, the tallest, stood clearly the focus of the group – youngish, dark-haired, with a face at once foxy and strong. He was talking quickly, one clenched hand frozen hard against the palm of the other; it was the attitude of a man suppressing some large emotion he did not want others to see released.

Not surprising, Queston thought, if he's been shot at. As he watched the man an echo of memory flicked into his mind and away again, to twitch irritatingly behind his thoughts as he let the stewardess turn him finally towards the plane. 'Flight 201, sir? *This* way . . .' Somewhere he too had seen that face, sometime during the last five years. But a film star? No – something very different . . .

Outside, the aircraft lay, a dull grey cylinder patched red, yellow, green by the heat of Mach 3 speed; the huge engines nestled at its tail and the nose pointed, menacing, like a needle-sharp horn. He thought: They should call it Unicorn. But instead they called it 1010: ten-ten; he had travelled in his first only the day before, on the way to New York. In the territory where he had spent the last five years, there was no use for anything but the older subsonic planes.

Inside the cabin, subtly transported from high summer to a cooler, gentler artificial sunlight, he settled back to let the music from the hidden amplifiers lull him gently half-asleep. It wafted him through the mild prickle of air pressure;

through the small lurch of take-off, the sudden change of element that somehow was still there to be felt even without windows to show the ground falling away. He had always liked the *frisson* of freedom which that release gave.

The seat beside him was empty; on these midday flights there was always space, they had told him, even in tourist class. So when the touch on his arm came he thought it was the blonde stewardess, and looked up with the beginning of a smile into the face of a strange man: dark reddish cheeks and pale lashless eyes. Hastily he dropped the smile, but saw a broader one on the stranger's face: a grin, almost a grimace, of wide welcoming teeth.

'Dr Queston?'

'Yes,' Queston said warily.

'David Queston? The anthropologist?'

'Yes. But I'm sorry, I don't think I –'

'Brunner,' the man said. 'Klaus Brunner. You and I have met several years ago, Dr Queston, I think in 1970. Before you left to bury yourself – if you will forgive me – so wastefully in Brazil. Or perhaps it has not been a waste. At any rate I am glad to see you coming home. You remember me, perhaps?' He sat, still smiling, on the arm of the empty seat.

And then Queston did remember him; and remembered in the same moment the face of the man attacked at Kennedy; and knew suddenly what was coming next.

'I am travelling with the Minister,' Brunner said. He gave the word an obsequious sound; a Teutonic reverence for office. 'We have been on a brief mission in the United States – most successfully, I am glad to say. The Minister would very much like to meet you – he was delighted to find your name on the passenger list. He sends me to ask if you will give him the pleasure of your company during the flight. You are not busy, I hope?'

Queston said non-committally: 'I imagine you're travelling first class.'

Brunner chuckled. 'We are – and no one else. There is therefore plenty of room. And anyone who is with the Minister . . . Please?'

'Why not?' He stood up, unfolding himself from the narrow seat, and followed the stocky little German down the aisle. At the barrier leading into the first-class cabin the stewardess, smiling respectfully, held back the door to let them through.

Against the padded head-rest of the seat where Brunner stopped, Queston saw the lean dark head of the man who had been in the centre of the group he watched at Kennedy; the man at whom the shot had been fired. He realized now that it was in the few newspapers to have come his way in Brazil that he had seen this face, pictured from Britain: young, bland, tough, always inscrutable, with no expression but confidence behind the large dark eyes. The face seemed thinner than it had done in the pictures, looking calculatingly up at him now.

Brunner said stiffly: 'Minister, may I introduce David Queston. Queston, this is Mr Mandrake.'

He had been away from England for a long time then, too, on the day he had first met Klaus Brunner. He had not known what had been going on. Not that there had been any reason, then, to look for sinister motives at work on the country. Perhaps there was still no reason now. Well.

It was in Oxford. On each of his few trips back to Britain in the last fifteen wandering years he had come there, briefly. He had few friends, and fewer that he cared to seek out; but James Thorp-Gudgeon was always an entertainment. Fat and imperturbable, he sat in his comfortable set of college rooms like an amiable Buddha, dispensing high-pitched paternalism to a new set of disciples every year. Queston liked to go back to be amused: and perhaps to be reminded, through Thorp-Gudgeon's malicious prattle, of the reasons why he would always prefer another long remote expedition in a joyless climate to settling down in the British academic life.

He had arrived at Oxford by train, to find an unaccountable peace in the streets.

'James,' he said, across the book-strewn table and peeling leather chairs, 'what on earth's happened to the traffic? I saw hardly anything but bicycles on the way from the hotel.'

Thorp-Gudgeon emerged from a cupboard with a decanter of port, his broad moon-face slightly flushed by the effort. 'Bliss, dear boy. Absolute bliss. Didn't you know we'd solved our problems? It must be nearly a year now. They tried to build that ridiculous road through Christ Church meadow again, and Oxford made such a fuss that the P.M. re-created the Ministry of Town and Country Planning. Not before time, I must say. The result is that we have virtually a walled-off city. Free of through traffic, at any rate. Delightful.' He eased himself into an armchair, and stretched his little legs out in front of him comfortably.

'Pretty well free of trains too. I had the dickens of a job getting here.'

'If you'd come by car,' Thorp-Gudgeon said, 'you'd have found yourself stopped on the perimeter. Only essential traffic is allowed in. Eventually we shall have roundabouts built at every exit, to save the congestion while the police turn people away. The roundabouts will be blind, d'you see, on the Oxford side. We shall leave one road open to the north and south, at St Aldate's and St Giles's, to let inside traffic out – with permits, of course. But that will be all.'

Queston blinked at him. 'You need a permit to get *out*?'

'O yes,' Thorp-Gudgeon nodded placidly, and sipped his port. 'If one has a car, that is. Few people have, now. But of course, dear David, you are always some years behind with the news.' He radiated geniality across the fireplace. Twenty years earlier he had been Queston's tutor at Birmingham University – a brief and unwilling sojourn of which he preferred not to be reminded – and had been treating him like a favoured and precocious pupil ever since. But while Queston roamed the Far East and South America, on research projects for a dozen assorted universities, James Thorp-Gudgeon had chosen to put down roots: and within

weeks of his appointment at Oxford he was a fat panjandrum, dispensing aphorisms, anthropology and Chablis in equal quantities, and caught in as tight an emotional bond to Oxford as if he had held a chair there for fifty years. Queston, who had no parents, wondered sometimes in lighter moments if he thought of Thorp-Gudgeon as his mother.

He said, grinning, 'Well, I hope you're happy now. The reactionaries have won at last.'

'Not at all. This is highly progressive. The Minister – '

There was a knock at the door.

'Ah,' Thorp-Gudgeon said. He heaved himself out of the chair, looking down with an oddly sly smile. 'This is someone I wanted you to meet, David.' He called. 'Come!'

The man at the door was chunky, square-shouldered, with dark hair cut flat and short across his head. The only startling thing about him was his face: two patches of red glowed high on each cheekbone, spreading to meet across his nose, and although his eyebrows were heavy there were no lashes to his eyes. He had a reptilian look. Queston tried not to stare.

'Good evening, James,' the man said. It was a throaty accent.

'Come in, my dear fellow, come in. You don't know David Queston, I think. David, this is Klaus Brunner, of St Catherine's. One of our best young architects, if he will forgive me for saying so.'

He buzzed over the decanter like a benevolent bee. 'Klaus and I are among the conspirators, David. That is to say, we are both members of the Ministry's advisory committee here. Partly responsible, I'd like to believe, for the developments I was telling you about. We've worked very closely with the Minister ever since the first Oxford plans began.'

Queston grinned at him. 'And since when have you become a traffic expert? I can see Mr Brunner's natural connexion with the business, but an anthropologist . . .'

Brunner said seriously, in his thick voice: 'The Oxford Committee is a research group of a rather unusual kind, Dr Queston. Patterns of human behaviour are as important as

any architectural aspects of town planning. In some areas of our work especially.'

'There are other areas?'

'O come, David,' said James Thorp-Gudgeon reproachfully. 'You must have heard something about Mandrake's record, even in Brasilia.'

'Mandrake?'

'The Minister. Excellent man, really excellent. An Oxford man – first in Greats at Trinity. He's proved himself head and shoulders above the rest of the Cabinet in the last three years – tremendous drive, the way he's put the country back into working order. Administratively, you know.'

Brunner said, accepting a glass and sitting stiffly in a high-backed chair: 'Let me describe to you, briefly, Dr Queston. The scope of the Ministry is wider than before. It stemmed from concern over the way many cities were being choked by increased traffic and poor roads, London in particular. That is why I think Mandrake's work has been so much welcomed. He has not only made changes by his own powers, he has initiated new legislation. The whole country, for instance, is divided firmly into seven regions now nominally under the aegis of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, for the purposes of local government – and to administer education, roads, and many things formerly directed from Whitehall by the Home Office and the Board of Trade.'

'The Home Office – ' Queston frowned, puzzled. 'Mr Mandrake sounds as if he's putting us on the road to federal government. He'll surely meet a lot of resistance – from the Civil Service if no one else.'

Thorp-Gudgeon chuckled fatly. 'The wind of public opinion can blow hard even down the corridors of power – ah no, this was an obvious step, just too long delayed. After all, there had been development councils for industry in Scotland and north-east England for years, hamstrung by having too little real power. Local feeling everywhere rose immensely when the proper regional councils were formed. We're an ancient country, David. I've always thought the

old kingdoms still existed under the skin. Mercia, Wessex, Northumbria, and so on. Think of the Roses cricket match – '

Brunner struck a match with a sharp crack to light a cigarette; the reflection glowed briefly in his pale eyes. 'These things are still only new, of course. The most effective work has been done in making the cities able to breathe. Stopping all office building in Central London, and cutting off other cities from through traffic on the Oxford pattern. York, Gloucester, Durham, Cambridge, and some others. You must visit them, if you are in Britain for long. You will hardly recognize them. The university towns in particular are delightful now. They have given us some of our strongest support.'

Queston shifted in his chair. He could feel his mind teetering on the edge of boredom. Had Thorp-Gudgeon really thought he would enjoy this pompous little German? Of course, James had always loved plotting and planning, the machinations behind a university election; he had revelled in the lobbying over the Oxford road problem for years. He must be a natural for the camp of the efficient Mr Mandrake.

Then Brunner said abruptly: 'I very much admire your work, Dr Queston. The book on New Guinea was the last one, was it not? James always says you are the greatest wanderer he has ever known.'

'And the most successful,' Thorp-Gudgeon said without rancour, smiling from his deep chair. 'It takes a great man to produce popular anthropology and at the same time retain the respect of the academic world.'

'Ah, give over,' Queston said amiably. 'You old snob, you know the only reason you still speak to me is that I've never got to the point of making television films.'

'My dear boy, you could become a film star of the utmost eminence and I should never know.'

The dark-panelled room was growing murky as the light died outside. Thorp-Gudgeon reached up and turned on a standard lamp beside his chair.

'The books are very interesting,' Brunner said persist-

ently, leaning forward with his eyes on Queston's face. 'Mr Mandrake was much intrigued by your examination of patterns of migration, I remember. He will be in Oxford for a committee meeting in two days' time – if you will still be here I know he would be very glad of the chance to meet you.'

Queston shook his head. 'I have to go back to London tomorrow, I'm afraid, and then abroad again.' And sharp-witted politicians aren't my cup of tea, thank you very much, he added to himself.

'I didn't know he was coming,' Thorp-Gudgeon said eagerly. 'Is this Wednesday's meeting in the Town Hall?'

'Yes. He wants to talk about the resettlement plans, I gather. There are a few particular points . . . but I will tell you about them later. Let us not bore Dr Queston.'

'He won't be bored. This is a tremendous thing, David – '

Brunner cut in swiftly: 'I really think it would not interest him.' There was an edge on the words, a quick flick of menace that was gone in the second it was there; but clear enough for Queston to catch it. He looked up in surprise.

'Ah well, you will have to wait, David.' Thorp-Gudgeon was irrepressible, like a child with a pet secret. 'But when this plan is working, Oxford will be a true national symbol of preservation. Perhaps more than that, in this disturbed world. It is time people remembered the importance of their roots.'

That was what had produced the first moment of reaction in Queston's mind: the seed of everything that afterward became an obsession. He looked at Thorp-Gudgeon, sitting paunchy and contented in the cosy shadow of his room, and began to laugh.

'You know, James, I really think Oxford must be the best subject for anthropological research in the world. You all worship the damn place, even those who come to it late. Talk about the emotional hold of environment – there's a whole study to be done right here. You should have a try at it. Or perhaps I should – you're a lot more accessible and articulate than my cave people.'

Brunner was as quick on the words as a terrier. 'Your cave people? Who are they?'

'It's the project he's been working on in Brazil,' Thorp-Gudgeon said sulkily. He was better at expressing derision than feeling himself its object. 'Some kind of tribal off-shoot in an obscure highland area. The University of Brasilia has been maintaining David out in the wilds to report on them, though what they hope to gain from it is beyond my comprehension.'

'They have their problems,' Queston said lightly.

'Hardly the same as ours.'

Brunner was persistent. 'I am intrigued. Tell me the analogy with Oxford. These people are one of your fossil races – very ancient?'

'O yes,' Queston said. He looked at Brunner's unblinking lizard-like gaze, wondering why the architect should be so curious. 'The point is that they're completely tied by their location. Emotionally. You'd find nothing in them from the design point of view – they live in these highland caves without any of the adornments or excavations you get in, say, Arizona. The place is all limestone, honeycombed, and there's no soil to speak of. They have a few goats, but mostly they live off roots and grubs. Half-starving, so the child mortality rate is enormous and their numbers are steadily dwindling. But the thing that fascinates me is that though there's perfectly good land unoccupied within fifty miles or so, they've never moved, and they still won't. They're the prisoners of a kind of pantheism. Well, not quite that, but almost – I've come across nothing like it in a primitive people before. In some strange way I've only just begun to unravel, they seem to worship not the usual all-permeating spirit, and certainly not individual gods – but the caves themselves.'

'Unless you are in some charming way equating the caves with the vaults of the Bodleian Library,' Thorp-Gudgeon said sourly, 'the analogy with Oxford seems to me obscure. Klaus, have some more port.'

'It most certainly is not. Do you know the warmest thing

you had to say to me about Mr Mandrake? You said: "He's an Oxford man." Implication – he belongs, therefore he understands. Well – out there these people exist under the rule of one chief, and he's a man who belongs too. There are some caves, some of the very deepest, that only male members of the chief's family are allowed to enter – I could never get anywhere near. They spend a lot of time there, especially at night. All part of the worship. There's no ceremonial, no initiation, just this curious kind of communion with the caves. It seems to permeate the ruling family's lives from birth. Not that they have much of a dynasty. When I first reached them there were only three men in the family – the chief, his brother, and his brother's son. And a few weeks before I left, the chief and his brother were both killed by a fall of rock.'

He paused, and for a moment he did not see the glint of glass or the walls of books, with Brunner's dark-patched face leaning forward peculiarly intent. He was back beside a fire on the scant grass of a South American hillside, near the looming dark mouth of a cave, waiting with the small lean people round him for the two men to come out of the hillside and perhaps, that time, explain to him a little of what it was that they always said and found and felt. Only, the two men had never come out. There had been a faint distant mutter, as if a wind sighed somewhere in the still night, and then the fire had suddenly flickered violently in a wave of air from the cave. And in the glow of the other small fires along the hillside, he had seen puffs of dust drift silently out from the other cave openings in the earth.

He said: 'After that only the boy was left, and they made him chief. He's very young, only about twelve, but there was no question. He rules without any kind of regent. The point for them is, you see, not just that he's his father's son – but that he's the only one left with this kind of psychic communion with the caves.' He grinned at Thorp-Gudgeon, suddenly feeling self-conscious at the monopolizing sound of his own voice. 'See, James? He's an Oxford man.'

Thorp-Gudgeon gave his shrill jay's cackle of laughter,

and wagged a finger as if at a child. Queston remembered from years before how quickly, almost hysterically, his fits of peevishness had unaccountably come and gone.

'David, your feet have left the ground. It's long past time you came back to teaching.'

'You are going back there?' Brunner said. His thick voice was excited, and Queston realized with a shock of something between alarm and distaste how intently the light eyes had been staring at him as he had talked. Now the man said again, urgently, 'You are going back to Brazil?'

'Yes, I am. Next week.'

'You must meet the Minister before you go.'

Everything seemed to come back to the one request. Queston said easily: 'O really, I'm not a very political animal, Mr Brunner. James will tell you, I tend to be – disengaged. It's kind of you, but I think not.'

Brunner said: 'It is important.' There was a Teutonic brusqueness in his manner that made the words into a command; suddenly irritated, Queston stood up.

'I must let you two talk your committee business, it's getting late. Glad to have met you, Mr Brunner. I hope the town and country planning goes on well.'

Standing to shake hands, Brunner had said curtly: 'Good-bye,' with resentment and a residue of determination behind the strange face; and Thorp-Gudgeon came with Queston to the bottom of his staircase.

'We're having lunch tomorrow, before you go back?'

'Fine,' Queston said. 'But spare me the man from the Ministry this time, will you?'

'O,' Thorp-Gudgeon said mildly, 'don't judge us too hastily. I think you'll find, David, that this is only a beginning.'

When Queston glanced back from the edge of the quadrangle, he was still standing there watching him: a small, paunchy, somehow secretive figure half in shadow underneath the pointed arch. Then in the same moment he moved swiftly backwards, and disappeared.

Queston walked back to his hotel with a nebulous feeling

of disquiet. Perhaps it was no more than the unfamiliarity of finding a politician's orderly aims applying themselves to the University of Oxford's charmingly disarrayed mind. Odd to find someone like James Thorp-Gudgeon mixed up in planning committees – furthering the ambitions of the obviously publicity-conscious Mandrake. The Oxford man: the guardian of the place . . . he felt his mind drifting back to the Amerindians of the caves.

All around him the streets were deserted, the shop-fronts silent and dark. Oxford was asleep; enclosed, obedient. Under the lamps the pavements stretched before him yellow and empty; but the lamplight seemed dim. At the end of Broad Street he grew aware of a dark mass in the middle of the road, blotting out the great wrought-iron gates of Trinity; he crossed the road to look.

There were two machines, ancient and clumsy, great metal trolls looming out of the night. He recognized the arms they reached down towards the road; the enclosed spray, for forcing out fire. He had seen them before, used to destroy an old surface before a new one was laid.

The road felt unfamiliar and lumpy beneath his feet; he looked down. It was some seconds before he realized that the lumps were stones, set in deliberate order. The last relic of medieval Oxford, removed fifteen years ago to smoothe the way for the cars. The cobbles of Broad Street were being laid again.

'Evening, sir,' said a deep voice at his side. He saw the blue uniform half-consciously with his nearer eye; in any case, only a policeman would have a voice like one of these machines.

'Ridiculous,' Queston said irritably. 'They might as well go the whole hog, and make it a beaten earth track.'

'I don't agree with you there,' the policeman said amiably. 'The Middle Ages, that's the time we want. Oxford was strongest then.'

He seemed eager for conversation. He fell into heavy step with Queston along the pavement away from the Broad.

'The Romans laid tessellated streets,' Queston said

faintly. If lunatic intellectuals operated the law, no wonder Oxford was running mad.

The policeman discoursed for fifty yards on Oxford's return to her former self. He quoted Anthony à Wood. He mentioned that grass had been seen growing in a corner of the High Street. 'A fellow from the *Daily Express* noticed that. There've been some excellent articles in the papers. The *Observer* were the best, they sent an Oxford man – ' His voice had the soft burr of Oxfordshire, deep and slow.

He said: 'You'll be a stranger here, sir.'

Queston was irritable still. 'I know Oxford well.'

'Will you be staying long?'

'Only till tomorrow, I'm afraid.'

They turned the corner into Beaumont Street. 'We don't see so many visitors here these days,' the policeman said. 'You can almost spot the strange faces. It's a look they have.'

Queston said: 'I am taking this strange face to bed. I leave you to your beat, constable. Good night.'

The policeman saluted him gravely, and he went up the steps into his hotel. It was not until he was half-undressed that he realized he had been neatly escorted home.

'Do come and sit down, Dr Queston,' said Mandrake. He slipped quickly sideways to the seat next to the fuselage wall, leaving its twin empty. 'I'm so grateful for the chance to meet you.'

Warily, Queston sat down. He was remembering the snatches of news and reports about Britain, and Mandrake's progress there, that had filtered through to his indifferent ears during the last few years. The range had been remarkably wide. Oxford, and others, transformed more or less into walled cities. Checks put on all countryside building, and a great resurgence of stress on farming, home-production of food. Something about a reshuffling of population, something to do with the regional councils . . . but it was all too vague in his mind. When he was away on the other side of the world, Britain became always a very small and distant place; and

in these days you heard little or nothing of her at all in international news. There was nothing but the tense up-and-down war of nerves between the Big Three: the Sino-Soviet-American meetings that seemed never to accomplish anything but raising the entire world to a fever-pitch of fear, and then dropping it to cold mistrust again.

'You have been working in New York?' Mandrake said. His voice was soft, with the slight affectation of Oxford vowels; the setting of the plane's head-rests made it difficult for Queston to look at his face. Instead he found himself studying the hands clasped loosely on Mandrake's knee: smooth, white, competent hands, with long square-tipped fingers.

'No, I just called in to see my publishers. I'm on my way back from South America.'

'Ah yes. The Brazilian project. I remember Klaus Brunner mentioning it to me.'

'You have a long memory,' Queston said. 'I met Mr Brunner once casually, three years ago.' He was beginning to have an uncomfortable feeling of having been an object of research. But whose research? Mandrake's? And why?

'You have always done very interesting work on the relations between men and their environments,' Mandrake said. 'I have all your books. Sometimes I think our minds work along very similar lines. After all, I deal with much the same kind of material, in a different way.' He half-turned in his seat so that he was looking Queston full in the face; there was a startling youthfulness about him, a smoothness round the eyes and mouth, and a suspiciously deliberate boyish wedge of dark hair loose over the forehead. He added, reproachfully, 'I did suggest once that you should consider working with me, if you remember.'

Queston remembered. A letter had come on Ministry of Town and Country Planning paper only a few days after he had met Brunner in Oxford. He had torn it up, not even bothering to reply, and had put it completely out of his mind until now.

He said lightly: 'I don't think I should have been your

cup of tea.' Then, trying to change what was beginning to seem a familiar line: 'I saw you had some trouble at the airport. Who was the man who took a pot at you?'

Among the entourage the blunt words went home: the back of Brunner's head jerked sharply in the seat in front of him, and across the aisle he saw two nameless aides glance warningly across. But Mandrake simply raised one smooth hand and let it fall again. 'The ordinary risk of the public man. There's always some opponent unbalanced enough to go to an extreme. I don't know what was up with this one – we shall find out, in due course. These people are rarely good shots, fortunately.' He smiled easily at Queston. 'I believe there are rather more of them in South America.'

'One of my best reasons for keeping away from politics.'

Mandrake laughed. It was a high-pitched, almost foolish laugh, but increasingly, talking to him, Queston could feel a strength of character which seemed to have no connexion with the young face, or the direct manner. This is a man, he thought to himself, who keeps his mind hidden; and who has a lot to hide. Or is the greatest secret that he hides the absence of any real strength?

Mandrake began asking him questions about his work. At first he thought it simply an examination of the thought-processes of an anthropologist, by a man seeking always to learn from the minds of other men; but gradually he became less sure. The Minister fired at him detailed questions on obscure points of social behaviour described in books or papers he had written years before; either he had a real and searching interest in Queston's not always orthodox ideas, or someone had prepared him some extremely efficient home-work at high speed. But how could anyone have known that they were going to meet that day . . . ?

'The business of emotional attachment to place out-weighing even basic human needs –' Mandrake was saying, alert and absorbed. 'You went back to Brazil, I believe, to continue some work that Klaus told me about. Naturally, with the situation in Britain as it is at the moment, this is a subject of some concern to me. Tell me, Queston, what con-

clusions have you come to about the people of your caves?'

How could he have known? Why should Brunner have remembered? To cover his astonishment, Queston said lightly: 'I don't really know much about the situation in Britain at the moment. Has it changed much?'

Mandrake's eyes flickered. 'A little. But your cave people –'

Unobtrusively Queston took a long slow breath, and held it for a little while. The one thing he did not want to look at again; the one memory that he had been running away from, because always since it had happened it had brought ideas singing into his mind that he knew were very nearly insane: one chance encounter with a planning-happy politician had to plunge a probe deep into the one vulnerable spot. It was his own fault, of course. Whenever he broke his own iron rule of solitude, something went wrong for him. He should have waited until he had done the writing. Now, because he had once incautiously quoted the beginning of the story, years before, the indiscretion was whipping back into his face to flay him with the implications of the story's end. Was it possible, now, to tell the bare facts, without being led on into the nightmare of deduction that for months had been haunting him?

Perhaps. He said, silently cursing Mandrake's interest: 'You'd better draw your own conclusions. They may not be the same as mine.'

From Oxford, that time, he had gone back to London, and from London straight back to Brazil. But there the Brazilian government, who paid his salary, had detained him in the capital as adviser to a long United Nations study, and he had not been free for the long journey back to the highlands for more than two years.

By air and land the way back to the caves in the hills took him almost three weeks. Intermittently his mind had been playing on the small strange tribe he had grown to know there, and their curious worship of the land; he was eager

to get back. At the end of the last day's journey, where the trees ended and the land began to rise, he left his men to pitch camp in a clearing and went on alone up the trail to get a glimpse of the hills.

Somehow he sensed a difference in the place, but at first he could not understand what it was. The night was almost down, after the swift sunset, and he was tired and not properly alert. But there was something about the familiar hillside that arrested his attention . . . then he realized what it was. He could not see a single point of light anywhere. He paused half-way up the slope, looking up at the rising mass of the range, darker than the darkening sky. There was no sign of the fires which always burnt outside the caves. Puzzled, he went back to the camp.

When daylight came, the morning puzzled him still more. There was no sign of life anywhere; no smoke, no human movement or sound. His own men were muttering, restless, and again he went up alone. When he climbed to the settlement, he realized in sudden alarm what it was that had disturbed him in the appearance of the place. The hillside had changed. Nowhere was its shape the same as it had been before; some cave entrances were widened by jagged cracks, others blocked, and the great fissures gaped black and menacing here and there in the ground.

He found the dappled circles of dead, cold fires, and a few scattered mats, tools, spears. But of the people he had left two years before he found no trace at all.

Other natives had told him, on his way, that they had seen landslips in parts of the hills, though there had been no heavy rains. Queston frowned. There could have been some rogue earth tremor here, perhaps; terrifying the tribe so that they had migrated at last. That must be it . . . but why, if so, should their precious belongings be scattered about? Even if they had fled, they would have come back through any amount of fear for those.

His natives refused to stay near the place, and there was no useful purpose to be served by arguing. But on the trek back through the lowlands, he found an old man alone in a

rough-hoed field; the people here knew of the tribe in the caves, and Queston had spoken to them often before. He beckoned the old man, and pointed up to where low fronds of cloud drifted round the tops of the hills.

'What happened?' he said in Portuguese.

'They were a strange people,' the old man said. He seemed to know at once what Queston was talking about.

'But what has happened?'

'It was the boy,' the old man said. He squinted upward; his brown, ancient face was seamed as corduroy, the eyes bright and dribbling; he mumbled round a single yellow tooth. 'It was the boy. He was chief, in place of the old one, because he was of the family who spoke to the caves. But he was too young. He did not go in alone, as those of his blood had always done. He had no respect. He took others with him, who should not have gone. And the caves were angry.'

He stopped, mumbling. Queston looked at him keenly. This was not dotage; the old man was not a fool. Only reluctant to go on.

'Was the boy hurt?'

'The boy, yes. And all of them. It has been a bad season.'

Queston waited, uneasy.

'The boy had no respect,' the old man said. 'No respect for the place. And the hills were angry. They called all the people into the caves into the deep caves, where they had never been. They went in, chanting. And when they were all inside, the caves gave their punishment, and consumed all those there. Not one of them came out again.'

The words echoed in meaningless enormity through Queston's head. He stared at the old man, appalled. 'They were all killed?'

'O yes. All of them.' The voice was almost placid.

'But why did they go into the deep caves? They were always frightened to enter, even for sheltering, unless they were of the family.'

The old man said patiently: 'The caves called them in.'

For a terrible moment Queston felt as if he heard the tearing splitting roar that must have overwhelmed them;

smelt the bitter dust, and the sudden shrieking terror as death came in tumbling tons of rock. And in that flash of a second he thought of something else behind the terror: a blind, orgasmic surrender, almost a welcoming . . . but then it was gone.

A remnant of reasoning stirred in his mind, forcing its way through the shock. He said thickly, staring at the old man: 'You speak as if you had their faith in the caves. In the power of the caves. But your people have always before thought it foolishness.'

The old man looked up at him out of the bright sunken eyes. 'It has been a bad season,' he said again. He mumbled, and looked down. 'A bad season.'

Queston gave him money, and went away.

'But you didn't leave the place altogether, of course,' Mandrake said.

'O no. There was a lot more than that to be found out. I worked on it there for three or four months.'

'And you found out more? About this curious extinction?'

Mandrake's eyes were fixed on him with close interest; he had listened to all the story in complete silence. They were close to Britain now; their seat-belts were on, and their ears prickling with the de-pressurization that went with a descent from 70,000 feet.

Queston shrugged. 'It's complicated. I have work to do still. Really, that's why I decided to come back – to retreat somewhere and just put all the pieces together. I want to write about it.' And that understatement, my friend, he thought, will have to do for you.

Brunner said, turning from the seat in front: 'Where will you go?'

'Haven't thought about it. Somewhere quiet.' He smiled, grimly. 'Some part of the country where people aren't quite so attached to their surroundings. Or their surroundings to them.'

He felt a touch on his shoulder; it was the stewardess,

smiling for his empty glass. Holding it up to her, he missed her outstretched hand by about half an inch, and pulled himself upright in the seat, frowning. Bad to have his reactions blurring on two Scotches, even airline-size. Well, but there had not been much chance of drinking for some time now.

He felt the Minister studying him again, and turned to meet the demanding stare, feeling a slight resentment that a man at least ten years younger than himself should exude such an air of authority.

Mandrake said: 'You would be a very valuable addition to my research staff, Dr Queston. If you would think about it . . . we should be honoured to have you.'

'Thanks all the same, but no. Out of the question.' He felt a distinct pleasure in making the flat refusal. 'I don't work well with other people, I'm afraid. Too much of an eccentric.'

'If you joined us, from the very beginning you could have as much leave as you wanted to write whatever you want to write about Brazil.'

'No thanks. Really.'

Mandrake shrugged one shoulder, and spread his hands in a graceful parody of despair. 'So be it. Of course you will enjoy writing a book, or whatever, about your cavemen. Though really they don't seem so exceptional to me. Attached to their surroundings, yes – but then so are most people. And most people, I find, are remarkably unimaginative and stupid.' The words lashed out with a viciousness that made Queston jump; but when he looked at the Minister the dark eyes were smiling blandly into his again. 'As for the accidental deaths,' Mandrake said easily, 'well, very sad, yes – but is stray volcanic activity so rare? Or in the least significant?'

'In a limestone area like this one it isn't just rare. It's impossible.'

Mandrake laughed gently, and patted him on the arm. 'Calm down, calm down. Your natives have quite a hold over you, haven't they?'

'The thing I want to analyse,' Queston said, stung, 'is the

power that had a hold over *them*. And when I do – ' He stopped, silently cursing himself. And the Scotch.

'Yes?' said Mandrake.

Well, go on, the small censor in Queston's brain goaded him. Tell the professional planner what you really believe: that the more closely involved a man becomes with a place, the nearer the place gets to gaining the upper hand. And that in the affair you have been through, this was an appalling example of the place deciding to take over. The caves, the earth, for their own reasons, deciding to destroy the men. So that it becomes desperately important to work out, now, how often this has happened before – and how it can be stopped from happening again. Tell him that you aren't sure whether you've gone off your head through being too much alone, but that this is the thing you want more than anything to do now . . .

And he might have set out, as in a confessional, all the wild echoing ideas, if he had not had a sudden irrational picture of the man at the airport; the man who had fired at Mandrake, and shouted: 'Murderer – '

He said: 'O well, I'll see how it goes.'

The encouragement in Mandrake's face died like a candle flickering out. In its place Queston thought that he saw for a moment a kind of warning, the resentment born in the important man who is denied his customary respect.

'As you please.'

The aeroplane jolted gently once, twice, three times; the pitch of its engine had been deepening steadily, and now it coughed into the roar that said they were on the ground, and slowing to the tolerable land-based speed of the runway. Queston wished they could see the earth; admirable though it was to cross the Atlantic in two and a half hours, he had a faint romantic yearning for the green-brown patchwork below that heralded England from one of the old six-hour windowed jets.

But there was still the impact of the first sight of a country through an aircraft's doors. And the impact of the new Britain was upon him sooner than he expected.

They stood waiting as a steward spun the control wheel on the giant curved door, and Mandrake turned and held out his hand.

'We shall meet again, sooner than you think. You will be working for me before long.' He gave Queston a brief, opaque stare, his head tilted arrogantly, and turned back as the steward opened the door. Brunner, with a patronizing nod, slipped past Queston to follow the Minister down the steps to the ground, and the two other Ministry men unobtrusively but firmly did the same.

Over their heads, Queston saw four men in navy-blue uniforms at the bottom of the steps, looking like policemen but somehow not quite; and beside them a large black car with its door held open. Mandrake ran very quickly down the steps and into the car, his small deputation following him; and immediately the car swung round and drove away rapidly across the runway. In less than a minute from the opening of the aircraft door it had disappeared. Queston stood blinking at the top of the steps, and saw the steward grinning at him.

'Guess they're not taking any chance,' the man said companionably. 'We had to radio ahead for that little lot, after some guy took a shot at him at Kennedy. Seems screwy to me – why should anybody be so keen to assassinate *him*?'

It was not long before he began to understand. His clearance at London Airport took longer than he had remembered. He was given lengthy forms to fill in that he had never seen before.

'The last British entry stamp here is dated – 1970, is this correct, sir?'

'That's right. I've been in South America for three years.'

The man flicked through the pages: ' – Mexico, Argentina, United States, Venezuela, Brazil – '

'I've been around,' Queston said lightly.

'You have, haven't you, sir?' The voice was colourless, but it managed to convey a faint disapproval.

'The passport's up to date, isn't it?'

'O yes, sir – now if you'd just complete that form.'

Queston wrote his name. Date of birth, place of birth, parents' names, parents' place of birth . . .

'I haven't an address yet.'

'Do you know where you'll be going from here?'

'An hotel, presumably.'

'Had you any particular hotel in mind, sir?'

Queston stared. 'I used to stay at the Copley, in Bruton Street.'

'Ah, London, I see. Well, if you'd leave that space blank for the moment, sir, our bookings officer will telephone the Copley and see if they have a room. Then we can book you in, and the hotel can go on the form.'

'Really, you needn't bother. I can hunt about when I get to London.'

'It's no bother, sir.' The man spoke unemotionally; he was calm, youngish, wearing a dark-grey suit in place of any uniform, but he had a distinct air of authority. 'We are required, you see, to know your whereabouts for the first week.'

'Well, I don't remember all this fuss before.'

'No,' the man said. Queston waited for him to explain, but he only indicated the form again. 'There is only one other formality – you will see it requires the names of three referees.'

Queston read the neat print. 'Persons with a familiar and sound knowledge of the applicant – '

'Damn it,' he said, 'I'm not an applicant. I'm a British subject.'

The man said: 'You are applying for re-entry into Britain, sir.'

Queston shrugged, and picked up his pen again. He wrote the names and addresses of his bank manager, his solicitor, and after a slight hesitation, James Thorp-Gudgeon. He said as he handed the form back: 'Strikes me it must be simpler to be an immigrant.'

'There are no immigrants now, sir. Of any kind.'

The scrambled voice of the loudspeakers boomed in

another part of the airport building, unintelligible. Queston looked down at the glossy orange varnish of the counter; suddenly it seemed very bright, very clean.

'*No* immigrants?'

'O no sir.' The man's face, as he looked up, was smooth and tranquil; his faint smile was condescending. 'It must be two years now – but then, you've been away a long time.'

'Yes,' Queston said slowly. He glanced round. In the twenty minutes or so he had been standing at the counter, no other passenger had approached. And there had been all those empty seats on the aeroplane. He let the beginnings of uneasiness wash over him.

Another man appeared, bland and featureless as the first. He muttered, and the first man smiled at Queston, holding out his hand for the form. Queston handed it to him in silence.

The man looked over it, his lips moving soundlessly as if counting. 'That's excellent, Mr Queston, thank you . . . now there is a room for you at the Copley, booked for a week. I expect you will not be there longer than that.' He spoke without question, as if it were a certainty. 'But if you would let us know if you do move elsewhere during that time. And we shall be getting in touch with you during the next three days or so. Only a formality, of course.'

Some instinct stifled the several reactions of indignation, alarm, ridicule. Queston said curtly: 'Of course.'

Deliberately, in all his time in London, he visited no one that he knew. He conducted his business at the bank, bought quantities of books, lived dutifully in the Copley Hotel: where another man in a dark suit, showing credentials of the immigration authorities, came one morning to inspect him, murmured vaguely, and went away.

That afternoon Queston began his search for the condition of a hermit. The details were still evolving in his head, but he knew very clearly that he was seeking to be alone, completely alone with his work, for a long time. He was amused

to find that it seemed far more complicated a business than preparing to go abroad for a number of years. He had never realized how much easier it was to run away.

He walked up Piccadilly to a great glass showroom and bought himself a car. That was easy, at any rate: easy, at least, to buy a British car. He had wanted a Mercedes, but met a curious evasive reluctance; he settled instead for a black gas-turbine-powered Lagonda saloon. It was an extravagance which gave him immense pleasure; he knew that he would never need speed, and that the car would languish unused for most of its life, but the sleek menace of it seemed to him a symbol of his own deliberate rootlessness. Nothing could hold him down; the car was his antidote against the ideas which must close over his head now if he was to force them into a book.

'She's a beauty, sir,' the salesman said. He stroked the Lagonda surreptitiously, as if reluctant to see it disappear.

The car would be delivered at his hotel in three days' time. Queston wrote out a remarkable cheque and was bowed reverently into the street. He walked up to Piccadilly Circus, looking about him properly for the first time since he had arrived.

The square-built blocks and overhead pedestrian ways of the Circus had been barely finished beneath a bristle of scaffolding when he had last been there. Now there was no scaffolding, and already the white facias and the one looming neon-spangled wall had a dingy, second-hand look. Outside the Tower Hotel he paused, his attention caught by a scarlet hoarding lettered in neat roman type. 'Piccadilly Tower: adults 50c., children 25c. Public lift to a panorama of London's skyline.'

He went up, in a lift buzzing with twenty sticky children and two harassed nuns. At the top, a uniformed guide began his mechanical chatter on the open, steel-fenced platform; the wind eddied round, unexpectedly chill. Queston moved away from the clustering children without attempting to listen; hearing only the wind moaning through the fence, he looked down at London.

He looked for a long time. The whole skyline seemed unfamiliar. After a few moments he managed to pick out Nelson's Column, the Old Bailey, St Paul's; and beyond them the Monument and the Barbican. But all around, in white sprouting groups of three and four, he saw tall intrusive blocks that had not been there before. One grew from Covent Garden, several beside the river, many more in the area that must, he thought, be the City. He stared, puzzled, then turned back. The guide had paused, and was standing wary and paternal as the children pressed round him against the fence. He was a short, square, elderly man; Queston tried not to smile as he noticed the enigmatic word M.O.P. neatly embossed in gold on the peaked cap.

'What are those towers all over the place?'

The guide looked at him reproachfully. 'You wasn't listening to me, was you?' He had eyebrows of white wire; the long upcurving hairs at their corners beat time gently as he spoke.

'No, I'm afraid not. Sorry.'

'Well now,' the guide paused deliberately, exacting proper penitence. 'If you had of been listening to me, you'd have heard me say they was the true new heart of London.' He produced the words with a flourish, as if expecting applause. Queston waved a hand impatiently.

'Well, but what are they? Offices, I suppose.'

'Offices!' The man looked shocked. 'No – they're homes.'

'Flats, you mean? All of them?'

'Every one.' He looked at Queston pityingly, with a hint of suspicion. 'You a foreigner, then?'

'No.'

'Well then. Those blocks, they're the London Plan. *You* know.'

'What plan?'

'Struth – ' the guide said in disbelief. 'Well. All them flats, see, they're full of London families. Thousands of them. Real London families, born and bred. You're not a Londoner, now, are you?'

'No.'

'No. You couldn't live in one of them, see. The Ministry put them up special. Been going on for years now, it has, the Plan. Funny you not knowing about it. That beats all, that does.' The suspicion increased; the eyebrows twitched like antennae.

Queston said hastily: 'I haven't been to London for some time. Amazing how out of touch one can get.' He clucked his tongue sycophantically, an amazed bumpkin. 'Really, I had no idea all this was going on.'

The man was mollified; he dropped back without reluctance into his explanations. 'Too many people going out to live and coming in to work, they said. So they stopped the big chaps building offices, and started moving firms away to other towns, and they built flats instead. The waiting lists were long as your arm right away. Still are. People who'd been shovelled out to them new towns wanted to get back, see. I come back from Harlow meself – been moved out there donkeys' years ago, back in 1959. We had a nice little house, but it wasn't like the old smoke. So we got on the list, and now we're back. Took nine months, mind. But we got back in the end. Three generations Bermondsey, I am. O, they've done a good job, the Ministry.'

'So no one is to live in London,' Queston said slowly, 'but the Londoners.'

'S'right.' The man nodded approvingly. 'Born and bred. Mind you, there's a good few outsiders here still. But they're going. Old Mandrake, he knows how to get what he wants.'

Queston looked at him sharply. 'Mandrake?'

'The Minister,' the old guide said. He lifted his uniform cap to settle it more comfortably on his head, and Queston's attention was drawn again to the gold lettering round its band.

'What are those initials on your cap?'

'The Ministry, of course. Ministry of Planning. That's what I'm here for. Everyone asks about the Plan when they come up here.'

'Ministry of Planning?' For a moment Queston did not

understand. Then he added slowly: 'I see. So the Ministry of Town and Country Planning changed its name.'

'Lord yes, years ago. Got much bigger since then. They say we're the biggest of them all now, by a long way.'

'I dare say,' Queston said. 'Thank you.' He gave the old man fifty cents and moved back to the lift. The children were already jostling and chattering round him again.

'Lovely view then, isn't it, Bobbie?' said one of the nuns to a small boy. Queston smiled involuntarily at the voice; it bore a strong, crude Birmingham accent, somehow incongruous against the medieval black robe.

'I don't go much on it,' the child said, with the same rising ugly inflexion. 'It's all right, like, but I'd rather have home.'

'O yes, Mother,' the children said. ' 'Tisn't like home.'

The lift dropped towards the street.

'For two weeks, perhaps three,' Queston said. 'Only that I'd prefer it to an hotel. I'm in one at the moment, but they seem to cost a fortune nowadays '

'Ah. They would.' The estate agent nodded obscurely. 'Well, for two weeks we should be able to find you a furnished flat without much trouble. It's when the time's more than a month that difficulties start.'

'I thought it would be the other way round. It always used to be.'

'O no, not now. The London Plan, you see, that's made the difference. You'd need London birth and residence qualifications if you were proposing to stay for long.'

It was like a familiar chord ringing through the room.

'That's just for the new blocks of flats surely?' Queston said.

'No indeed – anywhere. Furnished or unfurnished, houses or flats. Makes life very difficult for us, I can tell you. My partner, he's an Irishman, it looks as if he'll have to get out. Outside the Plan boundary, anyway. Luckily for me I was born in Camden Town – proper birthright now, being a

Londoner. Strangers are beginning to have a hard time finding these short-term places. Still, I think we can get one for you. Chelsea district, did you say?'

Queston said, with more decision than before: 'Only for two weeks.'

He learned more, in those two weeks, of the achievements of Arthur Mandrake's Ministry of Planning. Its powers seemed undefined, but large. Public and press alike had clearly accepted it as a messianic deliverance from the chaos, in a crowded island, of sprawling houses and slow roads. Behind the Minister, he gathered, was the same nucleus of men which had made up the original Oxford Committee. But he did not try to go back to Oxford, to see Thorp-Gudgeon. He was not sure why. He bought a road map, and saw new unfamiliar patterns: the motorways sweeping unbroken round Oxford, parting and joining again, like a river enfolding an island. The railway was still marked, but no roads into the city at all.

The same patterns lay now round the other towns which the Ministry had made into modern walled citadels: Cambridge, Durham, York, Gloucester, Bangor, Nottingham, Edinburgh, Aberdeen. And London seemed to be contracting too, into its old series of villages. He heard fewer foreign accents in the streets; few accents at all, except those of Londoners. The children from Birmingham had clearly been unusual. Yet there were plenty of guides near public buildings, in the same uniform and insignia as the old man he had met on the Piccadilly Tower. Were they for the Londoners themselves?

Everywhere he saw Ministry of Planning posters, on hoardings and underground stations, all preaching the same theme. 'Londoners, know your London' – beneath a picture-map of the city. 'London Belongs to You' – with a sentimental portrait of a beaming family entering a great block of flats beside the dome of St Paul's. And one poster in particular, cryptic and apparently purposeless, he saw more

often than any: an enlarged aerial photograph of London, overprinted, in giant luminous red capitals, with the words: 'Guard Thine Own.'

He wondered that no one, no one at all, should see any sinister ideological overtones in all this. But then he heard Mandrake's voice on the London local radio, recorded from one of the Ministry public meetings organized in a different region each week. And the speech was harmless and undistinguished: a flat exposition of the need for local loyalties and ordered towns, mingled with an undisguised appeal for votes. An election was due in a few months' time, and Mandrake was deputy leader of the party now.

Gradually Queston's mind stopped fidgeting over the Minister. The ordinary course of life was not affected, after all. Politics had never engaged him. He sometimes wondered whether anything, except his work, had ever engaged him at all. He had never known his parents; had he really yet known anyone else? With all events, with all people, it was as it always was with women; he could enter them often enough, but never feel himself involved in their existence. He was always the observer; the man outside, looking in.

And the only thing that seemed of importance to him now, still, was the fate of his few obscure Brazilians: the people of the caves. He took little note of the growing hysteria in London's newspaper headlines, that played ideally to the cosy isolationism of Mandrake and his party; he felt nothing but a fatalistic boredom over the chance of Russia and America reviving their latent antipathy on the surface of the moon, or of China invading the farthest Soviet states. Instead he looked only inside his own mind, at the nightmare ideas that played to and fro howling to be put into coherent shape. He had to be alone, for a long time now, to write what he must write about the power of the caves.

He came very near to being convinced that the nightmare could never find any real major shape. If two separate things had not happened, before he submerged himself in the writing of his book, he might never have realized the

dangers growing all round him; or the extent to which the harmless politician Mandrake was involved.

He drove to Winchester, to see a local estate agent recommended by the London firm. When he came back two days later, he knew that he had found the place where he would go to work. It was a small, remote cottage on the Hampshire estate that had become the Wessex National Park; a cottage built originally, the agent knowledgeably told him, for the head keeper. 'Only there's not much to keep nowadays, ha-ha.'

It was two miles from the nearest village, and half a mile from the nearest road; a rough track led to it, and there was no telephone. It had an overgrown garden, with roses and brambles twining in a thicket that rapped thinly against the small leaded windows; and an orchard of ancient dwarf-like trees rustled at the back. There was running water, but no electricity or gas; one room below, and a ladder-staircase leading to two others above. Standing alone at the back door – he ducked his head to go through – Queston sniffed the thick sweetness of long grass, lime-trees, honeysuckle, and felt satisfaction as the silence isolated him.

He ordered furniture in Winchester the next day. On his way back to London in the whining Lagonda, he stopped for a sandwich in Alton. It was unchanged from the small, uneventful town that he dimly remembered; there were few people in the pub.

Standing cheerfully munching at the bar, his hand cupped round the first pint of beer he had drunk in England for a decade, he became aware of the voices of two people on the other side of a black pillar beam. A man and a woman; he could not see their faces, only two hands holding glasses on the bar. The man's curved easily round a whisky; the woman's fingers fiddled nervously with the stem of a glass holding what he guessed to be gin. It was a very large gin. The hand took it suddenly out of sight, and when it re-appeared half the drink was gone.

It was the slight hysterical rise in her voice which caught his attention.

'I *told* him it was a stupid idea. I never wanted to leave London, but he wouldn't listen. If only we'd stayed at home . . . he was so determined to have a farm.'

'It always surprised me,' the man's voice said. 'Geoffrey was so much the city man.'

'Of course he was. We belonged in London. He was a real Cockney, you know – born in the sound of Bow Bells. He always used to be proud of saying so. And then all of a sudden this mad idea about being a farmer, and leaving the Exchange. And I couldn't talk him out of it. O God –'

The voice broke. The man's hand left its glass, and moved across to grip her wrist reassuringly. It stayed there. 'You must try to forget it all, Sheila. You mustn't brood. I knew it wasn't a good idea for you to go to the funeral.'

'I wouldn't have minded so much if I'd been able to think of his body in there.'

'Hush,' the man said.

'I can't help it, Tom. All in little bits like that, my Geoffrey –'

Queston choked, feeling a mouthful of beer in his throat like a fist, and caught the eye of the barman. The man raised an eyebrow reprovingly, and began filling a dish with peanuts.

The woman's arm remained on the bar with the man's fingers clasped round it; her other hand came out and the glass disappeared again. She said, gulping: 'Everything went wrong from the beginning, you know? The weather was wrong all year, and nothing grew properly, and we both hated the country really, it's so damn dull. Geoff did too, though he wouldn't admit it. It was the country that killed him in the end, I know it was. They shouldn't have been harvesting then, or something. He didn't really understand that combine, it was like a horrible great animal. O Tom, imagine the moment when he slipped –'

The fingers tightened. 'Darling, stop it!'

There was a pause, and then her voice was lower, unemotional. Queston could hardly catch the words. 'They tried to stop me going out in that field the next day, but I went. There was blood all over the straw. It was dark, not red. I was surprised it wasn't red. But you could tell it was blood. Like a sort of sacrifice. That's what I seriously believe, Tom. The land taking a sort of sacrifice, because we shouldn't have been there. We should have stayed where our roots were.'

'Now you're going back to London you must stop dreaming up things like that . . .' The man's voice began a long soothing monologue, and Queston finished his sandwiches and went away. Poor little bitch, he thought repentantly as he drove over the Hog's Back, glancing on either side at the sweeping gold-brown harvested fields. He thought of the dark blood on the stubble. Poor little bitch. 'A sort of sacrifice –'

The blood seemed at first to be the only connecting link. It was in London, the day before his final departure for the cottage; the builders there had finished rapid over-paid alterations, the furniture was in, he had sent down his clothes and a crate of books. He had settled into his work, and was about to shut the door behind him.

He spent too long, that last London morning, vainly hunting the memoirs of an eighteenth-century Jesuit whose sharp-eyed meanderings through British Guiana he remembered, dimly, as having once sparked the beginnings of his own ideas. No one had heard of the book; perhaps he had imagined it. Coming out of the last bookshop he was suddenly irritated by the pressing crowds and the cliff-like cold walls of the ubiquitous blocks of flats, still unfinished here and deeply echoing with pile-drivers and drills. Charing Cross Road was a roaring mass of people and cars; the Plan, he reflected, had not been as successful as all that. Reluctantly, he made for the nearest Tube station. It was the simplest means of getting home, though he did not like to be underground.

He threaded his way to the end of the platform. A train had just hummed and rumbled out, and few people stood round him there. Queston waited, fidgeting. Beside him, a voice said: 'Excuse me –'

It was a broad, perspiring man in a tight tweed suit, with a very new suitcase at his feet. He had sandy hair cut clumsily short, and the deep red-brown skin of the fair man who spends most of his life in the sun and wind. His eyes were very wide and blue, but their gaze shifted uneasily from side to side, holding Queston's only for a moment, flicking away, flicking back again.

'Sorry to bother you, but can you tell me how to get to Baker Street?'

Through the rolling sequence of country vowels, it took Queston some seconds to understand what he had said. He tried to place the accent; Devon, perhaps, or Somerset. On the bleak, grubby platform the man looked as out of place as a sheaf of corn.

'Sorry, I'm afraid I don't –' he turned, scanning the motley wall for a map. 'Here. This'll tell you.'

The man followed him gratefully, talking in relief. 'These things don't mean much to me, I just don't know London. They told me to change here . . . I've never been here before, you see. Come up for a holiday.'

Queston pointed. 'There you are. We're here, and you get a train to Oxford Circus, then change on to the Bakerloo line.'

'Ah,' the man said doubtfully. 'Thank you.' He put down his case again and eased a finger inside his collar. 'I don't know – London – it overpowers you, doesn't it? My daughter I'm going to, she's a real town girl now. Married a London lad. But not me, I'm not easy in it. Everything's so quick. Unwelcoming sort of place.'

Queston smiled without speaking, feeling the familiar impulse to remain detached, uninvolved. He looked up the platform to see if the train was coming.

'Be glad to get home,' the man said, half to himself. 'I don't like the feel of it.' The accent seemed stronger, as if it

were a refuge. ' 'Tisn't the people at all, 'tis the place itself. London really tries to push you out, I do believe.'

Suddenly it was like looking at a photographic negative. Queston heard an echo in his head of the reverse, the positive: the woman's voice in the Alton pub saying: 'The land taking a sort of sacrifice, because we shouldn't have been there . . .' He found himself staring at the man as if he had only just caught sight of him.

'Say that again.'

The man misunderstood him, and his rosy face grew more flushed still. 'O, there's nothing wrong with it, I'm not criticizing. A beautiful city, for them that's born here. It's just that – well – London don't like strangers. Prefers them to go home.'

To rescue him, Queston forced himself to smile and make a face. 'O well – but not the people, eh?'

They exchanged polite smiles again, and looked away from each other. Something was spinning like a newly released top in Queston's mind; the contents of what had seemed a distant South American nightmare suddenly brought close and ominous. The power of place; the power of the place over the mind of the man who feels he belongs to it – or who feels he does not. How long does it take for that to change to the second stage, the stage that overtook the people of the caves; when by some sea-change of energy does the place develop an independent, awful power of its own?

For heaven's sake, no, forget it; you're going off your head. He stood silent, trying to slow his brain down to normal speed. They waited. More people strolled to the end of the platform. The countryman walked up and down, glancing round in the same dazed, uneasy way. His shoes were very large and loud. Preoccupied, Queston gazed at nothing. When he became aware of the countryman again, the man was moving slowly along the edge of the platform, his suitcase in one enormous hand. Queston felt the air move against his cheek, and heard the train rumble deep and distant.

He never made up his mind, afterwards, whether the man heard it or not. He remembered only the violent shock of disbelief. The man had put down his case. His uneasiness seemed to have grown still more, and he shifted from foot to foot. He was a full yard from the edge of the platform. There was no one else near him. The train's roar grew louder in the tunnel. And then, in an impossible moment that was to haunt him always in a kind of dreadful slow motion, Queston saw the man take a gradual, dragging step forward, and jerk into the air as if some invisible force had given him a great shove. He did not fall; there was no possibility that he could have fallen. He gave an immense ungainly leap towards the rails, at the exact moment that the train burst thundering out of its black cave a few yards away.

Queston remembered that blood more vividly. It was bright scarlet, and he had never seen so much suddenly in one place.

With it he remembered something else. Before it crushed him, the train had tossed the countryman like a bull. For a fraction of a second, as his body turned in the air, Queston had seen the expression on his broad sunburnt face. The eyes widened by horror held only resignation; there was no hint of surprise. As if they said: 'I told you so.'

Part Two

Queston lurched down the ladder, his shirt lifting gently in the cool morning draught from the open window. At the sound of his first footstep the dog was across the floor with a yelp, and standing to greet him, tongue dangling, tail waving. She was a Welsh collie, undemanding and intelligent; he had bought her in the second year, after he had realized quite how often he was talking to himself. It seemed less dotty to talk to a dog.

He ran a hand over her head and went to unbolt the door; the dog bounded out into the sunshine. Queston crossed to the battered sink in the one square room; splashed water over his face, dried it with the towel hanging from a nail, and buttoned his shirt. He combed his hair, frowning at the length of it bushing out grey-streaked behind his ears, and decided not to shave. So few people ever came near the cottage that there was no point in shaving more than twice a week.

He filled the kettle and put it on the stove; the flames flickered small and yellow-blue, he would need another cylinder of gas soon. Barefoot on the stone floor, cold and uneven to his skin, he opened cupboard doors, methodically took out cup, saucer, plate, knife, spoon. Breadboard, butter, jar of marmalade, tin of powdered coffee. It was an automatic routine; his senses always woke before his mind. Sleepily he set his breakfast on the scrubbed wooden table, groping at the strange sense of excitement which hovered round him that morning like a child's anticipation of a treat. Long burial in work had made him absent-minded. Perhaps the feeling came only from the sunshine, the blue-white sky hazed with the promise of a fine day. But he knew the real

reason. It was finished. The night before, he had finished the last draft of the book. The pattern of work which had carried one day into the next for almost two years would be different now.

With one foot he pushed aside the square of flat wood covering a hole in the floor, and took out a carton of milk. It was his private device to vanquish the souring summer heat; the milkman called at the cottage only every fourth day. From the clattering bread-bin he took half a loaf, its exposed surface dry and rusklike even when he had sawn off the exposed end. The baker called only once a week. He had ordered his isolation with care.

He refilled the dog's water-bowl; she came padding back in, put down her head and lapped noisily.

'What a noise,' he said aloud. 'Suppose I drank like that, now?' It would hardly matter, he reflected, if he did; in all his time in the cottage he had encountered no one but the tradesmen, and the village shopkeepers when he drove in to buy food and collect his infrequent post. He had never been so content in his life. He had no idea what Mandrake and his Ministry were up to; it was only from a chance remark of the baker's that he knew their party was still in power. But his book would certainly shake their planning escapades. What had mattered was to write it. To cut himself off, and retire into the business of what he had to say. Since the village had not changed, there could be no great change in the world. No nuclear cataclysm, presumably, had yet arrived; and if it should be imminent, he would be no better off if he knew.

He made some coffee, cut himself a slice of bread and marmalade, and went to sit on the doorstep as he ate. The dog lay down at his feet, sniffing suspiciously round at the morning in some inscrutable wariness of her own. Queston watched her. He was not sentimental about animals; he had seen too many gaunt, half-wild dogs in the past, prowling round the fire where the scraps came thickest. So much, he thought, for loyalties. But he respected them; their perceptions covered a wider scale than his own, and that was reason

enough. Out of an irrational dislike of calling her by any name, he carried a whistle to summon the dog which blew a high note inaudible to his own ear. And once or twice he had suspected her of seeing things that he did not see.

He poked at her with his foot, and stood up. Already he felt the sun warm on his skin, though it shone still through an early mist, glinting on spangled webs in the thicket of the garden. He had cleared a patch of ground among the trees behind the cottage, and planted vegetables there, but here in front he had left the brambles and wild roses as disordered as when he came. Although he had cut a way through for the car, resting now beside the cottage in its fabric cocoon, he seldom drove away. Except when his stores ran low, there was no need.

The stores were low again now, but he felt no enthusiasm at the thought of going to the village. He would go tomorrow. There would be new milk today, and bread; and he would go for a rabbit.

'Rabbits!' he said to the dog. Her feathered tail rustled to and fro in the grass. Queston went in and up the ladder for his gun.

He came up through the floor of the room that he called his study. It was the least austere of the three. The kitchen-living-room below was primitive and functional; he had put in no more than rough wooden furniture, and a rush mat on the floor. And the bedroom was like a cell: bed, wardrobe, chair, white roughcast walls, but nothing else. No curtain at the window, even, since nothing was outside but the trees.

But in the room where he worked he had sanded and polished the floor, and covered it with bright rugs; brought in bookshelves, a couch, pressure lamps – everywhere else he had used candles, with a masochistic pleasure in the dim light. Here, he had worked; sitting at the big table with his back to the window, behind him the waving treetops that whistled in winter and in spring foamed in a pink-white sea. Two drawings hung on the walls: John Piper, Henry Moore. They had seemed to fit; to catch the ideas that he had been

trying to mould. The one in rocks, the other in men and women carved as if excavated from rock. Looking inward at them and at the room, he had worked; remembering, interpreting, living in the fantasy-world of the ideas that grew and writhed and intertwined, now that he had at last given them release, like a rising pillar of smoke. The cottage was an irrelevance, an irritation, but less so than any other surroundings would have been. Writing of man's attachment to place, he still found no smallest sign of it in himself.

He took the gun from a cupboard, with a packet of slugs. Below, the dog suddenly barked. Queston glanced at his watch; the milkman was early. Peering down through the trap, he saw the figure silhouetted in the doorway against the sunlight.

'Morning, George. Got some eggs for me as well?'

The figure moved a step forward. 'Mr Queston?'

Queston frowned, and climbed down the ladder. At its foot he stumbled over the dog; she stood there rigid, growling. 'Shut up,' he said to her.

The man was stocky and dark, with a round head. He was shorter than Queston. He wore a dark-grey suit that puckered at the shoulders where it did not properly fit, and he carried a briefcase. 'Mr Queston?'

'Yes. Sorry, I thought you were the milkman. Good morning.'

'Good morning.' The man did not move. Queston saw his downward glance, looked down at the gun, and laughed.

'O – don't be alarmed. Not my greeting for strangers.' He propped it against the table. 'I was going out for a rabbit.'

The man showed no trace of a smile, but stood there clutching the handle of his briefcase. He said stiffly: 'You live off the country?'

'To some extent,' Queston said cheerfully. He sat on the edge of the table. 'What can I do for you?'

The man fumbled with the straps of his case; gold initials glinted on its flap. 'Our office in Winchester would like you to answer a few questions, if you will. I'll leave a form with

you, but there are one or two points we could clear up now, if you have a moment.'

'All the time in the world. I've been meaning to write, but I didn't get round to it.' Queston remembered the three tax demands which had been waiting in his last batch of post, and felt an involuntary flicker of guilt. He waved at the single wooden chair. 'Sit down. Have a cup of coffee?'

'No, thank you.' The man would not be thawed.

'Well, I will.' He moved round the table and spooned more coffee into his cup, whistling between his teeth; the elation of the morning still washed over him warm as the sunshine. He said: 'I did fill in a return last year, you know.'

'A return?'

'Income tax.'

'O,' the man said, faintly pitying. 'This is not to do with tax. You might call it a census.' He sifted through his papers as if they were gold leaf. 'Now, if you would confirm . . . your name is David Wayland Queston, you are forty-five years old, British by birth, and you are by profession an anthropologist and writer?'

Queston put the kettle back on the stove. 'All correct.'

'And this is your handwriting?' The man held out a piece of paper. Queston glanced at him curiously as he took it, noting the high colour and thick dark eyebrows of the Wessex Celt. But for the solemnity, ill-fitting as his suit, he might have been of one family with all the men in the village.

He looked down at the paper. Then he put down his cup abruptly.

'Copley Hotel, Bruton Street . . .' Surely not. But it was his own writing. The form he had filled in a few years before, at the airport, when he came back from the States. He looked up. The man was gazing impassively at him, through him; Queston was suddenly aware of a nebulous uneasiness he had not felt for a long time. At the same moment he heard a low continuous noise in the room, soft and sinister. His imagination leapt in a frantic spasm, and then he saw the dog.

She was lying crouched beside the door, ears flat back against her head; her eyes were fixed on the stranger, and the long low rumbling came from her throat, an eerie unbroken growl like an incantation. He had never heard her make such a sound before.

'For heaven's sake, girl –' He went over to her, and caressed her head. The long warning did not waver. 'Get outside, then,' Queston said, and heaved at her collar. He had to drag her to the doorstep; her body was rigid and bristling, and all the while her head turned growling towards the man in the dark suit. As Queston pushed her over the step she gave one high snarling bark like a gun-shot, and slunk off into the garden.

Queston came back, clutching for common sense. 'So sorry.'

He might never have moved. The man sat patiently waiting, his eyes on the form.

'This is my handwriting, certainly. You're pretty thorough with your census, aren't you? It must be two years ago I filled this in.'

The man said: 'We understand from one of your referees that you have not led a settled life in this country since childhood.' The unwavering composure of his Hampshire burr began to be irritating; he spoke slowly, deliberately, with an air of detachment as if all the time he was listening for some other voice, looking through Queston for some other face.

'I've been here for two years, writing,' Queston said. 'Before that my work took me all over the place. I came back to England to write a book – just finished it, as a matter of fact.' He savoured the sound and feeling of the words, and felt less irritable.

The man had a notebook on his knee. 'Where were you born?'

'Yorkshire. I thought you had that on the airport form. Somewhere near Catterick, I think it was.'

'You think?'

'My father was in the army, we moved about a lot. And

I never really knew my parents – they died when I was young.'

'Your birth was registered in Darlington, according to our records.'

'I shouldn't be surprised. Anyway, if you've checked my birth certificate why ask?'

The man frowned. 'Be careful, Mr Queston.'

Queston stared at him. Was he mad, or just stupid? The man paused, with the same distant expression, and seemed to change his mind. He said, more mildly: 'Any inaccuracy makes things difficult for us, you see. Tell me, are you particularly attached to Yorkshire?'

'I don't remember it. I believe we moved soon after I was born.'

The man wrote; then looked up again. 'What about this part of the country?'

'It's very beautiful. Very English.'

'Would you say your roots were here?'

'O Lord no.'

'Yet you chose to come here to write your book.'

'I wanted peace and quiet.'

'But you would be distressed if, say, you had to leave this cottage tomorrow? You would miss it?'

'I have a ten-year lease,' Queston said dryly. 'With the option of renewal.'

The man looked at him, and smiled. He took a long breath, with the air of one trying a new approach to a simpleton. 'There must be one place from your early life that you remember with most affection. Where would you say your roots are, Mr Queston?'

The same word again, that struck an oddly unpleasant note. 'I don't have any roots. Damn it, I'm not a plant.'

'We all have roots,' the man said, patiently.

'Well, I don't.' Queston picked up his cup, but the coffee was cold. He leaned across to jerk it into the sink. The sunlight still streaming in through the door made him restless. 'Look here, if you'll forgive my saying so, I don't see much point in all this. I'm living here, and that's that. What more do you want?'

'I have my instructions,' the man said.

'Who from?'

'The Ministry of Planning.'

Queston paused. 'Indeed,' he said slowly.

'There are three questions I have to put to you, Mr Queston.' The round dark eyes were wide with self-conscious pomp in the round dark head. 'I should advise you to answer them as best you can. You say you have no roots. But if your first son were to be born, where would you like it to be?'

'I am unmarried. And careful.'

The man sighed. 'Very well. If you knew you were to die in a month's time, where would you choose to spend your last days?'

Queston stood up. His growing resentment had become active dislike. 'Buckingham Palace.'

'You are not being helpful,' the man said stolidly.

'You are most perceptive.'

'One more question. If you were forced to leave here, where would you go?'

'I'm afraid my time is valuable. If you don't mind –'

The man spoke very quietly. 'Answer my question.'

'I don't know where the hell I should go. Since this cottage is legally mine for the next eight years the question hardly arises.'

'The law changes, Mr Queston.' He stood up, closing his briefcase. 'You have been – out of touch.' He turned towards the door, then said, casually: 'Perhaps your roots were with the lady in Brazil?'

The faint but unmistakable stress on the word 'lady' brought anger whipping away astonishment. How had they known about that dead affair? 'Get out,' Queston said. He put his hand on the butt of the gun where it rested against the table, and saw the man's eyes narrow. Suddenly he felt an extraordinary undercurrent of menace; the man's impregnable confidence was that of one backed by an enormous weight of organized authority.

'You will be hearing from us, Mr Queston.' His eyes slid

away again with the same other-attentive air as before. He stepped out past the dog, who lay on the doorstep; she put back her ears, but did not growl.

The man gestured at her, and said over his shoulder: 'They should all be sent back to Scotland, where they belong. It will be seen to, soon enough.'

'The breed's Welsh, as it happens. And she came from a farm two miles from here.' Queston's retort came automatically triumphant, like a child's jeer, before he had realized quite what he had heard. But while he realized, the man had gone, and he saw only the dew glinting on the wet red blackberries and filigree cobwebs laced between the leaves, in the small jungle that cut off the cottage from the road.

The milkman's van did not come until the sun was dropping into the trees. Queston heard its clattering engine, and waited at the door.

'George! Where the hell have you been? I'm gasping for a cup of tea. Have the cows run dry?'

George was an amiable, dim-witted youth, vainly seeking sophistication in a leather jacket and black jeans. He wore them in all weathers, and the air now was close and hot. He mopped his red, large-featured face. 'Three pints?'

'That's right. Got any eggs?'

'Dozen?'

'I'll come to the van. What made you so late?'

George seemed uneasy, his eyes vacant and dazed. His rural drawl was more impenetrable than usual. 'Men in the village, from the office. Couldn't get out sooner.' He put down the cartons of milk and made off towards the road. Queston followed, and took the tray of eggs that the boy thrust at him.

'Come and have a cuppa,' he said impulsively, surprised to find himself grasping at a chance of company. 'It must be the end of your round.'

'Can't,' George said. He climbed into the driving-seat.

'Thanks all the same. Gotta get home.' He looked out furtively at the fields edging the road, as if expecting something to pounce. 'That's right. Home.'

Queston stared at him. Was the boy drunk?

'What did you mean about men in the village from the office? Was it some census chap from the Ministry of Planning?'

George reacted as if the words were some unutterable blasphemy. He jerked suddenly in his seat, and hastily started the engine. He said a third time, barely audible: 'Gotta get home.'

Queston stepped back, puzzled, but as the engine belched the boy leaned across the nearside window and shouted to him over the din. He looked across Queston's shoulder, without meeting his eyes. 'Shan't be calling any more, Mr Queston. Sorry. Not allowed. You're beyond the line. Have to come and get your own milk, if you like.'

Queston opened his mouth to argue, but the van began to move. He caught a last glimpse of George's hot, confused face, and heard him call: 'You're beyond the line.'

He went back to the cottage, carrying the eggs. Beyond what line?

The night was airless and hot; as he lay in bed the darkness pressed insistently round him as if it caught away his breath. Yet September was half gone already. Every year it had been the same, since he came to the cottage. The summers long, hot, longer every year, the cauldron of sunshine cooling only when the first autumn mists began.

And even the nights hot, that was the strange thing. He had grown accustomed to heat in the last twenty years; but to a heat that died into vicious cold at night when summer was past its peak. Not this, now: this was different. The nights were hot, without wind, without moisture; even tonight, though dew would form before morning, the stars were brilliantly clear. It would be the same until winter came, a sudden, brutal winter, biting into the year with

animal teeth. No heat or mildness then; only cold, low cloud, and snow in the wind.

He lay on his back on the bed, looking out. Downstairs he could hear the dog whimpering restlessly in her sleep. There was no sound outside. No sound at all. For a long time now the noises of the night had been still. He could not get used to that silence. No scrape of crickets, no bats squeaking, or hooting owls, no sudden chatter of a night-jar. Even the cottage had ceased to mutter and creak. It was as if the whole countryside waited, holding its breath. Waited for what?

Queston turned on his side. A cold runnel of sweat trickled down his bare chest. He felt oppressed, uneasy, and troubled at his uneasiness. For two years he had felt no sensation unconnected with the determined pattern of his days: to work, eat, sleep. Perhaps the breaking of the pattern, with the end of the book, had beaten down the barricades, and the arrival of the stranger only linked him again to the reactions he should have felt before. Perhaps this overwhelming sense of doom was natural to other men when they were alone.

He lay listening to the silence, and did not sleep.

The important thing now was for the book to be published. Fantasy or not, it might strike home. He had found it developing strangely as he wrote; the long analysis of man's two-way relationship with place, interwoven with a great unexpected diatribe against those who manipulated it for their own ends (he thought of the indignation Thorp-Gudgeon would splutter at him, and grinned). But both those were straightforward enough. It was when he had come to write of the deeper implications of it all – of the fate of the cave people, and all others who surrendered, without knowing it, to a force they had unleashed and could not now control – that he began to frighten even himself. He was not sure even now whether he had produced fantasy or prophecy; whether he would present the book as a fictional exercise or a solemn warning backed by all the force of his name and reputation. The more he thought about his curious visitor,

the more he leaned towards the second of these. It might at least show Mr Mandrake what he was playing with. Unless he would simply laugh.

He had written to his publishers, but now he decided to go to London without waiting for their reply. He could deliver the manuscript, at any rate.

He stripped the car of its plastic covering, and inspected the engine. Better play safe; it hadn't seen much use, and no one had looked at it for a long time. He worked on it all the morning, checking the battery and cleaning the single sparking plug with infinite care. At midday, admiring the purring turbine, he decided it was too late to set out.

The next morning, very early, he topped up the tank with petrol from the cans he had stacked in the cellar when he first came – there was no garage in the village, and he had been determined never to go farther away than that. Then he looked critically at the Lagonda again, and decided it needed polishing. He had turned to fetch a clean rag from the cottage when he realized with a peculiar shock what he was doing. The engine could have been checked within half an hour. The car could be washed down far more easily at a garage. All these things were excuses.

He was making excuses for delaying the journey to London. Something in his mind was struggling to produce reasons why he should stay at home. Just one more hour, just one more day.

The early mist was fading, and the sun growing warm. Queston looked round at the cottage, and the soft light on the reddening trees. A humming silence lay over it all; suddenly he was stirred by the beauty of the place that had housed him for two years. You never liked London, said the thing in his mind, gently insistent: a pity to go on a day like this, a pity to leave home . . .

It was like pushing against gravity. Queston shook his head violently; went to fill the dog's water-bowl and leave her a day's meal; threw the brown-paper parcel of his manuscript on the back seat of the car, and drove away.

On the way, brooding over his reactions, he decided to go by train; there could be no wandering off the route then, or freak decisions to turn back for home. He made for Micheldever, a small station on the London line, and left the Lagonda in the yard. The station was deserted, and he had to shout before an ancient, creaking little man, surly and muttering, emerged from some hidden depths; even then, before he could buy a ticket, the old man had to shuffle away to fetch the booking-office key. When the ticket was handed over at last, suspicion trickling out with it through the grimy window, it cost at least three times as much as Queston remembered for journeys of that length two years before.

A train was due in half an hour. 'You're in luck,' the old man said obscurely, and vanished, coughing with a childish, painful noise.

Queston walked slowly up and down the long platform, listening to his own steps. A nightingale was bubbling somewhere in the green, dark wall of fir-trees that grew close on the other side of the track; he could smell the resinous warmth of the air. It was like a ghost station, where nothing so vibrantly mechanical as a train would ever come. Even the old familiar holiday posters were missing from the walls; the poster-frames were still there, but gaping empty. Only in the waiting-room, with its bare wooden benches forlorn round the walls, did he find one poster glaring down at him. It carried no picture; no purple Highland loch or pneumatic beauty queen: but three lines of bold black type on a white ground.

IS YOUR JOURNEY
REALLY
NECESSARY?

Queston stared. The words woke a vague echo in his mind; there had been such posters when he was a child, he thought, shackling the worried country during the Second World War. Thirty-five years ago.

But this poster was quite clearly brand new.

Twenty minutes late, the train came in: a diesel car with one coach. There were only three other passengers beside himself, and every station platform where they stopped was as bare as Micheldever had been.

Even the platforms at Waterloo were half empty. At the barrier, a uniformed inspector peered closely at his ticket.

'You'll be coming back today, sir?'

'Yes, of course,' Queston said. 'It's a day return ticket, isn't it?'

'Just checking,' the man said. He held out a slip of green paper. 'Here's your pass.'

'Pass?' Queston looked down at the slip. It was printed, in neat black type: *London Regional Council: admit bearer for twenty-four hours*: and overstamped with the date. He said, incautiously: 'What's this for?'

'Not been here for some time, have you?' The man glanced up at him with a faint patronizing grin; the tolerance of the cockney for the provincial. 'You hang on to that, mate, and give it up when you get on your train tonight. You'll need it if you happen to get stopped by a bobby for anything, too.'

'Good God,' said Queston; but a woman behind him was impatiently clicking her tongue, and he moved on out of the way. As he passed, he caught sight of the letters 'M.O.P.' on the ticket inspector's cap.

He crossed the deserted station. Although it was midday, the snack bars and restaurants were closed. They looked as though they had been closed for a long time. There were no taxis in the station approach. Queston set out to walk.

At once he was startled by the altered horizons of London. From the middle of Waterloo Bridge, with the wind catching at his hair, he looked up and down the Thames at a great bristling fringe of the blocks of flats whose beginnings he had seen two years before. They were everywhere, in clusters and groups. He found it difficult to believe that in England they could have been built so quickly. As he watched, one of the helicopters whirring overhead on the river route turned suddenly over the south bank and rose to land on the roof of one of the tallest blocks.

But he did not really feel the change until he came to the other side of the bridge; and then London hit him with the vicious force of a hard, tight fist. He told himself afterwards that it was the unaccustomed noise: the traffic and the rushing crowds; that what he took for hostility was only the contrast of a busy city with his long lone seclusion. But no reason that he invented could explain the peculiar disquiet that flooded over him: the sense of being small and buffeted like a child plunged into an uninterested adult world. Unmistakably, he felt unwanted.

He imagined strange sideways glances on the faces of people he passed. He wondered if he bore some kind of distinguishing mark. 'I am not a Londoner.' For the first time in his life he thought: I have been away from cities too long.

He caught the monorail to Holborn, and walked to the offices of the University Press in Southampton Row. They were closed. No sign or message hung outside the locked doors; the place was dead, and silent. Only the streets were alive. People walked hurriedly: he had forgotten London's continual hurry. He stood unobtrusively in the porch at the top of the steps, beside the locked door, and looked down at the passing faces. They all seemed to wear an abstracted, listening expression, as if dazed by some mild drug.

No one paused, except to buy an evening paper from an old woman on the corner; there was no motionless figure on the horizon, except the old woman – and one man, on the other side of the street, gazing earnestly into the window of another publishing house whose name Queston remembered dimly for its textbooks.

With the aimless attentiveness of those who wait, Queston stood watching the man's back: a dark head with two curious round bald spots at its centre; a raincoat hanging loose from the shoulders; trousers whose ends drooped too low over the backs of the shoes. What was the man gazing at so intently? He looked the kind more likely to be standing furtively over a bookstall in the Tottenham Court Road, not examining dull and highly respectable educational works. A down-at-heel

academic, perhaps, taking a breather from the British Museum Reading Room.

When the man had stood immobile for ten full minutes, Queston's curiosity became intolerable; it was as if he were taking refuge in it from the bewilderment of the new London. He had to see what was in that window. Rather than cross the street directly towards the man, he came down the silent steps of the University Press and walked a few yards up on his own side of the road; then turned to cross. But as he turned, he saw that the man had disappeared. Apparently the spell had broken. He walked on towards the intriguing window; looked in, and then stopped short. Three books were displayed there, propped upright, facing forward, with only their covers visible. One was titled *Higher Calculus*, another *Geometry for Schools, Volume One* and the third *Geometry for Schools, Volume Two*. There was nothing else in the window at all, and even these were not easy to see. The glass was so grimy that Queston had to peer hard at them through an obstinate reflection of the street, and of his own face. How could those three lure a man to ten minutes' fascinated study? He chuckled at the anti-climax, and turned away. London had always been full of amiable crackpots.

Opposite him, the University Press was as dead as before. Somewhere a clock struck, and he looked at his watch: half past two. He was hungry, and the thick wad of manuscript clutched beneath his arm seemed heavier than before. No point in waiting any longer. He had promised himself a large and expensive lunch in Soho, but now it was too late. And in any case he knew, watching the grim passing crowds, that he flinched from the idea of walking alone into a staring restaurant, before the remote unwelcome of faces that accused him of belonging elsewhere.

He bought an *Evening News* from the woman on the corner, walked down to Theobalds Road and found a coffee bar. He remembered the place; he had come there often for lunch when he was young, working on research in the University Library before going abroad. It had been run by Italians then. He used to sit listening to the Milanese babble

over the shrieking espresso machine, imagining himself part of their isolation: aboard a foreign ship on a coastless English sea.

But there were no Italians now. The name of the place had changed from Capri to the Instant Grill, and both waitresses and menu were very English. Queston ate bacon and eggs with a sense of defeat. All the time at the cottage he ate bacon and eggs.

He flicked through the paper as he ate. The front page was full of London Regional Council election results, and most of the rest devoted to small local news; it was a more in-grown production than he ever remembered before. Then his eye was caught by an editorial headed 'Homesight': an odd combination of reporting and comment which he read with mounting alarm.

The story described, laconically, a murder trial in North Wales. In a remote slate-quarrying community, after a drunken brawl, a villager had killed a man who was passing through the place on his way to Ireland. The man had stopped only for a meal; neither had seen the other before. At the assize court, the villager gave one terse excuse for the murder he had done: the dead man had been *pobol dwad*, a stranger, and not *plant y lle*, a man of the place. And the verdict had been Not Guilty.

Queston looked again at the editorial comment that followed. 'The verdict, we are sure, would have been the same had this been a London affair. There can be no evil in the oldest right and instinct of man; his guardianship of his home. Where a man's roots are, there is his heart, and there his first duty. As the Ministry of Planning spokesman said in evidence: "Guard thine own" is no light cry.'

The Ministry of Planning? He stared at the words, his mind suddenly full of a loud discordant noise. What was happening in this country? There must be more to the story than they had here, clearly: the stranger must have attacked the villager's home, or family; done something, at any rate, to balance the business out. But what connexion had Mandrake's men with a criminal trial? And how could this

crazy, obsessive comment get into a reputable newspaper?

He found himself thinking, with new urgency: the book is vital now. It has to be published, to make people think about what may be happening. There's no knowing what else the Ministry can stop, but they can't stop that yet. Everyone can't have gone mad. There must still be men objective enough to see the dangers of this fantastic deliberate policy of tying people to place, even if they don't yet know the dreadful force to which they are being made so vulnerable.

And they would have a chance to know that, too, if they could read his book.

He sat for a long time gazing into space, counting the lines in the pattern of the wallpaper and trying not to think; until the waitress said in his ear: 'Can I get you anything else, duck?'

Queston jumped. 'What? O – no thanks.' He paid his bill and went out, still preoccupied. Ten paces away he felt an uneasiness in his hands, a reminder that they had not been empty before; and he realized that he had left the bulky brown-paper package that was his manuscript in the coffee bar. He turned back at once; but at the door he staggered as someone coming out cannoned into him. The man pushed him aside roughly, without pause or apology; his coat whipped at Queston's legs as he thrust past.

Queston said protestingly: 'Hey – ' Then his voice changed, as he saw in the same moment two things: the man, running now, wore a grubby flapping raincoat and had two bright strange bald patches on the top of his head. And under his arm he was carrying a heavy brown-paper package.

'Stop thief!' Queston yelled; and before he knew what he was doing he was running in pursuit, dodging through startled pedestrians, trying to keep sight of the weaving raincoated back. Faces turned to him in alarm or disapproval or vacant wonder, but none moved except a fat young man who swung round from a shop window and at once joined the chase, adding his 'Stop thief!' to Queston's in a shrill bark.

The man in the raincoat, twenty yards ahead, darted

suddenly across the road, leaving a bus screeching unsteadily to a halt and the driver heaving white-faced at his wheel. Through a gap in the traffic they saw the flapping figure grasp at the door of a taxi, and jump inside. The taxi swung out and away, and Queston slowed to a gasping walk.

The young man puffed up at his side. 'I say, bad luck.' His round, pink face was glinting with sweat and excitement; he tore off a pair of heavy black spectacles and began to polish them. 'Not another cab in sight, either. I got the number, though – did you?'

Queston looked at him with respect. There was something to be said after all for the generation reared on television thrillers. 'No, I didn't.'

'One-two-seven-six-nine.'

'Thanks a lot.' He fumbled for a pencil.

'Pleasure,' said the young man cheerfully. 'Had my first bit of exercise for weeks. There's a police station up on the corner of Gray's Inn Road, you know, if you want to report the fellow. What did he get – your wallet?'

'No,' Queston said bitterly. 'The halfwit's gone off with a book manuscript of mine. I think he expects it to be all about geometry.' But even as he spoke he knew that it had not been textbooks that the man in the raincoat had been watching in the publisher's window.

'O.' The young man's interest became merely polite. No glamour attached to a stolen book. 'Got another copy?'

'Yes, I have one at home. But all the same –'

'Ah well then, not so bad.' Brimming with Boy Scout zeal, he smiled benevolently at Queston and departed.

'Thank you,' Queston called after him. Then he stood still on the pavement and swore, once, aloud, causing two tight-skirted young women to turn and giggle. 'Naughty naughty,' said one.

At the coffee bar, when he went back, the waitress was tearful with apology. The man in the raincoat had jumped up as Queston went out, and called that the gentleman had left a parcel behind. 'He said he'd catch you, and he went

rushing out with it, sir. It's an old trick, but no one had a chance to stop him. I'm terribly sorry . . .'

He found the police station, beside the green oasis of Gray's Inn, and told his story to a stolid young constable. The smooth, earnest face did not flicker. 'You say this man followed you from Southampton Row, sir?'

'He must have done. Can't think why.'

The constable reached for a notepad, and began to scrawl. 'Now, if you'll give me the number of that cab . . . and your name and address, please.' He wrote with laborious care, but looked up sharply when he heard where Queston lived. 'You're not a Londoner, then, sir. Could I see your pass?'

'Pass?' Queston blinked at him. 'O yes.' He reached for the slip of paper the ticket inspector had given him at Waterloo, remembering wryly how startled he had been at the suggestion that he might need it for the police.

The policeman looked at it, licked it, held it up to the light, and wrote down a number. 'I think that'll do, thank you.' He managed obscurely to give the impression that Queston, as an outsider, was somehow responsible for the robbery. 'We'll have your local police contact you if there's any news of your – er – book, though frankly I don't think there's much hope. The man would just have hopped into the cab and hopped out again a few streets away.'

Queston said sharply: 'It's important.' But he turned, then, and went out, with the beginning of a sense of defeat. Behind the constable's head, on the bare plaster wall, he had seen a notice-board covered with posters and notices about registration of aliens, checking of passes, movements within the London Plan. They had all been headed 'Ministry of Planning'. There were beginning to be too many coincidences in the way he was constantly reminded of England's newest bureaucratic machine.

The roads were dark as he drove back from Micheldever. The Lagonda's lamps thrust a yellow path before him, and

briefly lit the rushing trees on either side. There had been no one on the station, not even the old man, and he passed no one on the way.

At the cottage, colourless and unfamiliar in the glare as he swung the car off the road, he left the headlamps blazing in through the window. He stumbled into the room through white light and black shadow; found the lamp, and lit it. The dog was not there. Her food and water bowls had been licked clean.

He went out again to turn off the car lights, then stood blinking and helpless in the sudden dark. Gradually he grew aware of the shape of the trees, looming around and above. He found himself wishing the dog would crash out of the bushes as she always did, leaping and barking in welcome and relief.

He pulled the soundless whistle from his pocket, and blew it, but she did not come. He shouted: 'Dog!' He wondered why he had never given her a name.

He shouted again. Round him the sounds of the night cracked and whispered and squeaked; the stillness and silence of the long heat were gone. The darkness was more alive, suddenly, with insistent, unidentified noise than he had ever known in an English night, and the air was cold.

He drove to the village the next day, to buy food. The shopkeepers seemed silent and preoccupied. Queston felt restless. The cottage had seemed so secure a refuge when he was away, but there was no welcome in it, or harbour. It was only a place like any other: four walls, and a roof. It had been there before, it would be there when he had gone; he was a tenant, it had nothing to do with him. And it was empty; the dog had not come back.

And the dog at least was his. He missed her. She was the only thing that had made any demands upon him. He went out into the fields to look for her, and found that he was carrying his shot-gun. He frowned, then shrugged his shoulders; perhaps he had thought without realizing it that

he might see a rabbit at the same time. Why else go out into a peaceful countryside with a gun?

He ranged through the fields; sheep grazed unheeding, and wheat and barley stood in neat bales where the harvesters had been, but he saw no man or woman at all. He called and whistled until he reached the wood two miles away; the air was heavy and silent in there, under the trees, and he felt a sense of intrusion, as if he were interrupting some particular private mood of the place. Then he found the dog.

It was a rustle in the undergrowth first that drew him, in the ferns and brambles catching at his legs. He moved towards it, calling, and then leapt back as something shot out almost from under his feet. He glimpsed grey-brown fur through the leaves, and as the animal streaked across an open space he saw that it was a gigantic cat, wild or turned wild; the long teeth glinted in a snarl as it passed.

He saw the blood on the leaves, and then the dog. Ferns and branches had been trampled for yards around by the fight. And the dog lay with her eyes slashed blind and her throat torn out, teeth bared in a futile frozen defiance that seemed to Queston devastatingly pathetic. Recently she had been wandering farther from the cottage, alone, out of her element, drawn by some instinct beyond his control. This time she had wandered too far.

He knew, without reason, that he must take the body back. The dog had been killed by something more than the wild. The body was not yet stiff, and he hauled it on to his back; the forelegs over one shoulder, the back legs over the other. It was astonishingly heavy, and smothered his shoulders with blood and dirt; dead, its musty animal smell was almost overpowering. Queston struggled grimly back through the fields, his gun under one arm.

It was dusk when he reached the cottage. Again he had passed no one on the way, but now he saw a strange car standing beside his own. He paused. The car was dark and sleek as his Lagonda; there was no one inside. He looked at the cottage, dark in the growing shadows, but he could hear

nothing but the noises of the night, loud and jeering. He moved forward again.

'Good evening, Mr Queston,' a voice said, from the shadows.

He stopped abruptly. The fur of the dog's forelegs rasped against his cheek. In the darkness of the cottage doorway the small red eye of a cigarette glowed. Then below it suddenly a brighter eye; Queston blinked as the beam of a powerful torch blazed out and flicked up from his feet to his head. He heard the man gasp. 'Are you hurt?'

He recognized the voice then. The man from the Ministry. The man with the questions and the form.

'I'm all right.' He put the gun down, then knelt to drop the dead dog, stiffened now into an arch. He pushed silently past the man into the cottage, and groped for the lamp. As he carried it flickering to the table, he caught sight of himself in the mirror over the sink. Dark blood smothered his jacket and one side of his face; his hair stood out ruffled and wild, and the shadows deepened the lines round his mouth. It was like glimpsing the face of a stranger: a hostile outcast, enclosed in fear. No wonder the man had been startled.

'My dog. It was killed in a fight.' Making no attempt to clean himself, he stood looking coldly across the room.

The man nodded; Queston thought he smiled. 'It should have been sent back where it belonged.' He stepped forward into the yellow light of the lamp, unfastening his briefcase. 'I am sorry to call so late. I came yesterday, but you were not here.' The words were a question. Queston did not answer. The man glanced at him sharply, and his voice changed. He laid a long envelope on the table. 'I am afraid you have not cooperated with us, Mr Queston. This is an eviction order. You must be out of this house within seven days.'

Queston stared at him. 'But that's ridiculous. I am the legal tenant.'

'I am afraid we can overrule the law.'

'Overrule – who do you think you are, for God's sake?'

The man said, smugly: 'The Ministry of Planning . . .'

'Suppose I refuse to go?'

'I don't advise that. I don't advise that at all, Mr Queston. It would make things very – complicated.'

Queston sat down wearily. 'Would you mind giving me one good reason why your blasted Ministry should want me out of here, when I've been left alone for two peaceful years?'

'Ah,' the man said. 'Those two years. I told you before, you have been out of touch. The situation has grown without your noticing.'

'What situation?'

'The situation demands now that men should be together.' He was reciting a lesson. 'That men should be where their roots are.'

'*What situation?*'

The man picked up his briefcase. 'Since you claim to belong nowhere, arrangements have been made for Winchester to take you. You might be said to qualify. You spent holidays there when you were small. You developed an affection.'

'I don't want to live in Winchester.'

'You can't live here.'

'Why not?'

The man paused inside the door. The light still fell on his body, and the hand clasping its briefcase like a talisman, but his face was in shadow. The voice was soft now, its accent pronounced. An actor in rehearsal, dark-suited, in a yokel part. An oaf, acting authority. Queston's tired mind fidgeted to and fro, half-listening, incredulous. The voice said, 'The van will come in a few days for your furniture, you must be ready, you must realize that the Ministry works for the greatest good.' Out of the shadows: 'You will find it best not to argue.'

But he only properly heard the last words.

'Remember your dog.'

He was beginning to understand. He wondered what had lit the fuse. Radiation, perhaps. Or just the possibility of

worse than that; the possibility that would never die away, because men were as they were. Frightened, clinging to their own. O, it was radiation that had done it, as a symbol of all the rest. From war, or simply from tests, it hardly mattered. The astronauts? Irrelevant. That did not directly affect the earth –

He felt immensely tired; bored, bored with it all, with centuries of weariness. He looked, in that unsleeping night, at his gun. Why not? The same result would come in the end; it was inevitable now, wished on him even in his isolation by all the rest of them, in their clinging and suspicion and fear. No part for him to play now; no part worth playing. He had written the book; that had gone out of him. There was nothing and no one else. The light was gone.

Then he heard a rat squeal outside, and realized what it had found. In quick revulsion he put away the gun, took a shovel and went outside and buried the dog. Light beamed out of the window to divide the dark, and he heard the muffled clatter as moths hurled themselves against the bright glass.

When he had trodden down the earth and put back the last turf he knew, obscurely, that it was too late. Betrayed of detachment by an animal. Now he would have to go on.

He drove, in the morning, to Winchester. He wanted to make sure. As he came to the city limits two men flagged him down beside a black car parked at the kerb. One was a police sergeant, the other a man in a dark suit. There was nothing distinctive about those dark suits, yet already they were unmistakable. The man crossed to the Lagonda and flashed an imposing identity card briefly through the window.

'Spot check, sir. Sorry to trouble you.'

'Yes,' Queston said.

'Can you tell me where you're from, sir?'

'Hookpit.' That was the village: his nearest label.

'O yes, that's all right. And what you'll be doing in Winchester?'

'I have to go to the Ministry of Planning office.'

The man drew back, his Hampshire drawl suddenly respectful. 'O, I see, sir, yes. Sorry to trouble you. You'll get straight through to the castle on this road. Thank you, sir.'

'Thank you.' Queston nodded curtly, and let in the clutch.

He drove on, smiling slightly, to the street that wound uphill to the grey castle walls, and in through the archway where the familiar ludicrous insignia 'M.O.P.' hung emblazoned in place of the county arms. A man in Ministry uniform sprang to attention as he passed. Clearly there were advantages in driving a sleek black car.

He found a bland youth in an outer office.

'My name is David Queston. I live at Rose Cottage, outside Hookpit.'

'Yes, sir?' The boy was calm and dark. Queston was beginning to loathe the accent.

'I want to know the meaning of this.' He slapped the eviction order down on the desk.

The boy opened it and read, unhurriedly. He looked up. 'It seems straightforward enough.'

'Of course it's straightforward, my child. I don't want it spelled out. I want a reason for it. And not from you.'

The boy flushed. 'I'll see if the clerk –'

'I don't want to see any bloody clerk,' Queston shouted, in a rage he did not feel. 'I want whoever's in charge here. The –' he groped for a likely word '– the regional controller.'

The boy disappeared; there was much muttering. Then with silent ceremony a man in uniform led Queston through narrow passages to a pair of great doors. He leant forward dramatically from the hips, and flung them open.

Queston was in a lofty, echoing hall with thick wooden beams spanning the roof. He saw, hanging on the far wall, the painted wooden circle that was Winchester's Table of King Arthur, and remembered his first sight of that spurious

piece of enchantment when he was a boy. He remembered the hall from those days, too, splendid and mysterious; it had been the seat of the county assize court. It was not a courtroom now. The floor was wide and empty, with only a row of chairs lining each wall; and dominating the space, under the hanging Round Table, a massive square desk where a man sat alone.

Queston marched forward, and he was half-way across the floor before he looked at the man. A figure rising to its feet, holding out its hand: 'Ah, Dr Queston, it has been a long time. I was hoping you would come.'

It was Brunner.

Queston stood still. Of course.

He said the first thing that came into his head. 'But you aren't a Hampshire man.'

Brunner seemed pleased. 'Nor an Englishman. An outsider. Like yourself. But are the leaders not always those who can step outside? In objectivity lies power, Dr Queston. Do come and sit down.' As Queston ignored his outstretched hand, he smiled tolerantly and turned the gesture into a graceful indication of a chair.

'We've nothing to talk about. I came on a simple errand. I have a cottage – '

'You *had* a cottage.' Brunner's emphasis was slight, but prompt. The years had hardly changed him at all. He was thicker set, his face older; but the same inscrutable swarthiness was there, the same jerky, brooding manner. Strained a little now, as he smiled carefully to win friendliness.

'I see.'

'You do not see at all. Come now, you astonish me. Your remoteness is almost unique, but even you must not regard the Ministry as hostile. There was a stupid man sent to see you, that was a blunder for which I apologize. Our officials must be local men, and sometimes the material is not good ... but you must forgive us, and forget it. You are too valuable a man to be treated without consideration.'

'And this?' Queston held up the eviction papers.

'We need you working with us,' Brunner said, still smiling.

'Anywhere you like, but with us. Not on your own. After all, a long time ago you told me yourself, David – we are such old acquaintances, I may call you David, may I not?'

'You may not,' Queston said.

The dark face flickered, but the voice was still controlled. 'I beg your pardon. But you remember talking – that day in Oxford, and in the aircraft.'

'I remember. And I failed to see then, and I fail to see now, what possible link there is between my work and what you are doing.'

'You have made the link very obvious yourself,' Brunner moved back behind his great desk, and opened a noiseless drawer. 'In this.' He held up a heavy bundle of paper, and in a flaring shock of disbelief Queston recognized the wrapping. It was the manuscript of his book.

'Where the devil did you get that?'

'You went to London recently and – lost it, I believe. If you go back to your cottage you will find the duplicate missing as well, and the rough notes. They should take some time to re-write. Ah – no, I am afraid I must keep it.' As Queston reached out, he dropped the manuscript back into the drawer and slid it shut.

'You have no right –' Queston began angrily. He clenched his fists, and stopped. He said, more levelly: 'Brunner, this is important. Give me that manuscript.'

'Certainly it is important.'

'Damn it,' Queston said in a kind of anguish, 'you can't steal all that work. You used to call yourself a scholar, you must know what it means.'

'Part of your soul,' Brunner said softly, gazing at him. 'Like a child, wrenched out of you. But more than that, O much more, because every ounce of its spirit and every inch of its body you made yourself, with infinite labour. Your own creation. Your tiny stake in the future. Isn't that it?'

It was cat-like, coolly sadistic. Queston swore startlingly at him, and he smiled. 'Listen to me, my friend. We are not unreasonable. You must realize that we can never allow you to publish a book like this. I reported long ago that you were

on the track, but even the Minister and I had no idea what you would produce. This could do great harm.'

'Then I'm right?'

'In your fantastic conclusions? Of course not.' Brunner flushed. 'Try to understand, you fool. The public consciousness is a stupid, malleable, plastic thing, and we have learned – Mandrake has learned – the secret of making it take a chosen form. The only hope for peace, for the whole human episode, is to keep it in that form. Contented in that form. Man bound to place. And you? You have hit upon the method, though not our secret of making it work, and written what might be a handbook of our ideas. But instead of attributing them to us, you create this absurd fantasy about the earth itself. If that idea in all the reasoned form you give it were allowed to spread . . . there would be an intellectual uneasiness first, and then very soon there would be panic.'

'Panic may soon be what we need.'

Brunner said patiently: 'That would destroy everything we are doing.'

'You've done nothing. Christ Almighty – my theories may turn out to be rubbish, I hope to God they do, but they're as nothing to the arrogance of you boys. D'you know what you are? You're the man who stamped his foot near Vesuvius just as it happened to start erupting, and looked at it and said: "Goodness, look what I've done." You frighten me, Brunner. Your Mr Mandrake, he frightens me most of all.'

'He wants you,' Brunner said. Incredibly, there was something like envy in the dark, impassive face. 'He wants your mind. He is a good friend, and a good master. You will not regret it. Come and work with us, David.'

'I don't like the way you work.'

'You may find life uncomfortable, otherwise.'

'I'll risk that.'

Suddenly then the reasoning calm broke. 'Come to us. You must. Of your own free mind. It is necessary. I swear to you. Mandrake could tell you – '

'He won't get a chance.'

'For God's sake, my friend – '

Queston said heavily: 'I am not your friend. I am not involved. I am a scientist, not a saviour. It pleases you and your people to call yourselves saviours, but you are something else, something I won't have anything to do with. You can steal my work, but my mind and instincts are my own. Leave them alone. Leave me alone.'

He swung round and went swiftly across the empty ringing room to the door.

'Come back!' Brunner called behind him. 'David! Come back!' But the voice vanished as he closed the door, and though he expected every moment to hear running feet, no one hindered him as he went out to the car. In the archway, the man in Ministry uniform saluted him again. Queston did not salute back.

He drove straight back to the cottage. Bright on a hoarding as he left Winchester, he passed one of the Ministry posters: an enormous picture of a high brick wall, and a closed door set in it, and over both the words, in scarlet: 'Guard Thine Own.'

He drove very fast. He was astounded by the emotion that gripped him: a trembling rage, and a great formless determination which had sprung into roaring life when he had seen his manuscript in Brunner's hand. He was against them. He was against the spell, whatever it really was, that they had begun to cast. Nothing of it should hold him. Suddenly the constant withdrawing remoteness of all his life had become a positive thing. Something in him was waking for the first time, and it was not a feeling for others or even for himself, and certainly not a feeling for mankind. Perhaps it was scorn. Perhaps that was the only strength. He was his own master for the first time, possessed of a fierce indifference.

He got out of the car. The cold autumn sun stood above the trees; it was midday, and very still. He moved now with great speed, mind and movements controlled by some inner computing mechanism of which he was hardly aware.

Click . . . click . . . one action automatically producing the next.

He climbed the ladder to his study. They had even known where to look. The two drawers of his desk gaped empty where the manuscript had been. Queston gazed coldly round the bright room; the cottage was a vacuum, neither welcoming nor hostile. It had been his home, it was so no longer. What would it become now? He jumped suddenly as something knocked at the window; then stared. It was the branch of a tree. The old apple-tree which grew near the back door; he had not realized that its arms spread so close. As he stared, slowly he understood. The cottage would never have a power of its own. It had never possessed enough separate meaning as a place. It belonged to the land, and the land would take it back. As it had taken the dog.

The land should take it back sooner than they thought, then, through the only gesture of defiance he could now make. Swiftness poured into him again, and he pulled out a suitcase from a cupboard; tossed in some papers and notebooks from the desk, took it into the bedroom and stuffed in clothes at random. He took his gun and cartridges from the study, and after some hesitation the two drawings from the wall; laid these in the suitcase, rammed it shut and carried case and gun down the ladder and out to the car.

Then he drove the Lagonda to the edge of the road, at the end of the overgrown little drive. No breeze stirred the silent afternoon; once or twice a leaf spiralled down alone from one of the trees. He got out, walked back to the cottage and took his last spare can of petrol from the cellar.

He unscrewed the cap carefully, and walked to and fro across the kitchen, pouring petrol as he went, scattering it in a jerking gurgling stream. The colourless liquid looked innocent as water, but its smell was all around him. He soaked a rug with the last of it, near the door. Then he set down the can and went outside, inspecting his hands carefully to see that they were dry. With the same swift unbroken certainty he struck a match and held it to a corner of the rug, leaping back as the petrol flared.

Before he was half-way back to the car he could hear the hollow roar as the kitchen filled with flames. He walked on without turning, but paused and looked back with his hand on the car door.

Inside the lower half of the cottage he could see the flames jumping and coiling, reaching upward, strands of yellow in the wreaths of black smoke. A grey haze showed already through the little window upstairs. There was a muffled explosion; he supposed the petrol can had burst. With a sudden irrational panic he thought: The dog is in there –

He shook his head impatiently, got into the car, and drove away. Behind him, billows of dark smoke began to climb into the blue-white autumn sky, towards the sun.

Part Three

As he drove north from Winchester, wondering where he should go, he found his mind groping for people. He was flotsam; he needed someone to provide a fixed mark which he could grasp as he was washed by. Other people had roots. He needed a refuge until he had time to think.

The mechanical fury had begun to ebb away, leaving him aimless and disturbed. As he drove through the autumn afternoon, along strangely empty roads, he fumbled in memory for the few old friends who might not be displeased now if he were to turn up at their door . . . only for time to think, only for a little while . . . there was Anderson, at the Bath Museum . . . Gilchrist, in London, where was it, the School of Oriental Studies, and a house by the river at Chiswick . . . who else?

He came to a signpost. Andover. Of course! Stewart lived in Andover: John Stewart, who had blustered him affectionately into the dreadful Rag Days when they were undergraduates; who had shared classes with him and then suddenly, to everyone's surprise, turned round on his subject and gone into the Church. Queston had visited him once, and found him a genial country vicar with a growing brood of gay, untidy, shrill children. Wasn't it Andover? Somewhere near there . . .

He took the Andover road, and drove more cheerfully.

On the edge of the town he drew into the kerb beside a telephone box. Better to ring up first. Solitude seemed to have given him a new shyness, a horror of arriving, unannounced, unwelcome. He thought of his aunt, long ago, jumping nervously as the door-bell rang: 'O dear, who's *that*? And me all in a pickle – David, tidy those books away – '

Stewart's name was in the telephone book, with an Andover number. He dialled twice, but each time heard only a high-pitched buzz. Blankly listening, he looked out through the grubby panes of the glass box at the road; narrow, empty, dwindling into enclosing trees, opaquely lit by the mist that had not properly left the sun, or the sky, all day. He turned inward, and looked at his chin in the small square mirror above the telephone. For a sudden moment he was in the cottage, seeing himself in the mirror above the sink. But this mirror was too low; he was back in the telephone box again. He had always been too tall for telephone boxes.

Irritated by the peevish noise, he dialled the operator. For a long while no one answered, but at last a metallic voice told him that Stewart's number was a ceased line.

'What does that mean?'

'The line has been discontinued,' the voice said, bored.

'D'you mean they've gone away?'

'I'm sorry, caller, we have no information. Your number is listed as a ceased line.'

'Thank you so much,' Queston said acidly, and hung up. He wrote down Stewart's address, and drove on into Andover to look for the house. A policeman on the fringe of the town looked up sharply as he passed, and in the driving-mirror Queston saw him turn and stand staring after the car. But in the centre of the town he began to pass other cars, and felt less vulnerable.

It was a large Georgian house, greatly the worse for wear. Facing straight on to the street, with no garden or yard, it was obviously a rectory: everything visible spoke the right devout carelessness of comfort or repair. Queston knocked at the door, with an immense snarling lion's head whose blackened brass had not been cleaned for a long time.

The woman who came was wispy and sluttish, wiping one hand on a dirty apron and pushing ineffectually with the other at loose strands of hair.

'Mr Stewart?' Queston said tentatively.

'Who?'

'Mr Stewart – doesn't he live here? Isn't this the rectory?'

'No,' the woman said. She raised her eyes to look at him, then glanced away again without interest.

'Oh. But I thought – he used to live here, didn't he?'

'I wouldn't know.' She spoke in a flat, country monotone.

'He's listed in the phone book at this address.'

'We haven't got no phone.' She glanced up again, seeking an excuse to shut the door. She sniffed, and added: 'The authorities give us the house. They'd know about your friend. You ask at the office.'

'The office?' Queston said blankly.

'In the square,' the woman said, and stared. Then apathy smoothed her face again, and she shut the door. The lion's head rattled emptily.

In the square, Queston understood. Its largest building, bright with the familiar posters, was labelled 'Ministry of Planning'. He parked the Lagonda, and went in.

At the inquiry counter an elderly, weatherbeaten man in Ministry uniform greeted him with a fatherly smile. A nervous tic continually jerked the corner of his right eye; it gave the smile a faint leering complicity.

'*Good* afternoon, sir.'

Queston regarded him warily. 'Good afternoon. I'm trying to find a friend of mine. He seems to have moved.'

The man chuckled warmly, as if he were accustomed to this kind of approach. He reached behind him for a large book. 'The name, sir?'

'Stewart. John Stewart.'

The man paused, with his hand on the book. 'The Reverend?'

'Yes.'

'Ah well, sir, I can tell you that without looking.' His eyes twinkled. Combined with the twitch, the effect was startling. 'He went home, a fair time ago now.'

'Home?'

'To Scotland. Edinburgh, I think it was.'

Queston stood still. 'Are you sure?'

'O yes, sir, quite sure. A lot of people have gone home, of course. But Scotland, yes, it was Scotland.'

'Thank you.'

'No place like home,' the man said, like a chanting child, still smiling at him. 'You'll be wanting to get back too, I dare say, time's getting on. From London, are you?'

'No,' Queston said, and knew, looking at the bright eyes that were keen beneath the cosiness, that he would have to localize himself. He made up his mind quickly. 'I'm off to Bath.'

As he uttered the word, incredulity, concern, warning flickered over the man's face; and Queston gave himself no time to find why the smile suddenly died, but went hastily out. As he swung the Lagonda round towards the Bath road, and Anderson, he was brooding over the first shock of what the man had said. The proof, the innocent proof, of an absurdity that masked the sinister persistence of the thing that the Ministry was doing. Stewart had gone home to Scotland . . . but Stewart had never lived in Scotland. His father had been a pleasant bank manager in Pinner, with a genteel English voice. The only Scottish thing about the family had been its name: and once, long ago, its roots.

The light was beginning to fade as he came out again into the street. He got into the car, and switched on the ignition. The fuel tank showed two-thirds full. He switched the key back, thought of trying to telephone Anderson in Bath, and then decided against it. He could always spend the night in an hotel when he arrived. Across Salisbury Plain how long a drive was it? Well, time enough.

He sat in the car, staring out. Farther down the street, groups of youths and girls were pushing and giggling into the thirsty-bright doors of a cinema; content, accustomed to living their lives in their own town, unaffected by change. He looked up, at the dour black building and the neat sign 'Ministry of Planning'. It was all clever, and ridiculously simple. Exploiting the sense of security that a man had in

his own home; glorifying the old atavistic homing instinct until he really believed himself better off where his roots were – even if, in Stewart's case, the roots had to be dug up by the Ministry themselves. In a country long overshadowed now by greater powers, and fearing all the time the war those powers might bring on them, they had everything on their side: given the chance to duck out from the shadow of disaster, ninety-nine men out of a hundred would be only too willing to do what they were told.

He sat staring blankly at the steering-wheel. Suppose, after all, that his own ideas were fantasy – or, as Brunner had claimed, half-fantasy. Suppose that the Ministry had managed to harness, by some mysterious means, this new strange force that operated from both inside and outside men's minds. Then, *why*? Mandrake was exploiting the primeval attachment to place, and the desperate longing for peace – but to what end?

The light died above him as he sat there, and the sky faded to a deep grey-blue. The cinema swallowed its crowds, and stood quiet. He jerked at the starter, and drove out westward to the faint-glowing horizon of the Bath road.

On all the clear main road to Amesbury he passed no other car. The Ministry needed no rules; their advice was enough. 'Is your journey really necessary?' Well no, it isn't when you come to think of it, let's stay at home. Sheep. But remember yourself, remember the hours you stood fiddling with the engine, docile as the rest of them, when you had meant to leave the cottage for London –

He accelerated unhappily through the town. The few people walking the streets raised their heads curiously as he went by. He thought he heard one of them shout; and then he thought he had imagined it. But for a moment the sound had shaken him.

He drove up the dark hill out of Amesbury, the Lagonda humming deeply, and out on to Salisbury Plain. The road had been climbing gently for a long time; now, suddenly, he was out on the roof of England. The darkness all round, like a black fog in the air, was the darkness not of en-

closing hills or trees but of the open sky. There was no moon. He could see, beyond the down-thrown white path of his headlights, the faint bright points of stars in the night. He felt a sudden oppressive loneliness, and accelerated again.

The signpost and the forked crossroads were on him before he had remembered to expect them, and fumbling for the proper direction he swung the car squealing and gravel-grating round into the right-hand road. But within a few hundred yards the picture of the map flashed belatedly into his mind, and he knew that he was wrong. This road led up to Devizes; it was the left-hand fork that pointed to Warminster and Bath. He stopped, and began to reverse the car. It slid backwards a little way, with a peculiar unwillingness, and then the engine gave a long diminishing moan, and died.

The starter howled ineffectually as he pressed it, and he frowned. The fuel gauge still showed the tank two-thirds full. With the beginnings of foreboding, Queston felt for a torch and the dipstick, and got out of the car. The slam of the door made him jump, and he stood for a moment frozen by the silence of the Plain, a silence that hung all round him like an immense motionless force. He had switched off the headlights, and the silence was in his eyes and ears, the voice of the dark.

He felt for the switch of the torch, and in its small light tried the dipstick in the fuel tank. It emerged dry.

'*Damn*,' he said, aloud.

He stood still, thinking, and instinctively switched off the torch again. The vast solemn darkness sprang in on him at once. Stepping back to the grass verge, away from the vulnerable ring of footsteps that the road gave, he moved forward through the long swishing stems to see if the lights of a house showed anywhere within reach.

On the other side of the road a distant prickle of light-dust showed a village far away across the Plain, a graze on the blackboard of the dark. Over his head the stars were fierce now, remote points of fire. He had always liked the stars,

in a thousand nights spent open to them; but here in this empty silence they did not seem the same.

He turned his head, and looked away from the road over the sweep of the dark land; then suddenly he was aware of a darkness more solid than the rest. Things, tangible. His head sang with shock for a moment, until he realized that he had stopped beside the pointing circle of Stonehenge.

Wariness did not occur to him; only the warmth of recognition. He walked forward again in relief towards the stones. From visits long ago he felt vague memories of fences, and an official turnstile, and souvenir-touting huts; but none of these seemed to stand in the way now. Only the empty grass stretched out to the old silent stones. He was moving without uneasiness, and growing accustomed to the dark. And then it hit him.

Without warning, he was flung backwards by an impact as fierce as if he had walked into a wall. Fear came simultaneously; a dreadful paralysing terror that brought his blood throbbing up into his chest and ears, and dried his throat. But afterwards he remembered the split second before the fear, when he had felt the overwhelming thrust of an astonishing force of ill will.

As a man can radiate even in silence a hostility that is vocal, so the place was shouting at him. Go away. Get away. And then the terror drowned it, drowned everything. He knew as he stood there, appalled out of movement, that he had never understood fear before.

Small and helpless and uncomprehending and more than any of these *unimportant* . . . he knew for a flaring instant that only that was the answer, as the silence roared through his mind, and he cringed mutely begging mercy from an immense annihilating anger that filled the night.

Beside the looming stones he saw, suddenly, a bobbing light that grew nearer. He heard himself gasp, a hoarse unfamiliar squeak, and backed away, released by the sound, towards the refuge of the car.

From the direction of the light, still wavering closer, a voice hailed him. The fear that had hold of Queston paused,

and he stood listening, uncertain. The air was cold on his face; when he touched the skin it was wet. The call came again, and the light moved out towards the road ahead. Shaking, he reached inside the Lagonda, and switched on the spotlight.

As the beam of light leapt down the road, splitting the dark, he saw a man twenty yards away, starting back, raising an arm to shield his eyes. He carried a hurricane lamp in one hand; he wore a rough jacket, and the light glinted on leather patches over his elbows and knees. He moved out of the beam and Queston switched it off. The darkness sprang in on him again, but it seemed less powerful now.

The man came up close to him. His stride was firm, and the face and shoulders massive, square, solid-blurred as a rough carving from rock. Only the springing grey hair and eyebrows showed that he was older than his body. He said, unemotionally: 'Havin' trouble, are you?'

Queston blessed the level, normal voice, and heard the shake of his own. 'I've run out of petrol, I'm afraid. Hell of a place for it to happen.'

'Where are you going, then?'

'Bath.'

The man shook his grey head, slowly. He seemed to be looking past Queston, over his shoulder. 'You'll never get across. Not at night.'

It seemed an odd tone, with more conviction than was called for, but Queston was relaxing into companionship, shamefacedly trying to forget his alarm. 'Well, the main thing is to get some petrol. Or paraffin. I suppose there's nowhere nearer than Amesbury?'

'Nowhere,' the man said.

'I'd better walk back. Perhaps I can get a lift.' His voice died as he heard it. A lift? On a road where no single car had passed him?

'It's a long walk,' the man said, with the same abstracted air.

'O well. I'll spend the night there, and get a garage to bring me out in the morning. Better get the car off the

road, though. If you wouldn't mind helping me give her a push – ?'

The man did not move. 'Amesbury won't take you.'

Was the strangeness of the words anything more than local idiom? Staring at him, Queston felt uneasiness return. 'Why not?'

'My place will take you. For the one night.'

'That's awfully kind of you, but – '

'My place will take you,' the man repeated. He jerked his head towards the dark plain. 'Half a mile or so. I have a farm. It would be better.'

Puzzled but grateful, Queston thought of the silent, unlit road back to the town, and the unsteadiness that still drained him.

'Well . . . thank you very much.'

There seemed after all no point in moving the car. He took his suitcase from the boot and set off with the man into the dark, walking behind his deliberate striding bulk along a beaten path. They passed close beside a great fallen stone lying in the grass, and Queston stared belligerently past it into the darkness which hid the rest. But this time there was only silence in his mind.

The house, and the farmer's wife, were indifferent. He could feel that he was silently suffered to be there; without welcome, without hostility. The woman, small and mouse-like, with the same air of calm resignation as her husband, seemed not to hear his falsely jovial words of thanks. He saw on her pointed grey face the dazed look of inside listening that he could recognize now, but still did not understand.

The night would not let him alone. A dozen times, as he was on the point of falling asleep, something would suddenly wrench him back to consciousness: a shout, or a chord of music, that rang loud in his ears but came, he knew, only from within his mind. Once he thought he heard a long rumbling, grumbling sound outside, far off. He lay alert, listening, for a long time, and it seemed only a moment later

that the man was there, shaking at his shoulder. The window was a square grey glimmer of light.

'Time to go. There's breakfast downstairs.'

'Uh.' Queston struggled to wake up.

The farmer's voice was urgent, as uneasy as before it had been calm. 'Time to go.'

'All right. Coming.' He dressed, and went downstairs. Day broke like a sudden beacon, and the windows were white, pink, gold as the sun rose. They ate boiled eggs and heavy, home-made bread in silence; the woman was nowhere to be seen. The farmer could barely eat for nervousness, flicking swift glances round the room like a guilty child waiting for punishment.

Queston said uncomfortably: 'I hope I haven't put you out.'

'What? No. No. That was last night. Have you finished now? Are you ready?'

Queston could have eaten twice as much, but he stood up. 'Fine.'

The man led him out, picking up a can in the kitchen. 'I can let you have three gallons of petrol. I keep it in reserve. I have more, but this will get you away. The path is up here.' He set out so swiftly that they were half running. Striding beside him in the cold early sun, Queston gave him money, and wondered as the man uneasily took it whether he was nervous of his small silent wife. She hadn't looked a shrew. At least, not the human kind. He looked at the man thoughtfully. 'Why on earth didn't you suggest my having the petrol last night?'

The man paused, and looked him in the face, smiling rather ruefully. His grey eyebrows quirked at the corners, and for a moment there was only good humour where the distress had been. 'Last night? You'd never have got through last night. You don't seem to understand things. Doesn't do to be a stranger these days. I don't know if you're goin' far, and I don't want to know. But you take my advice if you are, and go by day.'

And that was all, and no explanation to it, for suddenly

the face that creased in friendliness glazed over, and was fixed in a kind of fear; as if, Queston thought, it had heard some dreadful shouted threat. Yet he had heard nothing. He thought with a shudder of the night before; was it that...? But before he could look again at the man's face he was away, beckoning, stumbling with speed, and soon they came over the rise towards the car. The Plain rode green towards the sunrise, a thin mist white-levelling its hollows; the horizon was a white haze. When Queston turned towards Stonehenge, he stared in astonishment and the beginnings of shame. Surely the stones had not been so small, so small and mild?

The farmer had brought a funnel with him. Already he had the cap off the fuel tank, and was hastily tilting the can. When it was empty he almost pushed Queston into the car, and his voice was strained, the accent suddenly strong: 'Go off, then. Back to Amesbury, or you'll be in the same trouble. You'll need more than this to cross the Plain. Good luck.'

He turned away, and Queston heard the Lagonda's familiar whine, and swung round across the road to face the way he had come. As he drove away, he glanced in his driving-mirror and caught a sight of the farmer that almost stopped him again.

The man was lying on the ground, his arms and legs outstretched, writhing as if in pain. But as Queston's foot faltered on the accelerator the body jerked upright to its knees, and the arms came up, flung wide, and he saw that there was no pain there but only a kind of grovelling horrible obeisance. The man bent forward, his forehead touching the ground, his hands flat downwards moving to caress the grass. As the ugly, unnatural picture telescoped into the little mirror Queston felt his throat contract, and he pushed his foot hard down on the accelerator and let the car thrust him escaping out of sight.

He drove through Amesbury, through Andover, through

small villages edging the road; he drove very fast, without stopping, without passing another car. He no longer cared about reaching Bath; nothing could have sent him back to the Plain. Again the road was empty, and in the towns and villages people paused and stared after him. He drove on, the morning sun higher now behind him through the autumn trees. It was just past nine o'clock by his watch. Fear was rising in him fast. Something more than a Ministry was at work in this countryside. He had been right all along. His game of ideas had not been a game. But to think of it as reality was appalling, impossible, and he pushed the flickering ideas away.

Outside Basingstoke he stopped for fuel at a small garage where a round-faced boy of about fifteen filled up the tank. The boy lingered by the window as he gave Queston his change, peering in out of light myopic eyes. 'Which office you from, mister?' His podgy face was fearful, admiring.

'No office,' Queston said.

The boy's eyes widened. 'But that's a Ministry car, i'n't it?'

'No.' Careful, careful. To hell with them. No.

'Cars is off the road now, except the Ministry.' He looked calculatingly at Queston and then swung round, calling towards the garage: 'Dad!'

Queston skidded out of the yard and away, without looking back. He drove on through Hook, past row upon row of deserted houses on the old L.C.C. estates that had been the New Town; past, on the Camberley road, empty barracks in endless lines, a military desert. He saw no one. A thin, mangy dog darted across one silent barrack square.

His mind skated and raced. He was in the stockbroker belt now, the big cosy houses set back in their beech-brown gardens from the road; beautiful fake miniature mansions of warm red brick. Before Sunningdale, he drew in to the nearest big pair of gates, left the car, walked up the drive and rang the bell. There was no answer. He drove to the next house, and tried again. No answer. No answer at the next house, or the next.

Queston drove on, slowly. As the fifth roof appeared through the branches he saw smoke rising from its cluster of chimneys in a thin blue stream. He drew up outside, and sat looking out of the car. There was a quick movement at one window, too swift to identify. The house seemed no different from the rest: big, gabled, red-leaved clematis round the door. Queston walked round the car, and in through the gates; and then he stopped abruptly.

The sensation was fainter this time, but there could be no doubt. There was no mistaking the silent shout of ill will, the invisible wall of hostility that to touch meant an awful paralysis of fear. This house was emanating the same thing, whatever it was, that he had encountered at Stonehenge.

Queston did not wait to investigate. He backed quickly away and into the car, and drove on.

He turned a corner, and saw another car. It stood beside the next pair of gates; a big sky-blue Jaguar, with a man and woman busy at the open boot. They were stowing suitcases and boxes inside, and more were strapped to the roof. Queston slid to a halt beside them. He was growing more thirsty for human companionship, ordinary human dull conversation with no sinister overtones, than he had thought he could ever be.

They did not even glance at him. As he drew up, the man turned back towards the house. The woman straightened quickly. 'George! Where are you going? Do hurry up!'

'Haven't turned the gas off.' The man disappeared into the front door.

'As if it mattered!' The woman looked briefly at Queston now, but she spoke to herself. She was about thirty, and beautiful; her eyes dark, wide-set, and a curve to her mouth that told him suddenly and brutally how long he had been alone. But the eyes were shadowed, and the mouth slack in distress.

Leaning across to his nearside window, Queston said bluntly: 'Where is everybody?'

The woman turned to look full at him, and he saw with a shock of disappointment and alarm that the mask was here

too, over the beauty; the glazed, dazed detachment, and the listening for something unheard.

'We're going home, we must go home,' the words bubbled out of her as if he had touched a spring. 'We must get back to London . . . I don't know what made us want to come away, we don't belong here. We had the house built . . . we're going home now. Think of London, think of the theatres, and the shops, and the river –' She looked anxiously back towards the house, and her flurry was ridiculous and not ridiculous at all. 'O what is George doing, I wish he'd hurry. We must get home . . . '

Queston drove on. He had no idea where he was going. He existed only in this moment like a man alone in a country overrun by war, or pestilence; all normality gone. He knew dimly that he was entering the edge of a cataclysm in which everyone but he was caught up; all around him, something which had for years been steadily, relentlessly growing had suddenly broken loose.

And he knew what it was, but still he dared not acknowledge to himself that he knew.

He followed the main road. After ten minutes the blue Jaguar streaked past him in a gasp of speed, and vanished round a bend. He saw no other car, until he came to the river, and the junction where a narrow curving bridge drew the way to London out of the main road, over the Thames. Beyond the bridge, the road was blocked high with a dreadful pile of metal, the mingled ruin of several cars.

He put his foot hard on the brake and saw, as he stopped, wide-sweeping skid marks swinging up to the crash and away over the bridge. The man in the Jaguar had seen the perilous wreck only just in time.

No ambulances, no police, no crowds. No warning of any kind; only the wrecked cars, lying silent and entangled in the road. He left the Lagonda and went nervously towards them, and saw that the remains of a lorry lay there too, buckled in among the monstrous heap. There were no bodies.

He saw a round-edged bite taken out of the lorry's crumpled door, where acetylene cutters had been at work; and beside it, still visible, the insignia M.O.P. What could the Ministry be using lorries for?

Blood lay spattered everywhere in darkening patches, some still scarlet and wet. Looking at it, Queston turned from a twitch of memory, and was suddenly an indignant citizen. For all anyone seemed to care, the wreckage could lie there to gather worse disaster, trapping any car that came fast and unsuspecting round the bend. Not even a warning; damn it, there should at least be a warning. He forgot that apart from the Jaguar, he had at no time seen any other car on the road.

He picked up a tyre-lever lying beside one of the misshapen cars, and peered round doubtfully. Something red. A warning flag had to be red. He realized unhappily that only one thing was possible, and he took out his handkerchief and soaked it in a puddle of blood. Then he tied it to the lever, walked back round the corner and forced the free end into a rubber stud in the centre of the road. It leaned there dismally, the handkerchief hanging limp; the astonishing bright red would be brown before long, but at least it was a warning. He felt an absurd smugness at the thought as he walked back to the car. It was his last gesture in support of a world that had died.

He drove on, across the bridge, out to the long straight road through the Royal lands of Windsor; silent land cut off by a dark wall of firs looming over either side of the road. He drove fast, feeling threatened, enclosed. The trees still walled the road, stalking him; if it weren't for the fence and the asphalt, he thought, I might be driving through any age, out of time.

In Windsor the sense of warning was there again; a mute hostility that would let him through the place, but would spring if he dared to stop. With quick staccato flicks at the wheel he spun the Lagonda round corners at fifty, and heard the engine sing hollow in the empty streets; in from the bleak park, past closed and sightless shops, past the door of a house

hanging helplessly in the wind; past the little theatre on the hill, entrance dark, picture-frames bare, with a tattered poster flapping from its board. But the town was not unpeopled. He saw sentries at the castle gates and the heads of others lining the walls. They flowed past him, remote, medieval; again he had the sense of being caught in unreality, with time rushing him back into minds and longings that were centuries dead.

Then he was down the hill and over the Thames again, into Eton, with the hostility of the place pursuing him like a persistent noise. Only when he was out of the town, passing the mounded trees of the playing-fields, did the shouting and the tension die; and suddenly he found that he was driving now in peace, detached again, through a new indifferent place that cared nothing about his troubles and was not forcing him away. He passed a hoarding: 'Slough Welcomes Careful Drivers.'

From the central island that faced him, with traffic-lights flashing pointlessly red-gold-green, up and down in their frozen automatic sequence, three roads led away. All three were broad, walled with shops, all chrome and glass and silence. He turned off the engine and sat there in the centre of the empty town. Nothing moved. The emptiness of this place was unlike any he had encountered yet; a more absolute desertion. Andover, Amesbury and the rest had been deserted, but not dead; through the animosity of the places themselves he had sensed the mistrust of individuals, the unseen families behind curtained windows and closed doors. But here, there was no hostility of any kind; and no life.

Warily he let the Lagonda slide along the length of the main street, past shops whose windows still shouted with the bright custom-catching labels of an affluent town: 'Grand Autumn Sale' . . . 'Deep Freeze Your Fruit at Summer Prices' . . . 'This Week's Bargain, Sugar 5c. a Pound.' With no crowds to see them, the phrases were pathetic, shrill. He toured the back streets, past dreary, dream-repeated rows

of neat, dull houses from which no smoke rose; at intervals, defiantly, he pressed his horn, flinching each time at the loud virulent bray. But no one came out to look, and no curtain moved.

He drove past the silent railway station, a low concrete mausoleum; and on through a vast trading estate where old railway lines criss-crossed the roads, rusting into the asphalt, to click briefly under the tyres as he passed. There was nothing. He saw only bleak black warehouses and the cluttered yards of factories, a dead mechanical world stretching unbroken on either side. Chimneys and water-towers, lifts and derricks, loomed over his head like great empty husks, symbols of the end of things.

Things? Or people?

He drove back to the central crossroads, and irritably past the dutiful traffic-lights, idiot robots flashing directions at cars that were not there. It was a dead town, dead and spiritless, and he was uneasy because he did not understand. When all other places were taking on a monstrous life of their own, why was there none here?

He pulled in to the kerb outside a shop-window full of cameras and soap. He looked down the grey empty street, and tried not to think. Without really expecting it to work, he turned the radio knob on the dashboard; he had used it perhaps twice in the few years since he had bought the car.

At once his head was full of the high ringing note of a continuous call-sign, eerie and unbodied. Then, as suddenly, it stopped. There was the prickling silence of the live air, and a voice said unemotionally: 'This is the B.B.C. Home Service. Here is the one o'clock news. The Prime Minister, Sir Michael – '

An appalling crackle broke in, drowning the words. 'Blast!' Queston said furiously, surprised by the violence of his disappointment. He thwacked impotently at the dashboard, but the noise did not clear for several minutes. It was a curiously deliberate sound, rising and falling in regular waves.

He came in again at the tail-end of a sentence elliptically

describing the end of a trade agreement, and a national appeal for reliance on home resources. Home resources? What kind? The announcer went on, his voice deepening a semi-tone in the regulation greeting for disaster, with an account of two accidents, oddly simultaneous that morning, in the country's two deepest coal mines. In one, a fall of rock had trapped sixty men, all now presumed dead. In the other, an underground riot of some kind seemed to have broken out; the description was vague and guarded, but here too several men had died.

The cool voice went on: 'The Minister of Planning, Mr Mandrake, has issued a special order closing all pits which descend below a hundred feet. The Minister said at a press conference this morning that owing to the ban on coal and oil imports, this new order will make further domestic economies imperative. Special cooperatives are to be set up for the distribution of shallow-mined coal from area depots of the Coal Board. Representatives of the steel and forestry industries will be meeting the Minister this afternoon.'

There was a pause.

'Evacuation of the Harwell and Trawsfynydd areas is now complete,' said the voice off-handedly. 'A spokesman for the Ministry of Planning said last night that dismantling will begin as soon as possible.'

Another pause. Queston sat motionless. Then he jerked in alarm at the words that followed: 'That is the end of the news. This is the B.B.C. Home Service. We are now closing down until six o'clock. Please switch off your sets.'

Silence. Incredulous, he turned the knob to the short wave, to find a local station, but there was nothing. He found no voice or signal on any waveband, except, once, the distant sound of accordion music; and very faint on the short wave-band a voice which appeared to be reciting the history of Roman London. He turned the switch off, and sat still. However sinister the implications of the strange, allusive news bulletin, that seemed after his years of remoteness to be speaking of another country, another time – however deeply that disturbed him, this silence of the air was worse. It was

worse than an immediate isolation, it turned the world cold. He felt childishly resentful towards the B.B.C. for leaving him alone.

From that moment, he took refuge in childishness; in simple reactions, as if he were conscious only on one superficial level, and the rest of his mind asleep. He looked angrily round at the smug silent shop-fronts, impossible and deserted and dead. He was hungry. And where was he to sleep that night? He remembered an hotel he had passed near the centre of the town; a gloomy, red-brick building with two sad cigar-shaped trees in pots outside the door. Well, he would stay there. He would force back normality that far, in this strange lifeless town.

He drove back to the hotel and parked the car in its narrow forecourt. Grey concrete, neatly swept; blank white curtains looping the windows; a solid, silent, locked door. In a sudden fear of embarrassment, unable to believe that a live town could turn into a vacuum, he hammered at the door with his fist. But the place was not inhabited. No one came.

He made his way round to the back, and climbed over a fence; the wood left a lick of green lichen on his sleeve. Inside he found a small garden: a patch of grass, a rusting wrought-iron seat and some dispirited clumps of michaelmas daisies. And a pair of french windows, leading into the hotel. He hesitated, and called: 'Hallo! Hallo!' The sound was startling, and suddenly absurd. Decisively he pulled off his jacket, wrapped it round his hand and punched his fist through the window. The small tinkle of falling glass was instantly exhilarating, and an end of his backward groping for reality. It was as if he punched his reason through at last into accepting the impossible new world.

Inside, the hotel was all solid, middle class, one-night-stop comfort, with grazed leather armchairs and thick drab carpets. He walked through to the reception desk. The register lay open on the counter; everything everywhere was neat and clean. The people of this town had left with ordered speed, expecting to come back.

He unlocked one of the doors, and fetched his suitcase from

the car. Walking the empty corridors of the hotel, alert to the seventh sense that was growing more watchful in him every hour, he could feel nothing but a despondent fatalism in the place. The room he chose was the same; tidy and depressed, a harmless box without power or emotion. He thought of all the hotel rooms he had ever slept in, and knew why. The necessary link was not there. People passed through, without lingering to grow attached to the place. And it was the same, perhaps, with the town itself. Slough; he tried to remember it. An industrial dormitory, shallow-rooted; a twentieth-century town, too raw to be able to hold those who had lived there. Or to be able to make use of them, to control their minds.

There must be other towns like this in Britain; he would be able to live in those. Other places that were empty. The dead lands.

There were no sheets on the bed. Confident now in the uncomplaining hotel, he went hunting for a maid's room, and took an armful of linen stiff and shiny as white wood. When he had made the bed he looked at the printed tariff card pushed threateningly under the glass top of the dressing table. Bed and breakfast, one pound eighty cents, dinner, table d'hôte, one pound . . . Solemnly he took four pound notes from his wallet, put them in an envelope from the drawer, and addressed it to the manager.

Downstairs again, slipping the envelope into the post-rack criss-crossed with wire behind the reception desk, he suddenly grinned, took out his pen, and signed the register. The last entry was dated ten days before. He wrote: 'David Queston, British,' and paused over the space left for an address. What address for a man without roots? He wrote, facetiously, 'No fixed abode.'

The kitchen, when he found it, was underground; a bleak, antiseptic expanse of metal tables, forbidding ovens and stoves and sinks, with grey light slanting down from ground-level windows set barred high in the walls. He tried a tap; the water coughed, then ran in a faltering stream. A cup of tea, he thought with ridiculous longing, and filled a kettle.

Waiting for it to boil, he foraged for food; the deep freeze was empty, but in the cupboard he found shelves stacked with vast foot-high tins of peaches, apricots, orange juice; butter, chicken, ham. There was no bread, or milk, or anything perishable; and no tea or coffee. In any case, when he went back to the stove, his kettle was still cold.

He tried a light switch; the bulbs remained dark. At least they had left the water turned on. In a corner he saw a solitary gas stove, and moved hopefully across; but the gas too had been cut off at the main.

Queston pondered, initiative edged by hunger. No heat, not even a tin opener. And no light when the dark came. 'Well,' he said aloud, cheerfully, 'we'll just have to go shopping.' He wished, as he said it, that the dog was there.

He drove up the street, peering vaguely, until he caught sight of a shop window where camping equipment hung festooned, bright, new and improbable, round a tent set on green baize grass. The door was locked. He contemplated the window, already hearing its satisfying crash, but something held him back. He thought afterwards that it was nothing but the prissy, upright voice of the B.B.C.; the world, that voice told him, is still civilized – if insane. Breaking and entering *has* been known, among the – ah – less educated classes. But looting . . . no.

Queston went down an alley to the back of the shop, in a small paved dustbin-cluttered yard, and broke a window there.

At first, remembering the mechanics of his life at the cottage, he had intended to take only a primus stove and a tin opener. But when he had found these, he looked round thoughtfully. What kind of world was it to be now? Other towns might lie mute and empty like Slough, but for how long would there be unguarded, available houses and hotels? His instinct was for independence.

Solemnly he toured the cluttered little shop making a Boy Scout collection that, as he went, he began to enjoy: cans of paraffin, blocks of solid fuel, kettle, frying pan, billy-can, sleeping-bag, rucksack, candles, rope, sheath-knife,

water-bottle, a selection of enigmatic packets of dehydrated emergency rations. Before taking them out to the car he laid the whole rattling pile on the floor, tore a bill from a pad on the counter, and made a list of everything that he had taken, with his guesses of the cost of each. He left the bill, and money, inside the till; the B.B.C. voice still murmured in his head.

He thought: food. Two doors away from the camping shop he broke into a supermarket; how defenceless shops were from behind, he reflected, when there was no one to hear the crash of glass. With two of the rough wire baskets that still stood stacked, oddly forlorn, at the front of the store, he walked up and down the ranks of bright shelves. Here too the deep freeze had been cleared, and he found no meat or cheese or bread. He took as many tins of soup, meat, fish and vegetables as he could carry, with sugar, tea and coffee, and piled them into the boot of the Lagonda, again leaving money behind. It took a long time.

It was only when he came out into the street for the last time that the full unreality of it all closed over his head. For two hours he had been enjoying his foray like a game, as he always enjoyed the methodical business of planning a life alone. But as he was getting into the car he paused, and looked up and down the silent street once more, and the loneliness of the place was suddenly not a game at all. The light was beginning to fade, and the end of the street merged already into a grey, formless mist. Queston knew again that he was frightened.

He drove quickly back to the hotel in the growing dusk, and took some food, the primus and his torch down to the kitchen, through the shadowed corridors. He found himself deliberately trying to avoid noise.

He sat on a table near the stove while the kettle hissed towards boiling, waiting to replace it with a pan of soup. The small light from the flame was a comforting illusion of life; all the rest of the long kitchen was cold and dark now. His mind began finding nightmare reasons for the emptiness of the town. Perhaps an epidemic had broken out; even now

he might be breathing some monstrous hovering disease. Perhaps the town had been evacuated for use as some kind of target . . . his reason rebelled at that one, but only to replace it with another. Perhaps attack was imminent from outside: America, emerged from behind that granite isolationist wall; Russia and China come to the inevitable struggle at last, dragging the world after them. Perhaps the sense of doom about the town, about all towns, was simply the mortal fear of fifty million people made distinct and tangible, a terrible paralysis of waiting. Perhaps –

And all the while the knowledge of the real reason, that made nonsense of all these, fretted at the back of his mind: and he turned away from it and would not let it free.

He made coffee, opened a tin of milk and one of chicken, and piled it all on a tray with the soup and some biscuits. He turned out the stove. At once the kitchen was black and limitless, and he groped hastily for the torch.

He had told himself that he would eat at a table in the dining-room. Bang in the middle, with great panache: candles for light, a civilized, cooked meal, and a bottle from the cellar. Wherever the cellar was. The idea of a drink made him wish he had found a bar before darkness fell. But the night was too much for him. His imagination was shrieking already with the hours of silence, and he stumbled upstairs to his bedroom with the tray, clutching the torch between two fingers. Once he dropped it, the beam leaping crazily round as it hit the floor, and at the noise he started so violently that he nearly dropped the tray as well.

Inside the room he locked the door, and felt at once, irrationally, more secure. He sat down to eat rapidly by the light of the torch. Then, in a sudden flooding exhaustion, he fell across the bed and into sleep. His last conscious thought was of relief that his mind had stopped.

The morning was better. With the light – a grey, cold light, but anything was better than darkness – he was confident again, rational, focused only on the immediate problems of

existence. He grimaced at the remains of his supper congealed messily on the tray, and went into the bathroom to duck under a cold shower. Hopping on the tiled floor as he towelled his back, he began to feel exhilarated. He fetched his one spare shirt, and promised himself an expedition after breakfast to buy more.

He unlocked the bedroom door, with contempt for the impulse that had locked it, and went out into the silent hotel. It was just as it had been. Breakfast, which he ate in the kitchen, was a semi-satisfying meal of porridge, coffee, and a tin of pilchards from the supermarket. Afterwards he found the hotel switchboard, behind the foyer, to try reaching his last hope of friendly refuge: Gilchrist, in Chiswick. But the telephones gave his ear only a dull hiss; all the lines were dead.

Very well then, he would drive to London. One direction was as good as another. At least he would find out what might happen to him on the way. He wondered if Brunner's men had found the burned-out cottage yet, and whether they would come after him. He thought of the manuscript in Brunner's Ministry desk, and was angry again. Damn them, what were they trying to do?

He stowed everything into the boot of the car, and on a last impulse went back into the hotel bar. The shelves were still stocked; his reflection danced at him from the mirrored wall behind the rows of bottles. He helped himself to 500 cigarettes and five bottles of whisky, leaving the usual payment in the till. It was almost becoming a routine; though not one that could last very much longer. He had never kept more than about thirty pounds in the cottage, and he had only a few notes left.

But enough for some clothes. He eased the Lagonda out of the hotel yard; and then, looking up automatically as he turned into the road, he saw that the town had come alive again.

A hundred yards away, four enormous black vans were parked on either side of the street; he could see men moving along the pavements beside them. Too late to turn back

now. In any case, why should he? He drove slowly towards them, and stopped beside the first. It was outside the supermarket; the shop doors were open wide, and five or six men were busily clearing everything from the shelves, trundling trolleys out to load tins and boxes and bottles into the van. The immense pantechnicon towered black over him; he looked up, and saw 'Ministry of Planning' inscribed in neat gold letters on the side.

He might have known.

The men glanced at him incuriously, without pausing. Queston leaned out of his window and called to the nearest; a burly, middle-aged man in blue overalls, standing beside the van's open doors with a list in his hand.

'Hey! Excuse me!'

The man turned, slowly, and came across.

Queston said foolishly, as he had said to the woman on the Windsor road: 'Where is everybody?'

'Gone.'

'Gone where?'

'Gone home, of course, mate.' The Cockney voice was slow, dragging, as if the man were drugged; but he eyed Queston carefully.

'But – wasn't Slough their home?'

'Home is where your heart is,' the man said heavily, like a child reciting.

Queston said, in experiment: 'Where your roots are.'

He brightened as if at a signal. 'That's it, mate. You got it in one. Slough, this is, see. Didn't properly exist till the Depression. You wouldn't remember that – back in the thirties. It grew up full of Taffies and such, come up to get jobs. So now they've all gone back home.'

'Guard thine own,' Queston said gravely.

The big Cockney positively beamed. 'S right.' He looked at the car, wary and admiring. 'Nice job. Official?'

'No. Mine. I'm just going through.'

The man looked surprised, then serious, then knowing. He nodded, with deep mysterious meaning. Then he jerked his head confidentially towards the big van, where his band

still moved methodically up and down the ramp, loading. 'Like a nice case of tinned stuff, cheap, eh? Going to be scarce soon, you know. All going back to the owners, but one or two's bound to get lost on the way.' He winked enormously and grinned, showing yellowing broken teeth. 'Tell you what, two pound for a twenty box. Take your choice what kind.'

'No thanks,' Queston said, trying not to laugh. He might have saved himself the trouble of his surreptitious shopping the day before.

The man stopped grinning, and looked at him suspiciously. 'What's the matter, then? You sure you aren't official?' He laid his arm along the top of the car, with vague menace.

Queston said hastily: 'Got anything except food? I could do with a couple of shirts.'

Friendliness returned; the man closed one eye, made a neat circle with finger and thumb and disappeared into the bowels of the van. He returned with three cellophane-packed shirts balanced triumphantly on one palm.

'There you are, chum. Medium-large, should fit you. From one of the London chains, that lot. They'll never miss them. Three pound shirts those are, last a lifetime. And that's a good bit of material.' He was the complete salesman. 'To you –' he handed them over with a flourish ' – three quid the lot.'

Queston gave him four pounds. The men loading the van took no notice. It was probably a familiar sight.

'Well thanks, guv. Thanks.' The big foreman touched a non-existent cap, and beamed.

Queston started the car.

'You off now, then?' He lingered, almost affectionate.

'I'm off. Thanks for the shirts.'

'Not goin' nowhere? Just roving, like?'

'Very unofficial.' Queston dropped his voice, playing the conspirator, and saw the solemn-delighted nod in answer. He let in the clutch. As he moved off, the man walked a few paces with him, beside the window. He shouted, over the

noise of the engine, something that sounded like: 'Keep to the open roads.'

Keep to the open roads? Queston drove on, preoccupied. Outside Slough, where the road divided, he missed the signposts, and instead of the straight, bleak Colnbrook by-pass he found himself on the old curling road that it had replaced; the road left now to quietness of its own. He drove on without noticing, through the stooping trees and silent fields, until he was approaching Colnbrook village. He could see the first roofs ahead. And then, he was suddenly clutched by an obsessive conviction that he was going the wrong way, and although he knew that if he drove on through the village, the coils of the old road would rejoin the main London road farther on, he turned the car round at once and drove back to the junction he had missed to take the by-pass instead.

He thought helplessly, as he turned back: Why the hell am I doing this?

London Airport lay deserted; the hangars stood massive and closed, with no aircraft anywhere, and he saw cows wandering over the runways. Only the curved arms of the radar scanners moved, turning in silent seeking circles. He wondered if they were controlled from far off, or if human eyes watched as well from the unrevealing walls. But he did not stop to find out.

Once, on the empty road, one of the big black pantechnicons roared past him. In Hounslow, he saw several others waiting beside shops while men loaded boxes into them, as he had seen before. But no other cars passed. Nothing hindered him, though he saw 'Road Closed' notices barring several side-streets leading to unseen villages near the main road, and instinctively he drove more quickly past.

Until he came to Brentford, he thought that he would reach London without difficulty, though wariness waited behind his eyes as he drove. And suddenly, then, he knew why. In the burned child, something watchfully expects the fire. There seemed no change in the road or the silent suburban

houses on either side, but in a swift moment it was there. Without warning, it hit him again: the screaming blank wall of terror that tore through him like an electric shock, thrust his foot hard down on the brake and brought the car skidding into stillness.

He was on the edge of the town centre. The road was clear. Nothing moved; he saw nothing. But it barred his way as totally as a blockade: the great paralysing soundless shout that said: You do not belong here, you aren't wanted, go away.

He turned the car back, his hands shaking on the wheel. Nothing in the world, at that moment, could have induced him to go on.

As he turned, he thought he heard another sound above the Lagonda's engine. He stopped, and as he looked back over his shoulder he saw a low black car like his own coming fast towards him out of Brentford, and slewing to a noisy halt several yards away. The driver jumped out and Queston saw the black Ministry uniform. He swung back quickly to the wheel and put the car into gear again, pausing only when he heard the man's urgent shout. No running footsteps; only the shout. He put his head out of the window, and looked back. It was something to see a human being, after all.

The man had stopped, his arms hanging loose, two or three paces from his own car. Queston found himself thinking without the slightest surprise that he must be on the other side of the barrier of the place. He heard an echo in his mind from long ago: You need a permit to get out . . .

More than a permit, now.

The man called: 'Where are you going?'

Queston looked at him, at the invisible wall, and felt safe and impudent. 'Nowhere in particular. How about you?'

The man had taken a paper from his pocket, and was peering at the Lagonda. 'Is that your car?'

'Of course.'

'You are David Queston?'

Quickly, quickly, Queston's instincts urged him. But he called back: 'So what?'

'Are you Queston?'

'I've told you.'

'I must ask you to come with me.'

'Where to?'

'London.'

'Can't be done,' Queston shouted cheerfully. 'I've tried.'

The man seemed to be straining towards him, leaning against a wind; but no wind blew. 'Mr Queston, you must come, I warn you – '

Looking back with his head out of the window, in the cold air of the deserted street, Queston began to laugh. Both of them shouting about impossibility; he couldn't go back over the line, the man couldn't come and get him. How bloody silly. Suddenly it was all uproariously funny. He spluttered and choked with laughter, and heard the man call angrily: 'This is your last chance. You must come – the Minister – '

He was laughing too hard, almost, to hear the small sound on the other side of the car. But the warning instinct drew his head back sharply just in time to see an arm, in the same black uniform, groping down through the half-open window opposite towards the handle of the door. He thought irrelevantly, I didn't know I'd locked it – and then he was swinging the Lagonda forward, weaving wildly across the road to jerk the man off the running-board. He heard a cry, and then the dark shape at the window was gone. The image of the other car flashed across his driving-mirror again as he pulled back on the wheel, and he caught a glimpse of a black figure stiffly holding out its arm. Almost as he saw the wisp of smoke he heard a ringing impact behind him, somewhere outside the car. So they were armed, now.

Then he was half a mile down the road, blessing the Lagonda's size and speed, and out of sight.

He drove fast, aimlessly, along the blank road. They were armed, and they wanted him badly enough to shoot, even if it was only at the tyres. Brunner must have lost no time with the manuscript. Was it that important? What did they think

he could do? They had the number of the car. That hardly mattered; he was conspicuous enough anyway, in this empty new world. How much petrol left? Still half full. They weren't following. Why not? That second man got through the barrier. It had held the first of them in, why not both? Perhaps they weren't all tied. Special types, a kind of immunization. Valuable people. Is that the only reason they want me? How widespread are these Ministry police? There had been a radio aerial on the roof of the car.

For God's sake, what kind of a world was this?

He shot through Slough: no vans now, the place was dead again. Swinging out to the motorway beyond the town, he found the same thing as before: all by-pass roads seemed safe, disinterested, uninfluenced. 'Keep to the open roads...'

A no-man's-land of time and space began then, while he roamed the empty roads and towns round London for days which ran into one another until he lost count. A kind of suspended animation, cold and comfortless. He occupied himself only with survival, and did not think; and survival seemed gradually more pointless every day.

In the dead lands, the places where no men had grown roots, he learned to find the suburban houses shut spiritlessly away in their half-acre gardens, stripped of all possessions and identity; they were uneasy places, but at least they gave shelter for the night, in an autumn that was turning early to winter and making his tent a poor substitute for a roof. In the end he packed the tent into the boot of the car, and did not use it at all. The Lagonda became his real refuge, the defiance that was in movement; he blessed his choice of a turbine-powered car when he found that although there was no petrol, he could always help himself to paraffin from the garages of the dead lands. Cans and big hundred-gallon drums were always stacked high there, even though there was never anybody to be seen in the echoing, empty sheds. He wondered for a long time why the fuel had not been taken away; in the end, although he saw hardly any movement on

the roads, he supposed it to be left for any roving Ministry car.

The pattern of his days became a macabre game: running the car into the drive of a deserted house; walking round to its front door over gravel crackling boldly in the silence – a long silence now, and more oppressive than he had ever known it, with only the birds chattering, and even those quieter every day. He never saw more than an occasional bird, or animal; the freedom of loneliness seemed to frighten them, and they kept out of sight.

The front doors were never locked. He could find no reason for that. Once or twice still he saw the black Ministry pantechnicons at work, with intent men carrying furniture out into the road, and he took care to go another way. But in each house, when only emptiness remained, the doors were left on the latch. Available, ownerless.

He would curl up on bare wooden floors in his sleeping-bag, with blankets heaped over him; the nights were cold now, and although he longed to light fires in the empty grates he was nervous of drawing attention with the smoke. Once inside a house, he took it on trust, not flinching at the hollow beat of his footsteps over naked floors – but there was no point in waving a banner which the Ministry police could see from a mile away. He remembered the pistol shot, and he knew that whatever else might capture him, it should not be Mandrake's men.

He ate from his stock of tins, setting up the primus in the kitchen of each empty house. In the gardens sometimes he found apples still on the trees, hanging obstinate among branches whose leaves were dropping fast now. But generally there were only unkempt hedges, trees where masses of fruit rotted underfoot, and flower-beds thick with the green of weeds.

Once, near Watford, he came on a lorry parked outside one of the houses, and a gang of youths round the gate hurling stones at the windows. They seemed to have no purpose but destruction. The lorry was old, small, open-backed; the first vehicle without the Ministry insignia that

he had seen for weeks. As he slowed to pass it the boys turned, a row of startled white faces; then the nearest shouted, grinning, and flung a stone at the car. The others scrambled to join in, and Queston hastily accelerated past. Later, when he stopped to investigate, he found a deep dent in the rear offside wing, near the long scar the bullet had made. For the footloose young it was a good world; they must be having trouble with them in the towns. But what was this gang doing half a mile outside?

He stopped, that night, at Chesham railway station. Though so little seemed to travel the roads, there were still trains on the lines every day. Always goods trains, always very long; endless snaking rows of covered trucks pulled by two engines, travelling fast from nowhere to nowhere. He noticed often a certain kind of boxed-in black truck that bore the Ministry initials on its side.

But they never stopped anywhere in the dead lands. Every railway station that he passed was shut and silent, and he discovered that they were places immune from every kind of pull. Even in the green belts between the suburbs, where the voice of the land was loud and the leafless spiny arms of hedges groped out over the straggling grass to the roads – even there, he found that once inside a station yard, he was suddenly out of the tension and sense of doom. After a little while, he understood. Stations were outside the old boundaries of the villages; and they were hardly places where anyone would have put down roots. Places with no emotional pull at all, at least since the days of steam.

Chesham station was like the rest; near a village, where hidden life lay locked behind hostile boundaries, but a lifeless refuge. He parked the car outside the porters' room; it would be, he had found, the cosiest place in the whole bleak building. Sometimes there was a gas ring where the gas could still be tapped, from the main still serving the living unseen village not far away.

The yard was familiar, a pattern of all the station yards. Once it had been precise and neat as all its London-trotting travellers; now the asphalt was cracked and pitted, with

dandelions beginning to sprout in the holes; and fir cones lay scattered from the dark trees that grew round its edge.

He got out of the car and took a chisel over to the office door. Generally he had to break a lock; he did it without compunction now.

'Stay where you are!'

The voice was high and nervous. Queston stood startled, holding his chisel, and waited. Soon it came again.

'What do you want?'

He looked round warily, to find where it could come from. The station was fairly new; spare red brick, with no unnecessary alcoves. He could see nowhere that anyone might hide.

'I warn you, I've got a gun.' The voice raced away, near hysteria. 'Haven't you taken enough, damn you? What more d'you want?'

Queston said evenly, towards the wall: 'If you think I'm from the Ministry, you're wrong. I'm alone. My name is Queston. I'm looking for somewhere to sleep. Nothing else. If I can't stay here, I'll go away.'

There was a pause, and then he spun round as footsteps came from the side of the station. The shock came from the unexpected; he had seldom seen so inoffensive a figure. The man was small and bald, with rimless spectacles; a crumpled, dirty raincoat hung from his shoulders. His eyes were fixed on Queston in an immense frightened determination that seemed incongruous, as if no emotion so large had ever tightened his face before, and he clutched an unwieldy service revolver in both hands, pointing it unsteadily ahead. Queston looked at him, and felt overwhelmingly depressed. The man looked so wretched. Without the gun, his last rag of human dignity would vanish.

'Put that thing down,' he said gently.

They had a long insane argument, standing in the growing dusk of the silent station yard, with bats swooping across and away from the fir-trees bordering the road, until the little man was satisfied. He seemed obsessed with a hatred for the Ministry. He suspected Queston's car, and only the

story of the bullet, and the sight of the long sinister graze, finally convinced him that Queston was not a roving spy. He put the revolver into his pocket, where it dragged his raincoat comically down, and held out his hand with apologetic ceremony. 'You must forgive me,' he said. 'My world has gone mad.'

They sat together in the porters' room, drinking soup heated on Queston's primus stove. The little man had no food, and no possessions but an attaché case which he kept carefully near him, touching it now and again as if for reassurance. His voice was tidy and careful, as he must once have been himself.

His name was Lindsey. He was about fifty-five, with a face that had never known real misery and was the more desolate now. Its puzzled, pathetic lines seemed curiously new. He was alone, he said. He was obviously very hungry.

He would say no more, so Queston began talking about himself. Once he had started he found it surprisingly easy, his thoughts uncoiling like a long-pressed spring. When he reached the story of his food-hunting expedition in Slough, the little man sighed.

'I wish I'd had such foresight. I didn't imagine – everything happened so quickly, you see.'

'How long have you been wandering about on your own?'

'About six weeks.'

'What d'you live on?'

'I had some packets of dried fruit at first, and nuts. I took them from – home.' It was a curious hesitation. 'But they've gone. Since then, fruit and vegetables from people's gardens, and the fields. I don't like the business of just helping myself, but there isn't any alternative. I don't seem able to go to the towns, I don't know . . . I don't need much, you know. My wife and I are vegetarians, and that helps. Being used to that kind of diet, d'you see.'

'Your wife?'

Lindsey looked down into his soup, and said nothing. To shake off a sudden sense of vulgar intrusion, Queston

tried another tack. 'Are you making for anywhere in particular?'

Before the little man could answer, there was suddenly an unsteadiness in the room. Queston knew he was not imagining it; he could see the awareness in the other's face. The primus rattled on the table, and the flame of the candle beside it shivered violently, twitching its thread of black smoke into a coil. He felt for an instant as if his chair had disappeared and he were sitting on air, an undulating air like the sea; and he thought he caught the same distant sound of rumbling that he had heard far away in the night once or twice before.

Then the room was as it had been, with the silence, the comfortable smell of food, and the shadows dark over Lindsey's small troubled face.

Lindsey said abruptly: 'That's happened before.'

'I know.'

'What d'you think it is?'

'An explosion of some sort, I suppose. If we weren't in England I should say it was an earthquake.'

'What's the difference?' Suddenly Lindsey jerked his head up and backwards; so far back that the larynx bounced as if to escape while he spoke, and the candlelight glinted yellow on his spectacles. 'Bombs . . . earthquakes . . . it's them. They've made something break loose. I knew something had to happen one day. The Ministry, the Guild of Women, they're all one. We thought a miracle had happened, we were all mad, they were planning it all the time. I never thought. I marched to Aldermaston when I was a young man . . . and then when they came they seemed like saviours. I don't know what went wrong, I don't know what they've done . . .' He dropped his head forward again, and the light shone on his bald skull as it had done on the lenses over his eyes. 'The world's gone mad. Not just the people in it. *The world's gone mad.*'

Queston watched him. It was a private outburst; he felt he should not have been there.

Lindsey's high, tremulous voice was muffled. 'I'm a

teacher. I taught at a prep school near Beaconsfield. Biology and French. The French was never up to much, but you have to double up a bit in these small schools. We never had any children of our own. I didn't mind. Boys can be monstrous, I had enough of them at school. But Ellen was sorry, I think. Sorrier than I knew. Perhaps if I'd known . . . she's Welsh, and Welsh-looking. Small, and cosy – you know? They like children. But she joined the Guild, and they took her away.'

'The Guild?'

'The Guild of Women.'

'What's that?'

'I don't know.' Lindsey shrugged. Hunched inside his crumpled raincoat, he looked like a small bedraggled bird. 'The Ministry started it. At the beginning, before anyone realized. It was part of their guard thine own, keep to your roots campaign. The idea that the family's the most important thing there is, and the woman's its focal point. Did you never come across it at all? It's immense. And not . . . nice. We always saw a lot of Ellen's family in Wales, but more after the Guild began – we spent every holiday there, and all the women going off all the time to meetings and what they called groups. They nearly spoke a language of their own. They'd never tell you what it was all for . . . Ellen changed . . . She kept on about living there, going home. I tried to get a job there, but they wouldn't have me because I wasn't Welsh. She didn't seem to care. In the end she just upped and went.'

He stopped. His head was still bent. Queston thought he was crying. Then he looked up fiercely.

'Life hadn't altered, we weren't any different as people. It all got too big for them, that's what happened. It's the thing they let loose that broke us up. They talked all that about contentment, and having your own roots being the only way to end war, but all they did was make places matter more than people. Make them more powerful than people. Let this – this thing break out. I tell you, that's what's happened. None of the old standards hold any more, something's broken out.'

Queston sat still. He felt cold. The words were like an accusation; they turned his mind irresistibly in to look at itself, and it was like a dreadful blinding realization of guilt. He shouted silently to himself: it's not my fault, I didn't know –

The little teacher pulled himself up in his chair, as if he were drawing the whole of his body into a small upright space. 'I'm sorry. I don't generally talk very much. We never had many friends. Somehow we didn't need them. These last weeks – well, I . . . I miss my wife.'

Queston said helplessly: 'Surely you'll be able to join her.'

'O no.' He shook his head. It was a very final gesture. 'Personal relationships have no place in this kind of world. You are well off without them, Mr Queston. You are a very lucky man. I think perhaps you have found the only way to survive in this – in whatever it is.'

The candle flickered down. It was little more now than a melted stub. Out of his guilt, Queston felt an enormous resentment against a force that could so shatter this harmless, hapless little man. He tried to find some comfort, and it was as clumsy as a man holding a baby for the first time. He said: 'I tell you what. We could go to Wales. I'll take you. There's the car, and enough fuel – you can still find garages with stacks of paraffin, and this car runs as well on that as on petrol. I'll take you. I've nowhere else to go. We could find your wife. We'll go tomorrow. It's worth a try.'

He wondered always, afterwards, whether he had really meant it, or whether Lindsey had sensed no real involvement in the offer. But he could have sworn there were new tears in the bleak-bright eyes when the man put out his hand and gripped his for a moment, and said 'Yes, that would be wonderful. Thank you. That would be wonderful. Yes, we'll go.'

He could have sworn Lindsey had trusted him, then.

They had blocked the draughts under the doors as best they could, and drunk some whisky to pledge the journey to Wales, and gone to sleep rolled in blankets on the floor.

But suddenly, Queston had woken in the night, with nothing in his mind but the conviction that he had just heard a shattering noise.

He listened; there was nothing. The air was blowing cold on his face, and his back was stiff. He groaned, and sat up; then he saw that Lindsey was gone. The blanket lay in a neat folded heap on the floor: and the attaché case on top of it.

The window was a faint grey square. His mouth tasted foul and ancient; he felt terrible. He saw that the paper they had plugged underneath one door of the office was lying loose, and he went out on to the platform. Mist hung low over the railway line in the beginning light, and over the long stretch of concrete, but it was not difficult to see Lindsey. He lay at the far end of the platform, with one arm and the remains of his head dangling from the edge.

Queston jammed his finger-nails into his palms and went close. Lindsey hadn't learned that from a biology textbook. He had come out into the dawn, put the barrel of the heavy revolver into his mouth, and fired.

Something tinkled at Queston's feet. He picked it up; it was a round rimless lens from a pair of spectacles. He let it fall, and it bounced musically, and did not break.

It was as if the anger built a protective coating around his brain. All day it lasted. He broke into the garage of the nearest house for a spade, carried Lindsey's blanket-wrapped body to the car, drove to the churchyard, and buried him. Somehow he had seemed the kind who would want to end up under a yew-tree. Neat and tidy and grass-hummocked, with a headstone: 'Beloved husband of – '

He buried the attaché case with him. It had been full of letters twenty years old, from the Welsh wife.

Afterwards, it was the thought of going into the churchyard that astonished him most. They should have more pull, those places, than anywhere else. Inevitable; the emotional bond was there ready-made. Bodies under the earth, a bait

to hold those above it. Churchyards were dangerous places, especially those outside the line of a town.

Yet he had felt nothing, with his seventh sense, from beginning to end. He knew he had been made safe by his cold fury against the earth, the Ministry, perhaps himself: against all the forces that had pulled Lindsey's finger on the trigger. When that had gone, ebbed away, and he was driving alone again along an empty road, he began to shake until his teeth rattled in his head.

It was the fifth week, and still he had no idea what was going on in the towns and villages. The car radio had not worked since its one mysterious bulletin in Slough. The car itself was effective still, while he could find fuel. He drove to and fro within the dead lands of the empty suburbs, aimless, without any coherent thought except the daily business of finding food. More and more of the shops he passed had been methodically cleared; or lay jagged-windowed, rifled by the gangs of youths who roamed a little way out from the edges of every town. He no longer planned beyond the end of a day. Sometimes he thought Lindsey had found the best solution. Sometimes he thought he was looking for something that he could not recognize and would never find. Sometimes he thought he was going mad.

Then it was what he dimly reckoned to be the seventh week, and as he wrenched the car automatically round from the prickling warning of a place barrier in his path, he saw the three men, and the girl.

They were chasing her; lumbering, shouting towards him out of the town. The first he saw of her was the bright red coat, flapping like a cloak as she ran. There was terror in the running; she flung herself forward, stumbling with speed, and even from inside the car he could hear the fearful animal gasps for breath.

The men were whooping with a kind of ugly delight; he saw that they were young, not much more than boys, with the same vacuous vicious faces as all the gangs of the dead

lands. Something flashed in the hand of the first: a razor, or a knife. Without stopping to reason, Queston reached behind him for his shot-gun and jumped out of the car as the girl drew level with the bonnet. He shouted to her: 'Get in!' and without even glancing at him she wrenched at the door-handle and crumpled into the front seat. Queston stood with the gun levelled from his hip at the three young men, and they slowed to a halt ten yards away.

'Stay where you are!' he called. Lindsey had said the same. What else did you say with a gun in your hand?

The three stood irresolute. The leader with the glint in his hand was ginger-haired, with a pale, pock-marked face; he yelled: 'You mind your own business, mister. She's ours. Leave 'er go.'

He moved forward. Queston promptly fired at the ground before his feet; shot sprayed up and caught the hand of one of the other two, and he leapt, squealing with pain and alarm. While they still paused Queston dived back into the car, skidded round to complete his turn, and drove fast away up the road. Everything seemed to happen to him on boundaries, beside those invisible lines of force. Border incidents. He grinned. Suddenly he was exhilarated, jolted out of his joyless daze; he felt better than he had for weeks. He glanced at the girl.

She sat beside him with the collar of the red coat drawn up round her face. He saw tangled brown hair and damp, flushed skin; he noticed, irrelevantly, that her eyelashes were very long. She was still breathing noisily.

He stopped the car a mile or so along the road, pulling into the verge beside flat, open fields, and reached behind him for the rucksack on the back seat. He poured some whisky into his one cup, and pushed it at the girl. 'Here. Drink this. Steady you up.'

'Thank you.' She was almost inaudible.

'Smoke?'

'Yes, please.'

He lit her cigarette; it shook slightly as she held it. Those eyelashes were really absurd. She wasn't pretty. Her nose

was red, and her skin shiny; the face almost sullen. She looked very young; about twenty, he thought.

She finished the whisky, and took a deep breath. 'O. Thank you. Thank you very much.' She glanced quickly across at Queston, and away again. He sat smoking calmly, waiting for her to say something. Nothing came. The girl sat in silence, drawing cigarette smoke deep into her lungs and blowing it slowly at the car roof; appreciative, self-conscious, in a kind of defiance. His curiosity grew, but he determined to ask no questions. A patient Sir Lancelot. If she wants to be mysterious, let her. Well, but give her time, she's had a shock. She's very young. He began to feel paternal, and middle-aged, and depressed.

He threw his cigarette-end out of the window, and started the car. A thin, cold November rain had begun outside, and he switched the windscreen-wipers on. They flicked slowly to and fro with a gentle, hypnotic hiss. The girl gave him the same nervous half-glance as before.

'Where are you taking me?'

'I haven't the slightest idea.' Queston gazed vaguely out at the road ahead. 'Somewhere with a roof. Preferably somewhere warm. We might risk a fire. I shouldn't think the lads will stay out in this. Got any suggestions?'

He looked round; she was staring at him blankly. She said: 'But aren't you – I mean, I thought – the car – '

Suddenly he understood. 'O, damn and blast the car. I beg your pardon. It is *not* official, I am *not* from the Ministry. I'm not from anywhere. I'm just a poor tramp who happens to drive a big black car.'

She looked like a child faced with the Christmas tree. 'I thought you were from the Ministry police. You know – out of the frying-pan into the fire. O gosh. O, I'm sorry.' She smiled at him delightedly. It was a child's grin, not provocative, but under its impact Queston felt himself warmed and cherished and important. He smiled back, amused at his own reaction; but at the same time he knew that he was going to want very badly to see the grin again.

The girl began to talk, with the same urgent relief in

which he and Lindsey had tumbled words out at one another. In an instant she seemed to have come to life. Only the red coat showed him that this was the same terrified waif he had rescued half an hour before.

The fire glowed red, orange, white; it gave no smoke. Queston had stopped to investigate the coal-bunkers of half a dozen houses until he had found the sack of egg-shaped, machine-pressed black objects he was looking for, and carried it out to the car; he was determined not to send up a beacon that might give them away. So they lit the fire carefully in the small house that they chose, and it gave them heat fanned white by the draughts over the empty floor, and an acrid-aching smell. But no smoke.

'All these thousands of hollow houses,' the girl said. She leaned forward to steady the can of water resting on the fire. 'Think of the packed furniture stores there must be in all the towns. I mean, the people that went back to their roots – there can't be nearly enough houses for them in the places they've gone. They take all their belongings from the homes they've left, and where do they put them?'

'A reshuffle,' Queston said; cross-legged, as he had learned to sit in the last two months. 'People go back to a place – but others leave it, to go back to somewhere else. The dead lands aren't so very big, with their dead houses like this one. And there were new blocks waiting in the really big towns, where you could have got overcrowding. The Ministry's been preparing for this for a very long time.'

'I suppose so.' She sat with one arm propped on the blanket spread over the bare boards, gazing into the fire. The light glinted on her hair; it had dried to a curious golden-shot bronze, curling over her forehead and ears, and she looked, Queston thought, like a long-legged and rather chubby Puck. He sat facing her, his back against the fire-place; his right leg and side were slowly roasting, but he enjoyed the view. They had no light but the fire; the house stood alone by a level-crossing on a small railway line, the

home of a departed crossing-keeper, and the gas which was its only power supply had been cut off.

The girl was quiet now. She had emerged from the red coat dressed all in black: a heavy woollen sweater and pleated skirt that gave the same young-old impression that had struck him at first. She was something outside his experience, and there was a wariness in his interest.

Her name was Beth Summers, she had told him: twenty-three years old, an actress. Not a very successful actress: 'but I was going to be, if this hadn't happened.' She had spent two years at one of the London drama schools, and the four years since in the no-man's-land of beginners' theatre: three seasons of repertory, a handful of one-line television parts, a provincial tour of a West End play in the last winter before the Ministry tightened its hold. She had talked about the stage, as they sat eating in front of the fire, with a mixture of sage disillusion and childish delight.

She said, as if it were her own phrase: 'I've never had any roots.' As a child she had been tossed between divorced parents; when the last Ministry edict had come into force she had applied to live in London, since she could think of nowhere else, but had failed. Unlike Queston, she had tried to find somewhere to settle; but her friends had grown curiously cool, and one Ministry office after another refused her admittance to any town.

By the time the real change began, she was wandering from one hostile community to the next; she seemed to be one of those on whom the invisible barriers of place had no effect. She said little about this, either; only that the gang from whom Queston had rescued her were typical of many inside. Like animals, they could sense an outsider, and hunted him – or her – as fair game for anything they pleased to do.

She lay rolled in blankets, her head pillowed on her coat, while Queston banked up the fire. She said: 'The most terrifying thing isn't the people themselves. It's something that's got hold of them. They're – possessed. That blank, listening look. Even the Ministry men have it. That was the

thing that scared me stiff always.' She looked at him, in a sudden, fierce appeal. 'I don't understand, I want to know what it means. Do you know? I can't go to sleep, I haven't for a long time. Tell me what it means.'

Queston squatted on his haunches, and gazed sombrely up at the stars prickling the bare black windows, and for the first time his mind was clear and cold and open, admitting the things that he knew and had deliberately shrouded, all this time, in ambiguity. If he had told Lindsey . . . When he spoke, he was speaking not to her only but to himself, and to Lindsey, and Thorp-Gudgeon, and the farmer on the underground platform; the man on the Plain, the woman in the pub. Even to the dog. All the people he had never properly spoken to at all.

'You have to forget a lot of things,' he said slowly. 'Unknow them. All the things that bound our little horizon. You have to look at the stars out there, and think that when the light left them the earth was still practically molten, and human life was millions of years away. Man is an episode, on that scale. And his intelligence is tiny. We've never known quite how tiny – we haven't the capacity to know. We know less about the human mind than about anything. We potter about with something like the electro-encephalograph, and we think we're enormously advanced, but it's about as clumsy as trying to hear a Beethoven quartet on a metronome. We don't understand the nature of life, or intelligence, any more than we can grasp infinity. We don't understand the connexion between our mind and our nervous system, but because they obviously are connected we can't imagine any intelligence that isn't linked to an organism.'

'Religions do. They have gods, I mean.'

'Gropings in the dark,' Queston said. He glanced at her. 'If that doesn't offend you.'

She said: 'No one ever gave me any good reason for believing in a god.'

'Religion . . . even the Christians have to think of the Holy Ghost in terms of an intelligence like their own. O, vast, infinite, omniscient, but not different in kind. Some

of the ancient religions were groping in the right direction, I suppose. Some of the primitive peoples I came across, once . . . '

He felt the words come as they had come when his book took shape; fumbling, flickering at snatches of what he chased. 'You see, if you try to put yourself outside the idea of man, it can all change. Blake came nearer to it than anyone, and they said he was mad . . . Suppose you say: Life is energy. And suppose you equate the two things that no one can account for – life and intelligence. On that basis, the hydrogen atom that's being fused inside the sun, turned into energy, is alive – and intelligent. The universe is full of suns and novae and solidified matter, and they are all of them energy, and so it's a kind of community of intelligences. Only man's scale of values doesn't include this. He can't appreciate an intelligence that consists of performing to certain immutable laws, and of being indestructible. Transforming itself by natural processes into another form if its own is attacked. He can't see the laws of the universe as a kind of cosmic intelligence.'

The girl lay on her back, her face tightened with listening. 'But it isn't. I mean, there's nothing intelligent about a set of rules. A machine can obey rules. Intelligence is choosing what you do – free will.'

'Is it?' He spread his hand in the air, and took hold of one finger. 'If I bend that back far enough, it snaps. I don't choose whether it does. We are born, and we die – we don't choose that. No. You're doing what we always do, thinking in our own terms. Our scale of values has to be based on what we know. On ourselves. When we wonder if there's life on another planet, we choose Mars, or one with conditions most like our own. When we scrape around for traces of life in meteorites, it's organic life we're looking for. Or we wonder if there's some great mind somewhere, like our own only much bigger, outside all these manifestations of energy and governing them all. It never occurs to think that perhaps the physicists might be the theologians. That energy *itself*, the common denominator in all things, is the

basic life and mind and intelligence. The nearest we get to it is talking about the music of the spheres, and the poetry of motion. Trying to turn the laws into intangibles. And when we sense that our own intelligence is a dim reflection of the whole intelligence of the universe, we give the elements our own attributes – our only small admission of the ruthlessness of the laws. We talk about the cruel sea, and the merciless sun. It's a cover for something we daren't think about.'

'Nature red in tooth and claw,' Beth said. 'The rough winds. Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May . . . all right. But what then?'

'Then,' Queston said, 'we miss altogether the whole terrible significance of the elements, and the universe, and the earth. The intelligence that's in all these things. We think we've learnt pretty well to control the earth. So we can't see, now, that it's controlling us.'

'*The earth?*'

'You've seen it. Gradually it's been happening, this last ten years. You know as well as anyone the state it's reached now.'

'I've seen this insane Ministry of Planning getting a stranglehold,' she said bitterly. 'People like them. The peace-makers. The governors. That terrible kind of hypnosis they put on people. It wasn't the earth that started shutting everyone up in boxes.'

'Wasn't it?'

'But the earth's not alive.'

'Isn't it?' Queston said, and the words had hold of him again. 'Listen. For fifteen years I've been studying the relationship between men and their environment. Men and places. It's always been a far stronger thing than anyone bothered to realize. Local loyalties, romantic feelings about mountains . . . and did you ever come across one of those little societies for preserving a railway branch line? No, of course not, you're too young. But all that emotion – if anyone had been asked to define it they'd have said it was just a matter of attaching affection to an inanimate object. Very strong affection, but a one-way force. They wouldn't have admitted

the one great danger. The fact that any strong emotion makes you vulnerable. The lover is always vulnerable – the one he loves has such power over him. The force can work both ways.'

She shifted inside the cocoon of blankets. 'But to say the earth's *alive* – '

'The earth. Which is matter, which is energy, which is intelligence. Not just a big thinking ball – a form of existence, of life, which happens to have encountered rules that it had to obey, and that turned it into solid material.' He leant forward earnestly, hunting to keep the words. 'But it's none the less alive, don't you see, and capable of action. This is that action, everything that's happening now. Suddenly it's taken advantage of the power it has over man. It's making him do the things he thinks he's doing of his own free will. All this business of guard thine own, and peace through isolation, and the frightening wall of emotion you find round places now. It's a beginning. I think it's the beginning of the end.'

'What will happen?' She spoke coolly, linking her hands behind her head so that she could look at him. She sounded as though she did not very much care.

'Only one thing can happen,' Queston said. 'It's out to destroy mankind.'

'But why now? It's put up with us for a long time.'

Queston looked at her. 'I dare say you think I'm very comic, don't you? Poor old thing, gone off his head after all that wandering about.'

'No,' she said calmly. 'I think you're quite sane. And you aren't old. *Why now?*'

'The bomb, I suppose.'

'Nuclear tests, you mean?'

'O no. The first. Hiroshima. Thirty-five years ago.'

'I don't follow,' she said. 'We've disarmed, haven't we?'

'We have. Everyone hasn't.'

'All the more reason not to bother about destroying mankind, I should have thought. Mankind will do it himself

fairly soon. I've never really believed in the year A.D. 2000 – we'll have blown the earth sky-high long before then.' As she said it she stopped suddenly, wide-eyed.

'Precisely,' Queston said. 'The earth doesn't want to be blown sky-high.'

'Are you trying to say that this – what's happening is a kind of self-defence?'

'Something like that.'

'But that's impossible.'

'I dare say. But it's happening.' He shifted wearily on the hard floor. 'Think of this form of intelligence. Not organic – existing only in obedience to its rules. The laws of Nature, we called them. Somehow our own kind of intelligence developed alongside it, separate and independent, but living off it like a highly complex parasite. The Intelligence was quite content for us to coexist. We were harmless enough, scratching at the surface of the earth, enclosed in our small senses. But then we overreached ourselves. We discovered how to break one of the great laws.'

'Splitting the atom?'

He nodded. 'We couldn't affect the cosmic intelligence until then. We could have sprayed blood around with our little wars as much as we liked, that didn't matter. But when we began monkeying with the energy of the nucleus . . . all the tests since the sixties haven't been bomb tests as such, you know. Just refinements. The biggest bomb they could make now couldn't be tested, the risk is too great. The force of it could affect the planet as a whole. And its satellite too, because if America and Russia want to blast at each other now they've got to blast those stations off the moon as well . . . But no one's going to think about the risk in time of war. They'll just press the button. And when they do that they'll affect the whole solar system, and the whole cosmic intelligence – you can't break one law without affecting the whole. Or at least that's what I believe the Intelligence, or whatever it ought to be called, thinks. All it's doing now is what we do when we find death-watch beetle burrowing into a house – get rid of it, before it brings the whole lot crashing down.

We're just as dangerous now, and not much more than particularly arrogant beetles. So it's doing things its own way. Getting rid of us. Animal life can stay, it won't evolve again in a form like us. The Intelligence is working just to paralyse the intelligence of man. And the appalling thing is, everything that it makes him do he thinks he's doing of his own free will. Or else at the behest of a Ministry that's even more unwittingly under the influence than he is. The earth's taken over, and no one knows. Maybe all parasites live and die without knowing their host exists.'

He stopped, and sat silent and very tired. Even in the dead night it seemed to be pressing in, shouting, all round him; the vast, inconceivable force against which there was no defence. A nightjar rattled outside the black window. He forgot the girl.

She said, wriggling farther down into the blankets: 'What shall we do in the morning?'

Queston stared at her.

Her voice came muffled out of the cocoon. 'I've heard you. It fits with everything, I'm sure you're right. But I mustn't *believe* it . . . I mean, we're alive, aren't we? It doesn't seem to have got at us. Someone once said to me that there was only one great crime, and that was a denial of life while you were still alive.'

After a long pause, Queston said: 'The first thing we'll do is look for some breakfast.' He was smiling. He rolled himself in blankets and lay down.

'Good night,' she said.

'Good night, Miss Summers.'

She said sleepily: 'My name's Beth.'

'Mine's David.'

He lay waiting for the sleep that rolled up towards him. He wondered, faintly jealous, who had presented her with the tired little aphorism. He thought again of the conviction that he had tried to turn into comprehensible words, and grinned again at her reaction. Trust a woman. If you introduced her to the Angel of Death, she'd invite him to stay to tea. And then he turned back to the greatest enigma of all,

that he had glossed lightly over in his big words: the single figure whose part in it all was not what it appeared to be, who had a power of his own greater than any puppet could have, however strong a force manipulated him. Mandrake. Mandrake . . . He did not sleep for a long time.

It happened very soon, and afterwards he wondered that it had not happened before.

They decided that they would drive through the dead lands for as long as it was possible to drive, looking for others like themselves. It had not seemed important to him before; until she came, he had not thought any others could exist. He discovered, after a little while, why she was frightened of the Ministry police. If they found her, she said, they would take her back to the Guild of Women, Mandrake's second brainchild: and she told him more about it than Lindsey had done. Like him, she described it vaguely as fostering all the old instincts that glorified the home. But she said too that any unattached woman found by the Guild now, in the enclosed towns, was forced either to marry or to take on another equally traditional function.

'They aren't exactly brothels,' she said calmly. 'The basic idea seems to be that if a man isn't getting enough of it at home, he can go off to one of these without having an affair with someone and breaking up the family. But something else goes on there that's really nasty . . . a sort of ceremony at set times of the year, like Midsummer and Christmas. They never managed to get me inside one of the houses, and I don't know quite what goes on. But I heard enough. They make it all sound very moral and necessary . . . that's why I was running away.'

He knew, by his horror, what was happening to him. A month ago, the fate of these unhappy wandering females would have left him indifferent, even amused. But that it might have happened to her –

He had known nothing like her before. She seemed able to forget in a moment the enormity of what had overtaken

them, and lose herself in the details of living. Her gaiety dazed him, as if he had been a long time asleep. She bubbled with conspiratorial delight when they found a deserted garage or shop, and helped themselves to fuel, clothes and food; with the scarlet coat wrapped close round her, against the cold that grew more intense now every day, she moved gracefully across his horizons so that he set her tasks of her own for the pleasure of seeing her walk.

She spoke to him with a grateful respect that made him feel worn and old. The smile that had first startled him lit her face often, but never brought her close. He wondered gloomily if she thought of him as a man at all, or at least as anything but a kind of benevolent uncle. His consciousness of her flared so much more vividly every day that it became a precious agony to have her beside him as they drove through the empty streets, or slept in deserted rooms. He took great care not to touch her. Only once, when he woke in the night and sat watching her for a long while as she slept, he put out his hand and touched the curious bronze hair that fell away from her face.

The next day they were on the outskirts of Reading, where the dead lands of Berkshire stretched round in a wide circular belt. Something seemed to be drawing him westwards, gradually away from London. They were driving with a purpose now; Beth had cut her hand on a tin-opener the day before, leaving a wound that was clean but a dark, angry red; and Queston had decided, before something worse happened, on a search for some kind of medical supplies.

In street after street of identical red-box houses they drew a blank; the places had been methodically stripped, and nothing remained. They drove farther into the country, and saw among the fields a cluster of houses and shops huddling on their own, away from the main road. From such a place, generally, a gun-shot or a stone from some unseen watchful source would drive them back even before they hit the familiar barrier of place, and they would know they had found one of the fierce, isolated little communities which

astonishingly seemed to survive alone in every part. But this time nothing happened as they approached.

Queston stopped the Lagonda a hundred yards from the first house and got out, carrying his shot-gun.

'Turn the car round. I shouldn't be long, it looks as if we're lucky. But if there's someone there, and they see me, I'll fire a shot. If you hear that, drive back round the corner and wait, and if I'm not with you inside ten minutes then drive like hell back to the house where we were last night. And then I'll get there somehow. All right?'

She nodded, pushing her hair aside with one hand. Her face was strained; he thought suddenly that she looked much older than she had done. The childishness had gone. She had argued with him urgently, too, over the idea of trying small unpredictable villages like this one; it wasn't worth it, she insisted, bandages and aspirin were a sophistication they could do without. But Queston had brusquely cut her short; her hand worried him, and he had a horror of the idea that something worse might overtake her and he be left unable to help. There was danger even in the water they drank: long boiled, but drawn from long-static tanks in houses where always he suspected disease might lurk.

He left her, and walked gingerly up the road through the long wet grass that masked its kerb. The responsibility he felt for her was unfamiliar; he had never known anxiety on anyone else's behalf, even when he was a child. But there was another difference; he had never secretly nursed any real emotion for a woman either, the plunder had always been easy. This time –

He clung to his freedom now because it was hers; and it troubled him that his protection carried danger for her all the time. The Ministry were on the look-out for him, he knew now; twice in the last week, driving fast along unfamiliar roads, he had seen men shout in recognition after the car. Once another car had chased them, but fell back as it reached some invisible boundary line. He held his gun ready as he walked.

But the village was empty. He saw the overgrown gardens

as he approached; tiles loose on the roofs, a telegraph pole leaning wearily at an angle, pulling the wires taut. He smelt the first shop before he saw it, and then drew level with the rotting heap behind its broken window. 'J. Pennyquick, Fruiterer', said the notice above, in paint that had already peeled. At least, he thought, the stench meant that the place had not been cleared.

In a general store near by he found bandages, cotton-wool, antiseptic; and he filled a bag with tins of food. His spirits rose. Last time, the tins they foraged had been unlabelled, and they had been living on baked beans for two days now.

He went out through the back of the shop and crossed a field towards the road. The grass was long and the hedges straggled. The fields everywhere still had the look of controlled land, the shape given them by farming, but their lines had begun to blur a little; so that at first sight always they gave an uneasiness, a sense that something was intangibly wrong.

Within a few steps he put up a rabbit; the white tail bounced frantically ahead, and instinctively he dropped the bag, pulled up his gun and fired. He missed. The rabbit vanished. Remorse flashed into his mind as he remembered the signal for Beth; now she would have ten minutes unnecessary panic. And he would have to walk an extra quarter of a mile to find her. Serve him right.

Then he heard the running footsteps, and her voice.

'David! David!'

Her face was plain with fright, and her hair tangled with running. She stumbled to a halt, staring at him, gasping for breath. She said indistinctly: 'You're all right!' and burst into tears, and he put out his arms with no more passion than he would have done to a child, until the feel of her there broke into him. He held her tightly, feeling the jerk of her gulps for breath, and rubbed his cheek against her hair. Her arms round his waist clutched as if they would never let go. 'Darling,' he said. 'Beth, my darling love, it's all right. It's all right.'

He drew her away from him at last, holding her by the shoulders, and she bent her head, sniffing, to hide her face. 'I heard a shot.' She gave a comic, hiccuping sob. 'I thought they'd caught you.'

'I told you to drive out of sight if they did.'

'I'm sorry.'

She looked up at him, with wet, flushed cheeks and reddening eyes, offering the plainness as penance.

'O Beth,' Queston said. 'Beth. Beth.'

Then he was kissing her, and the world was not the same as it had been before.

That evening, driving westward a spiralling way to avoid towns, they came on a hillside north of Chippenham that rose smooth green before them with a dozen small square shapes clustered in one field. Beth stiffened.

'David, look!'

Queston had been driving only half-alert, rejoicing in the weight of her body curled against his side. He slowed the car, and kissed the top of her head.

'What?'

'Why didn't we think of it before? It's the obvious thing to have. No roots, no ties. It need never stay in one place. A caravan.'

The caravans were huddled together in a corner of the field, in a litter of crackling brown leaves from the two great elms that overshadowed them out of the hedge. He chose the largest that he thought the Lagonda could easily pull, and unscrewed the padlock on the door. Sheltered from the wind, the walls and roof were weathered but still sound; inside, to Beth's delight, it was equipped as if the owner had left only five minutes before. She ran from one end to the other, burrowing in drawers and cupboards, like a child with a new toy.

'Sheets. And china, and knives and forks. How long is it since you used a real fork? And a sweet little kitchen, and it's even got a bathroom. How can a caravan have a

bathroom? O David, it's marvellous. The carpet's so soft. And there's a cupboard full of things like *pâté de foie* and lobster, *look* –' she waved a tin at him. 'And flour, I can make some bread.'

'And bottles of malt whisky,' Queston said thoughtfully. He had found a miniature bar behind a sliding panel. He pulled out a fat bottle, and blinked at it. 'And champagne.'

Beth said wonderingly: 'They must have been terribly rich.'

He grinned. 'I expect they came here for illicit orgies at the week-end.'

'Suppose they come back?'

'Does it feel inhabited? I'd bet they've been in Scotland for the last three months.'

She smiled brilliantly again, and bounced on one of the beds. 'Let's have our own orgy. We'll light the paraffin heater to keep warm, and draw the curtains, and eat all the most horribly indigestible tins. And drink lots of champagne.' She giggled at him, and as he laughed and came towards her he said: 'And make love.'

It was the thought that had been shouting from both of them, and then they were not laughing any more.

In the five days while they stayed in the caravan, in the field where they had found it with the cluster of flat roofs silent and strangely companionable all round, he began to feel that he had never properly been alive before. Open now to a delight free of wariness, he knew himself involved, dependent, careless of the danger of trust. Small details of Beth's body sent him giddy with an amazement that went through and beyond desire: the ripple of the fine skin over her hips, the soft curve from breast to arm, a thread of a scar that tilted one eyebrow. And the tenderness of their enclosure in the house that was one room gave him for the first time the old longing, new in him, for stability, peace to grow together – until he remembered the world they were in, where movement was their only salvation and that not perhaps for long.

Or until the sight or nearness of her roused him, or she came seeking him with a half-astonished shamelessness, and the fierceness held them again.

She said sleepily one day, as they lay quiescent: 'I've never been so happy ever. I wish the world would stop. I wish we could just go on living here like this for always.'

'Not altogether like this. We should die of exhaustion.'

'Should we?' She ran one finger delicately along the side of his thigh.

The shudder flowed through him like warmth. 'And if you do that again – '

'Should we? Are we unusual?' She turned to lie across his chest, looking at him inquiringly, and he grinned at the solemn surprise on her face, the hair tousled in damp curls round it now. The childishness was an appearance, hiding a sensuality that had astounded him with pleasure in her, but still it existed on its own like something she had outgrown but not totally shed.

'Some people would say so. I'm a staid middle-aged man, remember. And here I am behaving like an intemperate youth. Rather more so, in fact. And feeling marvellous.' He kissed her forehead, and she lay back with a naïve pride that made him smile.

'It's being together all the time, every minute, that's so glorious. I don't just mean making love. I've never lived with a man, at least not really.'

'What d'you mean, not really?' Queston felt a cold flick of fear. This was the other side of it; the other fire that had blazed alight in him, that even in passion for a woman he had never felt before. He wanted more than her body. For a long time, on only the second day, they had remorsefully detailed their past loves, each unwillingly begging to hear the worst. He had started it, he remembered. He had asked the first questions. Beth had only copied him, without the same compulsion; she had not really wanted to know. But he had burned to hold every moment of her, past as well as future, and he had interrogated her unmercifully; and felt each shock of revelation bitterly, illogically, as a betrayal.

She had answered everything, but as briefly as possible; he knew jealously that she had told him nothing except in answer to a question. What question had he not asked?

'What do you mean, *not really*?'

'O, nothing.'

'Don't be ridiculous, you must have meant something.'

'No I didn't, I just said it without thinking.'

'For Christ's sake,' Queston said, in exasperation and the beginning of anguish. 'Don't you know what they can do, these things you just say without thinking? Come on, let's have it. What did you mean?'

She moved restlessly. 'Well – for a little while there was someone who used to come round at peculiar times. It was because of his work. He turned up any hour of the day or night. That's all.'

'I thought so. Look, darling, don't bother to assure me how different all this is when it's not. I'd much rather you were honest.'

'I am being honest. O David, don't get angry. It wasn't like this, it wasn't like this at all. We weren't living together.' She added, with a touch of defiance, 'At the time I used to wish we were.'

A nice plausible line, he thought. 'Who was it – that old actor?'

'He wasn't old,' Beth said mildly. 'No. It was a writer. His name was Kit. He wrote plays.'

Queston lay still. 'How many more are there you haven't told me about?'

'I did tell you. At least, I included him.'

'In the grand total.'

She said quietly: 'That's right.'

He lay stone-still, hunting words that would hurt. 'How long does it take you to get tired of us, Beth? How long will it last?'

She said nothing. Suddenly he was furious with her; blaming her for the hands that had touched her, for the others before him, and most of all for keeping one of them back. How much else did she keep to herself? When they

first began talking that day, she had said with fear in her face: 'You won't want me when you know about me.' But there would be no harm in anything, so long as he knew, and was sure of knowing all of her – instead of finding the darker corners covered with flattering half-lies. There had to be openness between them; it was even more vital in the ambiguity of a disintegrating world. No sooner had she become his reason for living, the stake of all his values, than she had shattered him back into uncertainty again. He knew that he wanted to channel away the unreasonable pain by hurting her in return.

She turned towards him. 'David, I didn't know you existed then. I can't put right the past.'

'You could have been honest about it.'

'I have to think about the women you loved. But I don't care, so long as you love me now.'

He said wearily: 'That's not the same.'

'Darling, I love you.'

'Of course you do. There isn't much of a field to choose from now, is there? I can't think why you didn't want to stay in one of the towns. All that splendid variety, think –'

She sat up suddenly, staring at him. 'What on earth's the matter with you? Please stop. It was over long ago, finished. Why do you have to be jealous of things that are done with?'

'Because I've got no proof this fellow Kit is done with, in your own mind. How can I be sure of you? You didn't want to tell me about him, you wanted to keep the thing private. Nurse it where I couldn't see.'

'I didn't. It just didn't seem important. I loved him very much once, but people change.'

'You change, yes. You loved him, but now I'm the only man available, so you love me. But if he turned up, or any one of them, how do I know you wouldn't switch back again?'

'You don't know. But I do. I've never been so happy as this in my whole life before. Can't you see? Darling, I've come home, I don't want anyone else, ever. Please trust me.'

She turned close to him, and the anger was suddenly a

different blaze as he felt the softness of her breasts, and the tears wet on her face. And then love and rage were wrenched away from both of them, and desire caught and killed in mid-wave by an alien shock outside them that brought with it a new fear.

The earth shivered. It was not the way that it would soon have moved for them; it was cold, tangible, real. They felt the strange, gentle jolt all round them, through the floor and bed of the caravan up from the ground beneath, and even in the air. On the table, cups rattled in their saucers, and then were still. There was a quick flick of movement in the spray of leaves that Beth had propped in a vase near the window. And then silence.

They lay close, hardly breathing, waiting. Out of the past Queston knew at once what it was; and that she did not know. There was no sound.

'Twice more,' he said softly. Beth whimpered, and he held her to him.

The quiver of the world came again, more insistent, as if the caravan were moving, crossing a bump in the road. And then again, as gentle as the first.

'Then a wind blows.'

There was nothing. From outside the caravan they heard no movement, only a silence absolute as death. Then the trees stirred, rustling, and a growing wind breathed against the windows; muttered more loudly, and was gone. It was over.

'What was it?' Beth whispered.

'An earthquake. It must have brought buildings down in the towns.' He touched her cheek. 'It's all right, love. All over. We were lucky, I think. That was a small shock, but there can't have been anything like it in England for about two hundred years.'

'It was horrible.'

'They aren't nice. Show you that life's – precarious.'

'What's it trying to do?' It was the first time she had said anything of the kind, since the first day of all.

'Help out its methods with physical force, I suppose.

Speed things up a bit . . . Perhaps it's gaining power from us all. At least, from the others. In some strange way.'

'Let's not stay here,' Beth said suddenly. 'Let's take the caravan away. The place doesn't want us any more, can't you feel it? David, please let's go.'

They took the caravan with them, hitched to the back of the Lagonda; he knew that it would hopelessly hinder them if the Ministry police ever caught up, but the risk seemed worth while. At least this gave them an illusion of home. He longed now for the chance of peace, to build certainty between them. Yet everywhere they went now he felt the militant uneasiness beating at him, as if the land were muttering. A sound that might at any moment rise to a howl.

He found himself thinking more and more of the past – Oxford, the caves, the cottage – and every time pulling his mind forward to rest gratefully in the thought and awareness of Beth.

They drove north. Within minutes, when they first left the field, they were forced to turn back and find another road; before them, a dark crack six inches wide zig-zagged diagonally across the asphalt. Queston had not expected to see much trace of the earthquake here, but soon they found more: clumps of trees uprooted or leaning sideways; a raw brown patch on a hillside where the earth and everything that grew on it had slipped away; a railway line buckled so that it stood up in a hoop. Not long afterwards they came on the first of the dead.

They were approaching a village; through the trees he could see chimneys, and a church tower that looked indefinably the wrong shape. Beth was sitting huddled against him, curled up on the seat. Suddenly she said, with the beginning of laughter: 'Darling *look*, there's a *hat*.' Then she gasped, and clutched his arm.

Slowing the car, he saw first the brown trilby hat lying in the middle of the road, and then the man. Feet on the road, a pair of splayed feet in patched black boots; face in the ditch, the arms outflung. There was something familiar about the attitude. He flinched when he remembered; it

was like the grovelling farmer he had left beside Stonehenge.

'Stay there,' he said.

The man was dead, and cold. He had been middle-aged, with a weather-burned face and several days' growth of stubbled beard. There was no sign of any wound. The thing that horrified Queston was the expression on the face. Instead of the blank, characterless calm of death it was contorted by fear; the eyes, glazed and fishlike, were wide open, staring, and the mouth drawn back over the teeth. He had died shouting. He had died of – what? Shock?

Nearer the village they found others the same. Queston forbade Beth to leave the car, but when they came to the body of a child she insisted on getting out; and the horror on the face of the child was worst of all.

The village itself was not badly damaged, but black wisps of smoke rose steadily out of the broken roofs, and they saw that it had been on fire. They found others dead, but no one alive; they called, but heard no answering voice. Most of the houses had been burned, and stood dark smoking shells, but only a few seemed to have felt the earthquake: lay crumbled, or sliced neatly in half so that their privacy gaped like a doll's house opened by a child. In one, they could see an empty bed in an upper room, and the carpet hanging loose over the edge of the floor where half the house had fallen away.

The church tower was askew; it leaned towards the road from which they had come. The line of the shock had run past its base. As they watched, it creaked; a loose brick fell, and then the whole structure slowly toppled and crashed; a rumble, a cloud of dust, and then the silence as before, with no sound even of a bird.

The day was grey-bleak with low cloud, and very cold. Queston led Beth back to the car. He drove out of the village, and then stopped, and they sat gazing ahead at the bare road with the memory of what they had seen silent between them.

He said, to break the gap: 'Fuel's getting low.'

'Perhaps there'll be a gas station soon.'

'Petrol station. Garage. Where do you get these Americanisms?'

'Sorry.'

'Are you hungry?'

'Not very.' She tried to smile. 'Better not be, there's only a few tins left. And they're all soup.'

'We'll find some.'

'I expect so.' Suddenly she clenched her hands together. 'O David, it was frightful. Those poor people. That little boy – '

'Try not to think of them. I wish you'd stayed in the car.'

'He looked so terrified. Ugly. It couldn't have been just the earthquake. What was he frightened of?'

Queston said slowly: 'I don't know.' He was trying to forget how vividly he had recognized the fear. Behind those faces, he knew what they had felt.

'Where are we?'

'Somewhere near Gloucester, I think. I'm not sure. We'd better go on.' For the first time, he felt despair as he thought ahead. Fatalism was no answer now. There was Beth. How long could they spend running away, running from nothing to nothing, in a world with no refuge anywhere?

He started the car again, and drove on. The road was still intact, and the jagged, gaping windows of the houses they passed so familiar now that there was no way of telling whether the damage came from earthquake or long emptiness. They passed a lonely row of deserted shops, and the edge of a silent council estate. Then trees, groping bare over the fields.

Then the engine moaned, a long downward cadence, and died, flicking painfully at his memory, and when he pressed the starter there was only a peevish whine. He steered the silent, crawling car into the kerb, and it stopped.

'Well,' he said flatly, 'that's it.'

'No more paraffin.'

'No. And I don't see much hope of getting any other fuel.'

Beth took his hand, and held it tightly. 'What shall we do?'

'We can't stay here.'

'But what about the caravan?'

'We shall just have to leave it.'

'But it's all we've got. O David – ' She began to cry.

Queston said roughly, turning his anxiety to anger: 'What else can we do? Pull it along ourselves? For heaven's sake, Beth. Do you want to stay here?' He took her by the shoulders and pulled her round to face him, pointing out at the fields. 'Look at it. Listen to it. Remember that village. Do you want to stay here?'

Grey cloud hung low over the land; the rising Cotswolds were vague in mist, and there was only the dank, cheerless green of winter hedges and grass all around. Everything was silent; on a distant slope a farmhouse stood among a cluster of outhouses, but no smoke rose from its roof. There was an eeriness, a noiseless murmuring in the air, more ominous than the suburban limbo of dead homes. And the car, as if it had changed when it became no longer mobile, was no insulation now. Nothing could save them except to move.

He put his arm round her gently. 'Do you want to stay?'

'No.'

'Come on, then. We must take all we can.'

They went behind to the caravan, the familiar miniature room that had been warmth, illusion, safety. Even now Queston thought, it had begun to change; there was the same sense of nakedness, of looming menace, that he had felt in the car.

He said suddenly: 'It's a good job it happened on the road.'

'Why?'

'They're the only place we're free.' *Keep to the open roads . . .*

'Not all of them,' Beth said with a grimace.

'No. Not that one. But outside the communities, where there's no pull, there you can move. That's our only defence. It puts us outside the laws. When you move, you command time and space.'

'Shall we take blankets?' Her voice was flat and weary. He turned; she was sitting forlorn on the bed, hands loose at her sides. She said: 'It's no good, David. I daren't start thinking. It's all too horrible. Hopeless. There's nothing. The two of us, and nothing.'

He thought how smooth and untouched her face was, even in despair. Her mouth was turned down, but the curve that he loved was still there. She seemed to him very beautiful.

She stared up at him, and her face changed, and he saw the hunger that made his mind and body leap always out of awareness into a bright blazing world where only she was. She put up her arms to him, in a movement so unconsciously graceful that he felt tears prickle at his eyes.

'Darling. My darling. Please.'

It would be dark in an hour; already, in the grey afternoon, he could feel the strange indefinable power of the land insinuating fear into his mind. He fought it off. Beth was quiet, plodding at his side with her own blanket-wrapped bundle unwieldy on her back; he could read nothing in her face. She wore the scarlet coat that had been the first thing he ever saw of her. He had hoped, wildly, that the world might end as they lay there.

Beyond the low hedge on either side, fields stretched where cabbages had been left to go to seed, in rows of long ungainly stalks. The road curved ahead, and they could see nothing. Then as they walked, and the curve opened, they both saw the man lying beside the hedge.

'O no,' Beth said, and stood still. 'Not another of them. David, I can't.'

'Stay where you are, love.' He crossed the road. As he came towards the body he thought he saw it move. But that was absurd. Then he came closer, and he could hear the breathing: heavy, husky and slow.

'He's alive!'

He swung his bundle to the ground and knelt beside the man on the damp, gritty road. The breath was gasping in almost visibly through the open mouth; it was a well-worn face, beneath white hair cropped short and bristling. He judged the man to be about sixty. A goodish sports jacket and trousers, a raincoat lined incongruously with brilliant emerald silk.

Beth came up behind him. 'Is he badly hurt?' She gazed down nervously.

'I don't think so.' Queston was looking for obvious wounds, running his fingers along the bones of the arms and legs. 'He's certainly ill. Very ill. Look at the colour of him.'

'That noise, when he breathes – '

'Sounds like pneumonia. If it isn't, it soon will be. We'll have to get him into the warm somewhere, and quick.'

'But darling, where? How can we?' She knelt down, looking at the man compassionately, and lifted his head gently to lie cupped in the palms of her hands.

'God knows. Perhaps there's somewhere – ' Queston peered vaguely up and down the road.

'The caravan.'

'No,' he said at once.

'But where else is there?'

'We can't go back. Not there. It's not the same as it was before, you must know that. It's – unprotected.'

Beth said: 'So is he.'

'I'm more concerned with you. You don't know the size of the danger – I do. Darling, you don't know.'

She only looked at him, and touched his cheek, and smiled.

It took longer to go back; Beth stumbling under the weight of both bundles; Queston moving slowly with the man slung over his back. Darkness was nearer, and the mist hanging low over the road.

In the caravan, Beth lit the hissing lamp, and Queston thought wryly of the way they had forced themselves to leave, half an hour before. To come back was both an anti-climax and a kind of warm, surrendering collapse.

They took off the man's coat, and wrapped him in blankets on one of the beds, propping him half upright. The tearing, difficult breaths had eased a little; there seemed to be nothing else wrong, though his forehead was dry and hot. Beth boiled water and poured it over a mixture of every aromatic herb she could find in the kitchen, from the neat row of small jars that they had left as useless, and they

turned the man's head so that he breathed the steam. In a little while he stirred, was caught in a paroxysm of deep, rumbling coughing, and lay back and opened his eyes.

Beth put her hand on his forehead, and smiled at him. The man looked at her blankly for a moment. Then his face twisted into terror, and he drew away towards the wall, staring wide-eyed.

'It's all right', she said soothingly as if to a child. 'How do you feel?'

She leaned forward. He whispered: 'No. *No.*' Then suddenly he was half upright, shouting.

'I won't. You can't make me! I won't see them again!'

Beth recoiled into Queston's arms. He held her, then put her gently aside and sat on the edge of the bed, easing the man back. The terror seemed to grow less; the man clutched at his arm conspiratorially: 'Have they got you too?'

'No one's got me. Or you either.'

'Keep her away. I won't see them. You tell them, I won't see them. Not again, not ever again.' He struggled to get up.

'They're not here. Nobody's here. This is our caravan, we found you in the road. You were ill. Lie down, you must rest. Come on now, it's all right.' Queston talked on, reassuringly, and the man lay back, his gaze flicking watchfully over to Beth.

She whispered: 'What's he afraid of?'

'Thinks you're someone else. Or were you looking at him lustfully? Not that he's a very attractive morsel. Can you get at the whisky?'

She smiled faintly. 'Mightn't it be bad for him? I can make some tea. No milk, but there's sugar.'

'Not from her,' the man said loudly. 'I won't touch anything from her.' He lost his breath for a moment, and coughed, gasping. He looked pleadingly at Queston. 'Only what you give me. Not from her.'

'Put the kettle back on, if there's enough water,' Queston said to Beth. 'I'll make the tea.'

She went into the little kitchen. He watched the droop

of her shoulders; she had badly wanted to help the man. He himself hadn't cared; a poor sort of balance that the help had to come from him. He looked back at the bed. The man was resting back on his elbows, breathing more easily. His stubble-cut hair looked oddly youthful over the haggard grey face. He tried to smile. 'Asthma. Always had it. Must have got a touch of bronchitis now too, I think.'

'Does it often knock you right out? You were in a bad way.'

'Sometimes.'

'How did you get there? In the road, I mean. Where were you going?'

'Away,' the man said. He stiffened, remembering, and his face creased into cunning. 'I got away, without them knowing. They won't catch me now. You won't let them catch me, will you?'

'Who d'you mean, they?' Queston said. 'The Ministry?'

'Ministry?' the man said vaguely. 'No.' He looked round to see that Beth had not come back, and clutched Queston's arm confidingly. 'The women,' he said, and was silent.

Beth, in the doorway, frowned inquiringly; Queston motioned at her to keep out of sight.

'Where?'

'Gloucester.'

'Are you from Gloucester?'

'No,' the man said at once. 'I'm Neville Warren.' He looked up expectantly, deprecating and self-satisfied, like one accustomed to recognition.

'O. I'm David Queston. And my – that's Miss Beth Summers.'

Beth came tentatively towards them; the man's chagrin was more than his fear. 'You haven't heard of me?'

'Well – '

'I have,' Beth said unexpectedly. 'At least, there was a Neville Warren – I remember reading – '

'Go on,' the man prompted her eagerly.

'You're a medium.'

The pleasure held a faint flicker of distress. 'I prefer the

word "sensitive".' He glanced at her, and drew away towards Queston. 'She knows,' he whispered. 'She would, of course. She belongs to them. You can't pretend. Don't leave me with her.' He clutched, pleading, and Queston looked with distaste at the eager eyes; the man's face was flabby, old, the skin flushed with purple-red veins and darkened by a grey haze of beard. Was it fear that made him repellent, or something more?

He said sharply: 'Where do you come from?'

'Nowhere. I moved around. I have a consulting-room in London, of course, but I use it only irregularly. Only for special clients. I visit exclusive groups in many places – none of those vulgar so-called churches, you understand, but private circles. Some very distinguished people. One can give comfort, it's a great privilege . . . Once or twice I did offer my services for psychical research as well. I believe in trying to further scientific knowledge. But those people, really – so childish and undignified. Asking me to play games with cards, and stupid drawings. I gave it up, I really did. I told them, I should be insulting my gift.'

He spoke with an eager gentility that tried to be impressive but was only absurd. He said suddenly to Queston: 'You have a very good aura, did you know that? Very strong, very powerful indeed. You are an intellectual man, I think, but spiritual as well. Perhaps you have a little of the gift yourself.'

Queston looked at him in faint disgust. 'You claim to get in touch with the dead, you people.'

Warren smiled reprovingly. 'They pass over, but they are not far away. It is meaningless, the word "dead". They are all around us, waiting for us to communicate. Alas, so few these days can – '

At the end of the caravan, Beth stiffened suddenly. 'David!'

'What is it?'

She stood motionless, with the kettle in one hand. 'Listen!'

Queston sat upright, straining to hear beyond the flimsy,

stuffy little room; but there was only the wind, peevishly whining through the telephone wires. Then he thought he heard, for an instant, the rasp of feet on the road. Glancing at the fear in Beth's face, he stood up and turned towards the door. Before he could put out his hand, a new sound came outside and the door burst open. Warren, twisting to push himself against the wall as if it could shelter him, squealed like an animal. The gaping doorway was black, empty and cold, shadowed from the lamplight by the open door. It was a moment before Queston could see the faces.

He saw them in a group out in the night, upturned featureless pale blobs, and as he saw them a figure rose there, growing as it climbed the steps to fill the doorway. It was a woman; a big, square-built woman in a shapeless dark huddle of clothes, with fierce dark eyes under heavy brows, and a low thick fringe of hair. She was monstrous, he thought in horror as he stared at her: like some awful goddess of the night, materialized from long-dead fears that stirred out of the centuries at the sight of her.

She stood there, filling the night; her voice was deep. 'Come.'

Queston found words, and they squeaked in his throat. 'Who are you?'

The woman said again: 'Come. Come with us. 'Tisn't safe to stay here.' She had a marked Gloucestershire accent, and the sound made her instantly less terrible. Queston could hear Warren gulping, in shallow hysterical gasps of breath, and he furiously willed him to stop. Behind his back, Beth moved, and he felt her take his hand.

'We live here.' Her voice came cool and clear over his shoulder. 'Why shouldn't we be safe?'

The woman's gaze shifted, and he thought a swift gleam crossed the square, mountainous face as she looked at Beth. But she spoke to him.

'We know you have Warren here. I am sorry. You must come. We need him.'

She moved forward. Automatically Queston stepped out

of her way, unwilling to touch her; there was a crude animal smell about her, not so much unpleasant as alarming. She brushed past him, so that he and Beth were crushed backwards into the little kitchen, and then suddenly the whole caravan was full of them, strange silent pushing women in the same dark clothes, with their hair cut in the same rough clumsy way. Some with hair long and loose over their shoulders, some with bright ribbons or scarves in curious strong colours, yellows and reds; some massive as the first, some pretty-petite or thin and vulpine; but all inexorably feminine. Even the leader, Lesbian if ever he saw one, gave him an un-nerving sense of impending rape; and the feeling was far from erotic.

Perhaps it was the way they crowded round Warren, changed now into a whimpering, shrinking old man. He cringed down on the bed, making inarticulate throaty noises that were not words. Then they closed in on him, and the next instant he was on his feet, and hustled quickly past by three or four of them; Queston had a momentary glimpse of his face, turned beseechingly as the same gibbering protest came from its mouth; and then they had him down the steps and outside. And the heavy unsmiling faces inside the caravan were turned on Beth and himself. He could see the big woman's head over the rest.

'You'd better come with us,' she said. It was an opinion now, not a threat; the tone was amiable. He could hear Warren's cries growing fainter out in the dark. The women looked at him without expression; Beth was still clutching his hand.

He said, as he moved forward: 'Who are you?'

'We're Gloucester,' the woman said.

The moon had broken suddenly from a bank of cloud; a half-moon, cold-glowing white. The city looked smaller than he remembered. And he knew he did not remember the wall, looming high and black all round. There was a gate, and an indistinct murmur of voices in the dark, voices of

men as well as women; and then with the pressing of those round them they were inside. He held Beth close to him, his arm round her shoulders. He knew that she was terrified, but still he knew that it would have been worse to stay in the open. Whatever might happen here, that would have been worse. The conviction seemed neurotic, ridiculous, when he tried to analyse it, but it had been too many years growing to be ignored now.

The streets were empty; every shop dark, and every lamp-post. Looking in from the crowd round the gate, he saw that a light shone dimly on every corner, but nowhere else. He commented on it facetiously to a young woman at their side, and she stared in the gloom.

'Power's been rationed for months now. Didn't you know?'

'We haven't been in a town.'

'O yes, the electricity went ages ago. They have what they call a skeleton national grid for London and the big places in the north. The small towns generate their own. They say it can't be done much longer.'

The crowd was moving away down a side street. Their leader came across to Queston.

'You're hungry, I expect.'

'Well – ' He stared at her, trying to make out more than the heavy brows and jutting chin in the half-lit dark. Friendly or hostile? Were they guests or prisoners?

'You'll take them, Mary,' the woman said to the girl beside them. 'We are going on, with the man Warren. Follow us when you can.'

Watching her, the angle of the shadowed head as it leant slightly to one side, Queston realized what it had been, all along, that made most of them seem familiar. The listening, the air of other-attentiveness.

He said suddenly: 'It won't speak to you, you know. It isn't a voice for the ears.'

The big woman looked at him. In the cold darkness, with the stars pricking frostily overhead, he caught a gleam from her teeth as she smiled. 'O, but it will speak,' she said softly.

'And now I think I know you. O yes, Mr Queston, it will speak. And you shall hear it.'

He realized, when the one called Mary led them into the light of the little house, that she was not much more than a girl. She had said nothing as she walked them swiftly through the empty streets, past chinks of light glinting from tight-curtained windows, but inside her own home she relaxed, and became real. She smiled, took off the dark, enveloping coat to show herself thin, muscular, high-breasted, in a close-fitting dark dress. Queston knew that without a sign, she was beckoning him. He sat down, faintly shocked, close to Beth, beside the small wood fire spluttering in the grate. Opposite, the girl Mary's parents nodded and watched.

They were old, sunk into the wisdom of defeat, though Mary herself seemed only about twenty. The old woman, tugging a shapeless knitted shawl closer round her shoulders, said petulantly: 'When are we going down? It's nearly time. It'll be warm there. Mary, we ought to be going down.'

'In a moment, Mum. We've got visitors, they're hungry. I'm just going to the kitchen. We'll be going down soon.'

She touched her mother's shoulder, and disappeared.

The old man sat with a muffler round his neck, mumbling at an empty pipe. He said, looking at Queston from watery eyes: 'Cold out.'

'It is indeed.'

'Very cold. Never used to be so cold.'

'No.'

'Lots of things have changed.'

'Gloucester has changed,' Queston said, experimentally. 'You have a wall round the city now. That used not to be there.'

'Ah, but it did. In the beginning. You not a Gloucester man?' The old man peered at him suspiciously.

'We're visiting. Passing through . . . it's a lovely city.'

'Certainly is.' He relaxed again. 'Quiet as it was in my grandfather's day, now. They've got the right idea for once,

the politicians. I never voted for this government, I'll tell you that, but they've done well. Could have pranged everything, but they've given us peace and quiet. Keep ourselves to ourselves, that's all we ever wanted. All that Common Market nonsense – England's an island, isn't it?'

Queston said, half to himself: 'No man is an island – '

'That's John Donne,' the old man said unexpectedly. 'Knew a chap in the R.A.F. used to spout him by the yard. Some good poems, too.' He grinned a lascivious old grin.

'Anything you can mention, Dad knew someone who could do it in the R.A.F.' The girl had come back. 'Isn't that right?' She said it without malice, smiling at him.

'Good lot of chaps, say what you like,' the old man said mildly. 'An intelligent service, the Air Force. D'you know,' he said to Queston, 'we had two university lecturers and a barrister in my squadron.'

'Indeed,' Queston said politely.

'Bombers, I was in. Rear-gunner. Nasty job that, you copped all the odd flak that was going. I remember once – '

'Not now, Dad,' the girl Mary said. She put two plates on the table. More gently, she added: 'There's no talk of war now. You know that. It's all forgotten. The Minister said, if you want to go back, go back by centuries, to the good things. Not dropping bombs on people.'

'True enough. True enough.' The old man nodded. He pulled out his pipe again and sucked at it. 'You haven't got a smoke, I suppose?' he said hopefully to Queston.

'Sorry.'

'I haven't had a pipe since – well, never mind.'

The plates held a grey, glutinous mess with pools of sugar melting into a watery liquid on its surface. 'Porridge, I'm afraid,' the girl said apologetically. 'It's all we're down to at the end of the week. Ration day tomorrow. But it's hot, it'll fill you. O, and there's some milk. Here.'

She put a tin of condensed milk on the table between them, a white hardened crust edging the hole gashed in its top. It was not out of place; the whole room had an air of having gone to seed, with the clutter of dispirited poverty lying over

what had been solid prosperous comfort. Damp clothes were draped round the fire; a worn, half-mended rug hung untidily over a chair; dust was thick on a massive Victorian sideboard. The two old people sat listlessly watching by the fire. It was a family, and it was warm, uncomplaining, friendly; but there was no vitality in it.

They ate the porridge with an eagerness that surprised them. The oats were distinct and nutty, with a welcoming smell. 'This is good,' Beth said, taking breath. She smiled tentatively at the girl. 'Ration day tomorrow – what did you mean?'

'O, it's much the same here as anywhere, I imagine. Food supplies sent to the town cooperative once a month, doled out once a week. Actually the Guild does the distribution here. It's all right when there's enough sugar. There wasn't any, one week. That's what we miss most. Funny, isn't it?'

'They're very good really,' the mother said. 'They do their best.'

Queston ate more slowly. He could feel Beth's astonishment through his own.

'Like the war,' said the old man placidly. 'No, love, it's all right, not the blood and thunder. But the rationing, and everyone mucking in and making the best of things. It's wonderful, you know. I never thought we'd see that spirit back again. Got it back just in time, if you ask me. People were getting things too easy, they had time to make trouble.'

'Learn to be content with what you've got, that's what I say.' The mother nodded; the long, rocking, bobbing nod of the old. 'We're all safe now . . . Mary, when are we going down?'

'In a minute, Mum.' She was looking at Queston, with the same secret half-inviting smile that he had pretended not to see at the beginning. 'You look worried. What's the matter?'

Worried, he thought. 'The rationing. How long has it lasted?'

'Two months. Maybe three.'

'My God. So short a time ago – '

'It's not long, I suppose,' she said calmly.

'But how can you –' he heard his voice explode and crack, and they were all three staring at him. Except Beth, troubled, looking away into a nothing of her own. The faces stared, glazed, self-contained.

'– How can you accept all this so easily? Don't you remember the way you were living a year ago? Don't you ever ask who's responsible for all this happening? Or why? Don't you care?'

There was a pause, and then the old man leaned forward and patted him on the knee. 'We're safe, lad,' he said kindly. 'No one cares how much they pay for that.'

'Are we going down yet, Mary?'

'We'll go now, Mum.'

Queston and Beth went with them, though the father did not; the girl Mary seemed to take it for granted. There was in any case no question of leaving Gloucester that night. Beth still said scarcely a word, only clung silently to Queston's hand, and he was appalled when he looked at the fear tense in her face. 'Relax, love, nothing's going to happen. I'm still here.' But he knew that she was back in the fear of whatever had happened to her before they came together; and he had no great faith in his hopefulness himself.

The streets were not empty now. Other footsteps, other dim shapes went before and beside them as they walked through the dark. Nobody spoke. The ghostly cavalcade moved along like a march of sleepwalkers, soft and purposeful. Mary led them after the rest. Fatigue dulled Queston's brain, and the depressing lethargy of the place gave him the feeling of moving through a dream. There was the same half-reality about the darkness, masking all detail, and the mysterious intensity of the silent onward press.

Down. Down. When are we going down? He saw at last what it meant. Beyond the cathedral, on the edge of the Close with the four-tipped tower high over their heads, they came to a long ramp leading down to a yellow, gaping

square. The figures before them showed suddenly distinct as they went down, black shapes rimmed against the light. They moved in groups of three or four, and then they disappeared.

He thought of the catacombs, and then of other things. The ramp was walled with thick concrete, and he saw the great reinforced steel doors, outward opening, fixed back against the sides. *Lasciate ogni speranza* . . .

It was one of the old fall-out shelters, from the panic that ended the sixties and brought Mandrake his last opportunity. He stood still, staring at it. Below, through that door, it must run right under the cathedral. Under the crypt. What a hell of a place to build it.

Beth turned back to him at the tug of his hand when he stopped. He looked at her face, and it was vague, blank, listening; the face of all those drifting down past them into the shelter. It was as if she wore a mask. He shouted at her: 'Beth!'

She blinked at the violence, and seemed to wake.

'No,' he said urgently. 'Not down there. Not us.'

'Why not, Mr Queston?'

The voice was behind him and over his head, and he saw the looming black figure of the big woman who had come to the caravan; her face lit dimly now by the faint yellow glow of the entrance as he looked back and up at her, so that the dark eyes and full mouth showed more clearly, voluptuously, than before.

The old irrational terror was fighting through him, of the caves, of the brooding darkness under the earth.

'Why not?' she said.

'Why should you go down there? There's nothing to shelter from now. It's a mausoleum. Damn you, it's dangerous. You know as well as I do.' He flung the obliquity at her like a challenge.

More of the dark-clad women stood behind her, melting silently towards them out of the night. 'Dangerous?' she said softly. 'Not this time. Listen to it.'

He knew that she was returning his words of an hour

before, and that she did not mean a listening with the ears. He turned unwillingly towards the gaping mouth of the man-made cave, and his mind felt at it, and she was right. The place was indifferent. Its force neither drove him away nor drew him in.

She said: 'I told you. We're Gloucester. We let you in. Have you got within a hundred yards of a live town before? This is our place. If we accept you, it can't do you any harm. Go down.'

'You're mad,' he said coldly. 'No one can master it. Never. It's not a tool. You're obeying, and you don't know it. That's the great tragic joke, you don't know.'

'I know your delusions,' she said with amusement. 'Do you think anyone takes you seriously? My dear Mr Queston, you're a case history.' From some hidden pocket in her great engulfing black cloak she drew out a book, and held it up. 'Two-thirds genius, as the preface says, and one-third fantasy. The mind running away with itself. It happens to many scholars, the men with the most brilliant minds of all . . . their subject gets the better of them, comes alive for them . . .'

Queston seized the book from her, but even before he opened it he knew what had happened. The print of the title-page stared up at him, clear and bold even in the faint light: *Time Will Say Nothing*, by David Queston, B.Sc., M.A., D.Phil., Oxford University Press.

Beside him, Beth said, pleased: 'O darling – '

He hardly even heard. He looked up.

'A limited edition,' the big woman said, smiling at him. 'Circulated among certain selected people. Dr Klaus Brunner edited it for you – he has really done it very well. A most amusing book, I enjoyed it immensely. Parts of it are really very funny indeed, I congratulate you. But you really mustn't expect anyone to take you seriously . . . '

Queston said nothing, shaken by a tide of anger. He had been tiresome, he had not cooperated. So they had disarmed him in the most subtly effective way they could. Hide the truth, and it might leak out; hold it up to ridicule, and you

destroy it. It couldn't have needed much. A little ironic interpolation from Brunner here and there, and the whole thing easily crumbled into fantasy. The comic science-fiction of a dotty scholar. If there had been anything he could have done to combat the Ministry and their masters, by persuading people of the real significance of this new dreadful world, it was gone now. Now there was nothing he could do.

'You see, I know all about your ideas.' She was smiling down at him, immense and Junoesque and repugnantly intimate. For the first time he noticed a man standing in her shadow. She waved towards the shelter. 'Come down, Mr Queston. We have a little experiment at our meeting tonight. It will interest you. It may even convince you that you are wrong.'

The man at her elbow shifted as if in reminder, and she took his arm as they began to move. Queston walked automatically, his rage ebbing to leave a dead emptiness that he had not felt since before he met Beth. At his side, she moved her free hand to turn up the high red collar round her face as they walked down the slope to the shelter entrance. The small uneasy gesture caught at him and roused him; suddenly protective, he pressed her hand. It tightened round his, the fingers twining close.

The woman said: 'This is Mr Oakley. He has been asking to meet you. He's a journalist.'

'Christopher Oakley,' the man said, holding out his hand. 'Hallo.' He was younger than Queston, and shorter; a slight, fair-haired man with curious light-blue eyes darting in a constant half-smile. His shoulders were hunched for warmth in a sheepskin jacket; the heavy white collar made him seem smaller still.

'Don't tell me we still have newspapers,' Queston said. He shook hands briefly as they paused again, but his attention was on the gaping doorway ahead.

'Only locals. I'm from Reuters. I liked your book.' The small man spoke quickly, with an accent that sounded American.

'I doubt if it's my book you've read.'

He said: 'It's yours O.K.' The big woman had moved ahead, and he spoke softly. The light eyes held Queston's. 'I seem to be out on a limb, but I got more out of it than friend Brunner's gags. It tied up with ideas I've had for a long time.'

Queston looked at him sharply; but the woman had turned back and Oakley was wearing the vague half-smile again.

'Your title intrigued me. What's it mean?'

Queston said: 'A quotation. Of no significance now.' He remembered Beth, and gestured vaguely. 'This is Miss Summers. Mr Oakley.'

Oakley cocked his head to look across at her, like a small dusty sparrow. 'We've met before, I think. Elizabeth Summers, isn't it? The actress?'

Queston glanced from one to the other in surprise, with a flick of pride. Beth had not told him she was well known. He felt amiable towards the journalist.

She nodded, without expression, and smiled briefly. 'Hallo.'

The young man dropped back, looking pleased with himself, as they began to move again, and Queston slipped his arm across her shoulders and hugged her briefly. She turned her face up to him at once. 'David, I'm frightened. Stay with me.'

'Don't worry, love. I won't go away.' There seemed suddenly a deeper urgency in her fear than there had been before, and he was puzzled. But then they were inside.

A long corridor, half-dark, warm with the breath and bodies of those crowding ahead; he saw them only in a light that troubled him, hurt his eyes vaguely, until he realized that the strangeness was that it was blue. The lamps set deep in the heavy concrete roof glowed with a dark phosphorescent blue that made them seem to hover forward in the air; and yet they cast no colour on the faces round him, but gave a deceptive colourless half-light, like the moon. Full of shadows. Because of the shadows, he took some time to make out the appalling size of the room they came to, a great

echoing chamber; at first he noticed only the noise. And that troubled him too, rising round him unbearably loud and overwhelming and yet with a wrong pitch, a lightness – until he realized why. It was the noise of women's voices. The crowding thousands were nearly all women, excited, tense, and the atmosphere prickled with the near-breaking eagerness, a kind of hunger, that he had sensed in the women in the caravan.

He found himself pressed close against a wall, with Beth against his chest so that her hair brushed his face and he had to force his arm forward against the wall to keep hold of her hand. For long moments they swayed and lurched in the press of bodies and voices, inched gradually forward; and then at his shoulder he felt someone take a tight grip on his arm, and a voice said in his ear: 'Come with me. Come this way.'

He looked round, and saw Mary's face bright and rapacious, her eyes wide, her lips parted; she pressed close against him, and he felt her breast against his arm. He thought, with more alarm than amusement: This is why they won't let the men in. To whatever it is. Not with this little lot loose; there'd be an orgy. None of their precious family image then.

Mary drew him away insistently. He felt a helpless, comic figure – a woman holding him on either side. Keeping a firm grip on Beth to tug her after him, he moved dutifully sideways; found himself stumbling along rows of seated women in the centre of the room, to a sudden space in the far gangway where fewer people stood. Glancing back, he saw Oakley slipping after them; the journalist grinned at him, and rolled his eyes at the noise and warmth and shrill-soft crowds. A woman in black moved towards them with a look of forbidding; but Mary said something inaudible which sent her scurrying away, and they stood in a breathless group in the shadowed gap at the side. Still the girl thrust herself close against him. He held his arm stiff and motionless, and looked ahead. He felt giddy; the blue lights all round wavered in the darkness, over the thronging heads,

around the square concrete pillars that braced the underground roof. Then a stronger blue glow took shape at the end of the room, and in it he saw the monstrous black figure of the big woman, the leader, standing on a raised platform with her cloak swathed round her; and at the same time he saw suddenly that it was not one room, but three. Two other long pillared chambers, immense and crowded as their own, stretched up to face the dais, so that she stood there not at the end of one room but in the centre of a vast three-armed amphitheatre.

'My God,' he called down to the girl Mary, forgetting the feel of her, 'it's fantastic. How many thousand of them are there?'

Her face shone, the eyes glittering as if she were drunk. 'It's all the Guild. The Winchester Guild. They've all come.'

He barely caught her voice over the hubbub; but then the woman standing high in the centre suddenly raised her arm, the cloak falling away from it in a black wing that jerked at his memory without giving him time to know why; and a swift hush swept like a wind over the whole crowd until they were silent. Straining his eyes in the half-light he saw a table beside her on the raised central dais, and two chairs, and then another figure mounting to stand beside her. He heard Beth's indrawn breath before he too recognized the man. It was Warren.

The woman's vibrant male voice rang out; it was made thinner by the size of the huge shelter, but still every word was clear.

'Members of the Guild. We are honoured with Neville Warren's presence again tonight. You all know his special gifts. Let us help give him all our strength to bring them to their best use.'

Queston peered out at the rows of seated women, and saw movement wash over them in a wave. He thought they had bowed their heads, but it was more; each one dropped her head until it rested on her knees, and let her arms hang limp so that the fingers touched the ground.

Oakley's voice hissed softly, behind him: 'What's the

betting they pray to the great god Mandrake?' But he only stared out at them; there was something peculiarly horrible about the obeisance, the seated grovelling.

The big woman still stood, but she bent her head. 'O mighty power who givest us all things by which we live, give us also thy peace here. Come to thy son, and strengthen his vision, that he may see and tell of those things we cannot see or know. Serve us as we deserve. Amen.'

The word rustled through the crowd: 'Amen.' In another long ripple they rose and sat back, expectant.

The woman sat down, and Warren stood there alone in the blue light. Very faintly, around him, music took shape in the air; it came so gradually that Queston was not conscious of the first moment of hearing, only of finding it there as if it had existed from the beginning. It was soft, yet bleak and brooding. 'How's that for stage-management?' said Oakley, irrepressible, in his ear.

Warren stood with closed eyes, a square, solid figure; his face heavy and expressionless and old, without colour under the blue glow. He straightened himself; raised his chin; stepped slowly forward away from his chair and turned round, gradually swivelling in a full circle as if he were listening for something, or staring out through his closed eyelids in search. Then a broad, beatific smile spread over his face; on more noble features it might have looked impressive, but as his thick lips drew back to reveal two rows of large, gleaming false teeth, it seemed only an imbecile enjoyment of some private joke. Yet Queston heard sharp breaths of awe all round him; he glanced at the rows of women, and saw every face transfixed with expectancy, gazing ardently up.

He shifted uneasily. He had watched mediums at work before, without conviction; he knew all the pathetic tricks, the ambiguities that to the gullible shone with inspiration. This was a perfect audience, but if they were disappointed – he hoped for Warren's own sake that he was good.

Warren said loudly, very slow and ponderous: 'Good

evening, friends.' His eyes were closed still; he still smiled the wide, inane smile. 'I am glad for the chance to come to you.' The intonation and accent were his own, but the voice was deeper. It was not the genteel whine they had heard in the caravan. It carried easily, in the expectant, prickling hall, over the murmur of the music.

'I am glad our brother has come back to you. He did not want to come. I think he was tired. We must be patient with him, the body is weak. But here where the body is no longer a prison we send out much love to you, our loved ones on the other side. There are many with me who wish to communicate their love. No. No. Not yet.' Warren's face puckered in annoyance; he patted at the air beside his head as if brushing away a fly. 'They are eager to come through. We are glad here now, my friends, at what we see of you on earth. We see an end of discord and of rivalries, and we rejoice. The vibrations surrounding the minds of men are calmer now than they have ever been, a great disaster has been averted. We see you with wise leaders, teaching that evil can best be kept at bay by persuading the people of each country and city to live at home in contentment, enjoying the beauty and harmony of the world. It may be that there is still much to be suffered, that there are discontentments of the body – '

I'll say, Queston thought. He looked at the gaping women, and thought of porridge and cheap black cloth and dim light.

' – But thanks to the wisdom of your present leaders, whose minds are open to our loving thoughts of illumination from this side, all can be well. Only patience is needed, to bring strength for the great task ahead. To live as you live now is a blessed beginning. And at last, out of these trials there must come true brotherhood and peace throughout the world, linking men and women of every caste, creed and colour in perfect love.'

The deep, slow voice tolled monotonously out; Queston listened intently, frowning. It was the old nebulous love doctrine of the trance teacher, but there was a difference:

a hidden, deliberate thread of propaganda. Your leaders . . . your leaders . . . He stared thoughtfully at Warren.

The music faintly rose and fell, muttering with vague menace. A few explosive coughs echoed out; the women were growing restless.

Warren suddenly stood upright and stiff, clenching the back of his chair. His eyes opened wide, the whites gleaming, but his expression did not change.

'I have someone . . . there is a man, his name is Frederick. He is tall, dark-haired, a lot of dark hair. He tosses it aside all the time – ' He jerked his head backwards. 'He has a strong face, but gentle eyes . . . he moves down in this direction . . . is there anyone who recognizes him?'

The wide white eyes turned in their direction, and he flung out a pointing arm; Beth drew closer to Queston, and he slipped his arm round her. He watched Warren sceptically, feeling contempt at the rustle of excitement that quickened the air round them. On their left, a dozen rows ahead, a young woman rose to her feet: 'I know him,' she called. 'It's my husband.' Her voice shook.

Warren's gaze moved quickly to her. 'Ah yes, he's coming to stand beside you, my dear . . . he's on your right hand . . . he's running his hand down your hair . . . '

The girl had long fair hair, straggling loose over her shoulders. She said faintly: 'O yes – he used to do that.' She stood as if all her body was tingling, gazing at Warren in agonized hope. The heads craned closer to see her.

Warren stretched out his hand dramatically. 'Your name is Joan, I think . . . ' She nodded. 'He brings you great love, he tells you not to grieve, that he is always at your side as he is now . . . I have a feeling of something cut off suddenly, I think he died young, in an accident . . . he tells you that he is very happy, that you must be happy as well, live in the place where you were together and he will often speak to you through those like our brother. Only you must stay contented in your home . . . ' Warren let out a long breath and bent his head; the girl said tearfully: 'O thank you, thank you.' She sat down; but still upright, gazing, her face

shining up at him. Queston quivered with distaste and rage.

But Warren was erect again, half-shouting, pointing away from them into the depths of a second chamber of the three-armed hall.

'The name Turville, I have a Turville – '

They heard a woman's voice, faintly: 'Yes. O yes.'

He called: 'Your husband is here, he is a very erect gentleman, military . . . what is this I see . . . yes, he has a white moustache and it may be the light round his head, but I think he has white hair. He has only one arm . . . he can't give it to me very well because he is not conversant with the manner of communication, but he sends you his love . . . there are many whom you know on the other side, there is great love towards you, I feel it. He tells you to be content with your life, he says he is helping you in a decision you have to make . . . peace to you . . . '

The women were tense now with eagerness; the whole crowd murmurous and excited; and Queston thought that the music was growing, filling the pauses, heightening the emotional, smouldering air. Warren had swung round again, the sweat gleaming on his forehead; he was speaking more quickly now, pointing down at the rows in front of him.

'You, my dear, I have your father to come to you . . . a short elderly gentleman who passed over some years ago . . . I think he is your father – '

'It's him, yes – ' The voice was barely audible.

'He says you have been strong, you understand the need to cope with the difficulties we have now, your strength is a great joy to him. He shows me some papers . . . he left his papers in bad order, and you dealt with them. He is proud of you, he sends you his love . . .'

'Thank you – ' The voice broke, but the spell moved away from it; Warren had jerked suddenly, twice, a quiver running over all his heavy body and twitching his face into an idiot gape. He crouched slightly, clutching the chair. The music shrilled softly, a high note of strings, and down again. A woman near Queston moaned: 'Peter. O Peter my love, come back – ' The luminous blue glow over the centre of

the room, as he strained to see, suddenly cut at his eyes as if it drove into his head, and he blinked and ducked.

Then the voice was there. He saw Warren's mouth moving, as he looked up, and he saw the sagging clefts of age in the man's face, but the voice was the high clear tone of a small child's.

'Mummie. Mummie, it's Colin. Mummie, you were cross with me, don't be cross. I didn't mean to run out, I didn't know what would happen.' In some part of the darkness, beyond the platform, a woman sobbed.

'Don't cry, Mummie,' the child's voice said. 'I'm very happy. I'm always at home with you. You kept my toys for me . . . stay at home with me. I'm very happy . . .' The voice died with a gurgle; Warren doubled up as if he had been struck, and fell sideways over his chair, clasping its back with both arms, gasping, each long breath a moan: 'Aaaaaah . . . aaaaaah . . . aaaaaah . . .' Then his head jerked up again, and the eyes were wide and white, the pupils rolled up invisible; his face twitched and grimaced and seemed to change, the cheeks hollower, the nose and chin more pointed. He opened his mouth, and the voice that came was a man's voice but not his own; thinner, rasping, with the Gloucestershire vowels clear and marked. And he spoke, Queston saw, to the big woman beside him where she had been sitting all the time, an indistinct black shape on the edge of the platform, outside the glow of the strange blue pool of light. The music, from its hidden source, reached an end just as he spoke, and the thin voice husked out electrifying in the sudden silence.

'Daphne,' it said. 'Take care. It's coming. *Take care* – '

They never knew if it would have said more. The big woman sprang to her feet, immensely appearing in the light. Her face was brilliant with a kind of ecstasy; as she leapt up, the music rang out into the air again, a new music, throbbing and darkly triumphant. Above it she cried out, taking Warren by the shoulders, staring out over the crowded hall: 'Help him now – he needs the force of our minds and hearts and then he can tell us. The revelation can come to us, the

Guild can know its purpose. Help him now, in the work for which he came, call on his gift – '

The women's voices rose round her own, in a diffuse babel of shrieks and cries from every part of the triple hall; Queston heard Mary scream: 'Come! Come!' and saw her oblivious of him or anyone near her, gazing up, her hands clenched, her face caught in a frenzied mask of hope and lust. Staring round him wildly he saw every face frozen in the same passion of eagerness, a fearful tide unleashed through the place as if a restraining cord had been cut. The air was hot, oppressive, the noise beat on him as if it were one with the heat. He saw Warren, half-standing half-conscious, jerking like a marionette.

Oakley said softly: 'Christ! This isn't in the book – what the hell are they up to?'

Then there was a weight suddenly against him, and Beth slumped into his arms. He glimpsed her white face, and struggled to keep her on her feet; Oakley moved forward swiftly to help. 'Outside. Quick.' They moved away down the long aisle, half-dragging her; every face and mind in the room was bent utterly on Warren, and no head turned as they struggled by. Queston was urgent for escape; quivering in the room he could feel something more than the great sexual tide unleashed in the panting crowd of women; something like the helpless knowledge of nightmare, in pursuit. He felt cool air on his face as they reached the entrance to the room; Beth spluttered and moved, and they paused. He supported her as Oakley reached for the door. The fantastic noise of the women gripped him with revulsion; the baying of harpies, he thought. And then it changed.

The voice of the crowd took a long shuddering breath, a sound so horribly compelling that involuntarily they looked back. On the platform, in the shaft of blue light more weird and luminous now from their greater distance, Warren was writhing on the ground. The big woman was no longer there. Alone, the man's body thrashed and arched, sweeping the chair from the platform with a crash; he uttered short, throaty cries, his limbs and trunk contorting and leaping

in an obscene parody of physical love. The women were motionless now, taut and gasping, and a susurration from them like the blowing of dry leaves. In the air the music throbbed and wailed. Warren screamed shrilly: 'No! No!' in a way that Queston had heard before.

Then his back arched up from the ground in a great leaping curve impossible for any conscious man; he slumped back again to lie inert, and from his throat they heard a voice, harsh, tremendous, inhuman. It snarled out, booming in every corner of the hollowed underground hall; it was not real, Queston thought in disbelief; no voice could contain that force, the cold, mocking triumph, the viciousness, the size. Not Warren's voice, or any man's.

'You bloody fools,' it said, in a thundering, icy laughter. 'You stupid, bloody fools. What do you think you – what do you think – ' It ran off into gibberish, and then exploded into a series of appalling disjointed obscenities, laughing all the while; and all the while Warren, from whose unconscious throat it came, lay motionless on the floor.

Then it howled like an animal, and the sense was back again. 'Stupid. Stupid. You think you call. You dare to call. You shall see what you call you shall see what you call you shall see what you call – '

The words thumped evenly out, over and over again, like a faulty gramophone, in the relentless huge snarl. Queston pulled himself into movement; it was like shaking off a heavy restraining hand. He saw Beth and the journalist listening, staring, with the old look of abject attentiveness that always so horrified him.

'Quick,' he said. 'Quick.'

They went together out of the door, pushing it shut behind them; but the cacophony still followed them along the echoing corridor towards the surface, until they stood between the great open doors at the entrance, breathing the cool night.

Then they heard a new sound. A long, low rumbling came from inside the shelter; a deep ominous note that made them scramble instinctively away, up the long ramp, running against the thrust of the slope, with all the time the

noise growing and growling, and muffling a faint sound of screams from within so that afterwards Queston wondered if he had heard them at all. When they were clear they stood gasping, in an open street looking back to the lamplit entrance of the shelter, with the bulk of the cathedral rearing up over it blacker than the black sky.

And in that moment Queston was instantly back in another place, another time, under hot sun and a white sky. He looked at the entrance, through the heavy doors, and he saw a small cloud of dust puff out of its mouth like smoke from a gun barrel. And hang, drifting. Then the ground shivered under their feet, and the long subterranean roar burst out after the dust, and it seemed impossible that the drifting mist should not be scattered by the noise. But still it hung in the air while they saw, terribly, the long dark stretch of grass above the shelter gently slip and slump and fall to leave a great gaping pit. It was not possible, and they watched without belief.

But Oakley was looking farther; straining to see into the darkness beyond. Suddenly he swung round and grabbed at them to pull them away.

'Get out, quick! Along the wall, in the open. The cathedral's going!'

They ran desperately through streets, round corners, flinching once as a chimney pot crashed to the ground a second after they passed. Lights were flicking on in some of the houses, and children's voices calling in fear. Round the third corner Oakley stumbled to a halt, in the open paved stretch where two roads met at the city gate. The roar behind them had grown, following, and as they paused there, panting for breath, they saw incredulously the towering bulk of the cathedral sway and lurch against the dim dark sky.

The thundering grew to a high screaming note as if the earth itself had split, and among shell-fire crashes of falling brick the great tower slowly toppled over and down, burying the streets where they had stood moments before. At the same time the city wall, twenty yards from their feet cracked and shuddered and keeled over outwards as if it

were paper blown by the wind. The street-lamps flickered and went out. They felt again the gentle, awful ripple of the earth beneath them, and in the faint light left by the moon Queston saw the long black arm of an open fissure, running out from the cathedral close to the wall. It opened narrow jaws as he watched, and then closed; and the road buckled and bulged over the place where it had been. Falling masonry still rumbled and crashed unseen in the town.

He heard Beth's voice beside him, high with fear.

'Where can we go?'

'Outside. Nothing's worse than this. Where's Oakley?'

'Here.'

'Come on then. Carefully. Watch where you tread.'

They scrambled over the fallen wall and out on to the road, with the recklessness of despair. For a hundred yards the way was clear, and they did not turn to look at the wailing chaos behind their backs.

Then Queston sensed that some obstruction lay ahead. He called out in warning, stopped, and reached for Beth; but it was too late. The blinding white of a spotlight flashed into his eyes, and there were suddenly dark running, shouting figures all around. Hands seized him; he heard Beth scream, and struggled fiercely, lashing out with his feet. One heel connected hard with bone; a man gave an agonized, gulping gasp, and he felt savage satisfaction bubble within him.

Then there was the crash of a blow on the back of his head, brilliant light behind his eyes; and the darkness came in.

Part Four

Darkness, and the noise of silence; an utter confusion, as if he hung between heaven and earth and outside time. And then he was awake. He was lying on a bed, with blankets rough against his chin. The back of his head ached; his mouth was stale. He tried to open his eyes, and found that they were already open. Panic rushed into him, and he remembered the earthquake, and he knew that it had come again while he slept, and buried him alive.

He jerked the bedclothes away, wincing at a quick pain in his upper arm; swung his legs off the bed and found his feet on the crisp fur of carpet. With the darkness driving in on him, he felt for a wall behind the bed-head with his left hand; touched one, followed it round, cursing as he crashed against an invisible chair. Short walls, a small room. A window – he saw a faint chink of light as he gripped the sill, and felt relief surge in over the creeping fear that he was blind. But the window was shuttered outside the glass, and would not open. Round farther to the right, along the wall – and in the next wall, a door. He gripped the handle, knew that his knees were unsteady, did not know whether the shaking came from fear or sleep. He opened the door.

The glare of daylight struck at his eyes, and as he blinked and staggered senses and memory came fully back in a rush: Gloucester, the medium possessed by a voice; the women, thunder, and shrieking . . . and Beth. He called out suddenly: 'Beth!'

He came forward into the room, and saw that he was wearing pyjamas. He felt his chin, and it was smooth. He looked round, puzzled. The room was large. No one was

there. It held a heavy sideboard, three easy chairs, vast and sagging; a table, chairs, a lamp. Windows in the far wall, and through them bare treetops and a blue sky; he crossed the room quickly and saw below him a wide sanded road bordered by a line of great trees, silent, empty, and beyond it a wide green field. He turned back again.

'Beth?'

There were two other doors; he tried one, and it was locked. Panic began to rise again. He ran to the other door, opposite the room where he had slept, and heard a small noise from inside. In quick hope he turned the handle; and the light followed him into another tiny dark bedroom as cramped and shuttered as the first; and he saw the fair head of the journalist Oakley snoring in slack-mouthed sleep on the pillow.

He wanted desperately to find Beth, to know that she was safe.

'Oakley!'

The man still snored: a throbbing, animal sound. Queston pulled back the bedclothes and shook him by the shoulder. Oakley gurgled, groaned, and jerked away suddenly clutching at his arm. 'Ow!' He opened his eyes, and gazed resentfully at Queston. 'Jesus Christ,' he said. 'Don't do that.'

Queston looked at him thoughtfully. 'Funny – ' He rolled up his own sleeve and went back into the brightness of the big room to study his arm. Where the flesh was tender there was a faint redness, and a minute dark spot.

Queston padded after him in dark-blue pyjamas; he lurched unsteadily, and clutched at the wall. 'Someone's given us a jab. Pretty ham-fisted, too. How long have we been out? Where the hell are we, anyway?' He shambled over to the window and stood looking out. 'High up.' The American accent gave his voice a laconic flatness. He scratched his head, and yawned.

'It reminds me of something – ' Queston stared round the room, frowning, then shrugged. 'D'you know Gloucester well?'

Oakley said, still looking out: 'I do know there isn't a field inside the city limit.'

Queston looked up sharply. 'Then where – ?' He shivered. 'God, it's cold.' He went back into the bedroom, ripped the blankets from the bed, and came back wrapping one round his shoulders. He tossed the other two to Oakley. 'Here. We don't seem to have any clothes.'

'What!' Oakley turned quickly, the pyjamas flapping round his thin shoulders; with his pale face and hair he looked like a wiry white bird. He shot into the bedroom and came back looking concerned. 'God dammit, they've got my notebook.'

'Is that bad?'

'It won't do me any good, if they can decipher it.'

Queston's head spurted with pain; he fingered it tenderly. 'They were on the road . . . '

'I saw you go down. Then someone slugged me.'

'Did you see Beth?'

'Struggling – someone had hold of her. Don't know if they hit her.'

Queston stood very still. Then he rushed at the locked door and crashed at it with his fists. 'Hey!' he shouted. 'Hey!'

'Don't worry,' Oakley said flatly, but with compassion. 'They can see us O.K.'

'See us?' He let his hands drop, and clutched the blanket round him, feeling ridiculous. A middle-aged man in pyjamas, banging on a door.

'The Ministry are very efficient,' Oakley said. His bright pale eyes flicked round the room. 'They showed me this game once, when they thought I was for them. A picture, usually. Or a ventilator.' There were three large murky pictures on the walls, dismal landscapes in oils; he went from one to the other, peering closely. At the third he exclaimed in triumph, and pulled it down. The picture cracked and creaked and came away, revealing a network of wires and three dark protuberances jutting from a cavity in the wall. Queston blinked.

'Three lenses,' Oakley said. 'Each angled slightly, to give a good field. The glass on the picture is whole, see? But three holes behind it where these babies fitted in to the landscape – it's such a god-awful picture you wouldn't notice. And the boys just sit at the other end waiting for us to wake up. The mike's probably built in. Stand clear a minute.'

He dragged a chair across and clambered on to it, with the picture in his arms; then thrust his face forward at the lenses with an enormous imbecilic grin. 'Bye-bye,' he said sweetly, flapping the fingers of one hand. Then he raised the picture at right angles to the wall and smashed at them savagely with a corner of the heavy frame, again and again, until glass splintered and metal snapped and wires hung loose. He climbed down, panting, and grinned at Queston; his hair was standing up in tufts, and he looked like a schoolboy after a dormitory fight. 'I guess we'll have visitors soon.'

'I suppose it was the Ministry?'

'Who else?'

'I don't know . . . ' Queston wandered about uneasily. 'Has it occurred to you how easy it would be, with the whole country hypnotized, for a detached outsider to come in and take over control?'

Oakley stared at him, and grinned mockingly. 'I suppose you mean the Soviets?'

'Well – '

'Can you really imagine them bothering, after all that?'

'After all what?'

'Jesus,' Oakley said, and his smile widened, tilting his dark eyebrows up towards the pale hair. 'What were you doing before Gloucester?'

'We were on our own, for a couple of months. And I was roaming around alone for about six weeks before that.' He ached for Beth again, and looked at the locked door. 'And before that, two years.'

'You were tucked away writing for two years?'

'Yes.'

'But you must have had some idea of what was going on in Britain.'

'Well –' Queston said, half-way between irritation and defensiveness. 'I knew Mandrake was getting a lot of power. Obviously he wasn't altogether popular, because when I first saw him someone had just tried to knock him off. That was at Kennedy. I never did find out who it was.' He stopped, remembering the shout: Murderer! 'I met him then, and he tried to get me to work for the Ministry. I said no, but it wasn't because I thought there was anything sinister about him. I just didn't want to be at all involved in politics . . . And the book wasn't written about him, or about Britain. I didn't care much what was happening here. All my ideas had grown out of the cave people, and that Tristan volcano back in 1962 – things where you got the earth's physical violence tied in with a community who had really fierce bonds with the place where they lived.'

'And all that came out of that for you was concern over the earth's basic motive,' Oakley said bitterly. 'The anti-bomb bit. The reasons why it would want to destroy us, and the methods it could use if it chose to. You just wanted to give us a warning for the future. You never once stopped to watch those methods being neatly built up all round you, ready for use.'

'Was it so obvious?'

'Jesus,' Oakley said. 'What a privilege. Showing the author of *Time Will Say Nothing* just how beautifully he was on the ball.' He swung his blanket round him like a toga, and began walking up and down the room, treading delicately round the pieces of broken glass. 'No, it wasn't obvious to us. But it would have been obvious as all hell to you, with those ideas bubbling in your head. When all this so-called preservation started. When things like the Civic Trust and the National Parks Commission got merged into what began as a double Ministry of Housing and Transport, and ended as the Ministry of Planning. When strange things started happening to people on mountains, or at sea, only never hit the headlines because those were too much occu-

pied with the screwy way Britain was backing off from the United States. That is, till one of the strange things happened to the Prime Minister, and he was killed in an accident on Scafell, and Mandrake took over.'

'Good God,' Queston said. 'I didn't know Mandrake was Prime Minister.'

Oakley stopped pacing, and swung round on him. 'Of course you didn't! You were in hibernation, turning out your gentle academic tome, every detail four times digested.'

'I suppose you'd have had me blast a lot of hot air through the press instead. Big black headlines and half the facts wrong. I'm not a journalist, Mr Oakley.'

'You're a human being. And an exceptional one. And you know it. Damn it, Queston, you knew something the whole world should have had shouted at it, even if everyone thought you were crazy. And instead of that you sat in a closet and wrote your little book, and it's a damn good book, and it's too damn late.'

'If it hadn't been doctored into a joke – '

'Even without that it would have been too late. Things had begun to move well before you went into retreat. Out in the great big world of real people. Things like the Guild of Women, and the Ministry police – wardens, they called them at first. Traffic wardens, remember? Hundreds of them were recruited for all the so-called preserved cities, ostensibly to keep the streets clear. Then Mandrake really got going, I think, when the federal Europe treaty was signed. That's when he decided, God help him, that if there were going to be four major armed camps to distrust, the only hope for Britain was to turn herself into some kind of isolated power-house, and presumably reconquer the world that way... I dunno. The man's as mad as a hatter, of course. But that's when things properly began here: the clamp-down on immigration, the great home-production drive, all the jingo-ist boloney about guarding thine own. People were so scared by the 1970 Berlin rumpus that he had them on a plate – for just long enough. If you'd been here you'd know what I mean. It really did look then as if there were

going to be a war, a completely hopeless war. He got them throbbing with the love of the homeland the way they hadn't since 1940. And that, I guess, is when what your book calls the Intelligence began to take over.'

Behind his head, somewhere on the wall outside, Queston heard wood-pigeons burbling. Then he heard footsteps faintly outside the door, feet on wooden stairs ringing hollow. They passed the door without pausing, and went away, and he made no move.

Oakley's quiet voice went on: 'I used to sit up in the Commons gallery shivering, watching all those poor mutts cheering Mandrake as if he were the Messiah. The Lobby men were almost as bad, with their soft soap. That was before the emergency closed all the papers down. The foreign pressmen had already left, of course, only the agencies could get news out of Britain – and they had to have besotted natives sending it. I nearly got flung out, but because I'm a British national they decided in the end that I could stay.'

'You're British?'

'Sure. I was born in London – father British, mother American. We went to the States when I was three. I didn't come back until after I went into newspapers and started roaming around. But my dad was one of those homeland buffs, standing up when they played *My Country 'Tis of Thee*, and all. Mandrake would have loved him. So I always kept my British passport. I don't belong here. I guess I don't belong anywhere. But it was enough to persuade the immigration boys to let me stay on. Mind you, whether they will now – '

He stopped.

'Go on,' Queston said. 'Go on filling me in.'

Oakley shrugged. 'There's only two things worth the telling. I'm as much in the dark as you are – who knows what this country's like outside this room, now? The only point is that Mandrake, all on his little lonesome, made the whole goddam nation think it was safe when in fact he'd made it as vulnerable as if the intelligence had been dictating every last word to him. He gave everyone such a superstructure

of mistrust and isolationism that the actual take-over went like clockwork. Those regional councils of his, with their network of fall-out shelters and emergency food distribution plans – it was all terribly hush-hush' – he made the phrase a sneer, in a clipped Noel Coward accent – 'but it made all the old U.S. air-raid precautions look like peanuts. Only you, tucked away, you never saw one single damn thing of that.'

Queston sat very still. At length he said: 'Two things.'

'What?' Oakley looked tired. His face was pinched, and his nose red; the room was full of sunshine, but very cold.

'You said there were two things left worth the telling.'

'So I did.' He picked up a sliver of glass from the floor and stood turning it gently in his fingers. 'The second thing, my old hermit,' he said, 'was the end of the world.' Suddenly he flung the piece of glass into the fireplace and looked up. 'There had to be something to light the fuse. Mandrake had prepared the Intelligence its channel – there had to be something to blow a hole so that it could get through. I'm a poor simple reporter, Queston, I don't understand your equation between mental and physical energy. I don't understand how one can merge into the other, and back again. All I know is that on the day that every last one of the official evacuations had been finished in this country, and Mandrake had everyone back to his emotional roots – on that day something happened outside. The Government and the official news-sheet announced that nuclear war had broken out. The Soviet Union, China and the United States, they said – *all three*, mark you, and everyone swallowed it – had crippled each other in one great big brief blast. They'd known this was going to happen, they said, and that was why they'd benevolently tucked everyone up safe in his little emergency hole. There wouldn't be any trouble for Britain thanks to its isolation, they said; everyone was going to be just wonderfully safe, these had been nice clean bombs without any fall-out, all we had to do was sit and exist and do what we were told . . . Well, they were right in one thing. There was a blast all right. As a matter of fact there were two. I was in London then, just before the police had so politely

removed me outside the boundary, and I talked to a man I knew at the university labs. Not one single damn piece of news of any kind was coming in from the outside world by then – the Ministry jams all radio reception beyond the local wavelengths. All my guy knew was that there had been two god-almighty shocks simultaneously from two directions – one somewhere in Central Asia, and one on the eastern seaboard of the United States. And whatever they were, they made the most fantastic jump on the seismograph needles that there's ever been here. He said that in some places the thing could even be felt.'

'When?' But already Queston knew: seeing again the flicker of a candle, and the white, strained face of the schoolmaster Lindsey in the dim light.

'Three months ago. Thirteen weeks. The day Britain went back to its roots.'

'There were no bombs,' Queston said softly. 'That was the trigger. A trigger for Tyrannosaurus. And Mandrake must have known, or he would never have gone to such trouble to discredit my book. For God's sake, what's he trying to do?'

'Ask his henchmen.' Oakley's gaze was turned towards the door, and Queston heard the sound of the key in the lock. And then James Thorp-Gudgeon stood in the open doorway, smiling at them.

'For Christ's sake, James, stop playing this game of the shuttered imbecile don and tell me what they've done with her. I don't want to know anything about your blasted Ministry, I just want to know where she is.'

'She's safe enough.'

'But where?'

'Look,' Thorp-Gudgeon said, reproach on his fat face. 'You've frightened that squirrel away. Red, did you notice? The indigenous species. They appear to have returned in some numbers.' They were walking through Magdalen Deer Park, branches dripping overhead in the dank after-

noon, and the deer huddled in distant grey groups. A squirrel scuttered up a tree. Thorp-Gudgeon said blandly: 'She's in one of the women's colleges. Somerville, I believe. That place with the monstrous chapel.'

'I've got to see her.'

'All in good time. Don't distress yourself, David. She's being very well looked after. They must be glad of someone to talk to, poor dears. Women play little part in the life of the university now, thank God.'

'You never did care for women much, did you?' Queston said offensively.

The older man looked at him for a moment, and he felt a quiver of distaste at the flabby chin welling under the deep-curved mouth: a softness to the face, and behind the softness an unpleasantness, and something more. Thorp-Gudgeon smiled at him. 'No,' he said.

They came to Addison's Walk, past dull winter bushes in the neat bleak flower-beds, and through the cloistered main quadrangle. Thorp-Gudgeon said, in a new, flat tone as if he were reciting: 'You will see your little girl friend this evening. You have an appointment. Both of you. I suppose you realize now why this place suffers you to be here, and what this place has become.'

'A museum, if you ask me. The priceless university of Oxford. Our national heritage.'

'Our national capital.'

'What!'

'Save your astonishment for larger things. It's happened before. Have you forgotten the ill-fated Charles? Not that I find him a particularly apt precursor of the Minister. Of course everything is centred here. It was obvious from the beginning. The Minister made Oxford his nerve-centre long ago. We were called the home of lost causes – we are the home now of a force that is changing the world.' His voice rose shrill in the hollow cloister; his small eyes glittered; he glared at Queston in a kind of challenge as they turned towards the arch out of the quiet, darkening quadrangle.

Queston paused, forcing him to stop, and looked back at

the hooped grey walls, with their small stone heads carved to gaze in frozen laughing malice out into infinity. He said: 'Someone told me a story here once. About Dr Ellerton.'

'Ellerton?' Thorp-Gudgeon said indifferently.

'When he was President of Magdalen. Funny I should remember it now, James. A sculptor was making those gargoyles, and an undergraduate bribed him to give one of them Ellerton's face. When Ellerton found out, he was livid, and he forced the sculptor to hack bits off the face to destroy the likeness. The ruined face hung there for years. Then when Ellerton was a very old man, he found to his terror that he and the gargoyle were identical again.'

Inside the great gates that sealed off the end of the High Street at Magdalen Plain, a small boy was dropping stones into the river from the parapet of Magdalen Bridge. A swan glided out from under the bridge. The small boy threw a stone at the swan. Queston said, as they watched: 'There's the one kind of mind you can't trap into your insane loyalties. That's my hope for this perverted world of yours. So long as he has a bridge to throw stones from, don't tell me he gives a damn where that bridge is. Or who crosses it.'

Thorp-Gudgeon smiled. He moved up behind the small boy, and stood there. Presently he said softly: 'What's your name?'

'John,' the child said readily, bending for another stone. Then he straightened, and Queston felt sick with remembering as he saw the old spellbound look of listening to someone not present, the half-attention. 'John,' the boy said. The voice was rounded, Oxfordshire: he said: 'Jarn.'

'What bridge is this, John?'

'Magdalen Bridge,' the boy said.

Thorp-Gudgeon's voice was soft, coaxing. 'Who does it belong to?'

'Oxford. All of us, and Oxford.'

'And you? Who do you belong to?'

'Oxford, of course.' The boy looked up at Magdalen Tower. He smiled; a strange, adult, complacent smile. 'Oxford.'

'Those stones you're throwing – '

The boy looked like a boy again, alert, defensive. 'It's only a bird.'

'O yes. But the stones. They come from the bridge. They're part of Oxford. You're hurting Oxford.'

Queston looked with contempt at Thorp-Gudgeon's podgy, stooping form as he cooed insistently at the boy. He waited for the clear laughter, the derision. But the boy flinched his face clouded with alarm and horror and remorse; he said: 'Oh. Oh. Oh,' and looked down at the rough road-pebble in his hand. He bent down, crouching, and put the stone gently down in the angle between pavement and parapet.

He did not get up again. He stayed there, crouching, uttering small soft noises like an animal whimpering in sorrow or pain, patting incessantly with both hands at the pavement and the road. They were not the movements of a child, or of consciousness; they were an abasement, ancient and horrifying.

Staring, appalled, Queston backed away. He said nothing as Thorp-Gudgeon joined him, smiling quietly; they walked away, up the High Street, towards the Oxford where people walked furtively, hurriedly through the streets, and men in the black uniform of the Ministry police stood in groups on the corners. But when he looked back, once, over his shoulder into the twilight, he saw the boy still bowed there, bobbing, offering desperate penance to the ground.

As in Gloucester, he could not feel the earth, and he thought it strange. But gradually that day he sensed something in the walls and the people and the place that he thought he understood. He said to Thorp-Gudgeon: 'You're afraid. You're all afraid. You lit a fire, and now you know your house is going to burn down. You're afraid.'

'Rubbish,' said Thorp-Gudgeon. 'I've read your ridiculous book. Very entertaining. But upside-down.'

'So everything is under control?'

'Of course it is.' The podgy don had all the arrogance of the faithful. 'The Ministry has more power than you can possibly realize.'

'What about the earthquake in Gloucester?'

'Rumours. It wasn't an earthquake. An earthquake in Britain?'

'I was there, James.'

'It wasn't an earthquake. How could it have been? That great shelter collapsed. A criminal place to put it, they should have known the danger.'

'The cathedral came down, James. I was there.'

'You were flustered. The cathedral is still standing. Its foundations were weakened by that absurd tunnelling, and part of the tower fell. That was all.'

'*You weren't there.*' He began to wonder if his reason were slipping from him.

'No,' Thorp-Gudgeon said. 'But the Minister's observers were. That woman in charge of the Gloucester Guild had been getting above herself for some time.'

Queston's mind tumbled into a thousand broken images of a thousand different moments. The Minister, Mandrake; Mandrake, the Minister: always the name was there, haunting, all the way through. What was he? Always there. Always influencing. Get with child a mandrake root . . . all strange wonders that befell thee . . . shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth, that living mortals, hearing them, run mad . . .

He said, keeping his voice level: 'All right, then. What about that boy? The boy on the bridge?'

'I thought that would impress you,' Thorp-Gudgeon said smugly.

'But you can remember that, and still tell me you have this thing under control? James, you and I watched a normal child turn suddenly insane.'

Thorp-Gudgeon laughed. 'Possibly. But an induced in-

sanity, my dear boy – conditioning, suggestibility. You remember *Brave New World*? A far-fetched little work – like yours, now I come to think of it, in some ways. But the methods are similar. Our people don't say: "I'm so glad I'm a beta," – they say, "I'm so glad my home's in Oxford." Or Birmingham, or Chipping Sodbury. In fact, of course, they don't say anything at all. Catch-phrases were needed only in the beginning.'

'Guard thine own. Home is where your heart is . . . '

'There, you noticed. You weren't affected, of course, the little rolling stone – ' His tone was suddenly vicious, then matter-of-fact again. 'The phrases varied in, say, Scotland and Sussex, but the result was the same. Surprising how alike the reactions of hysterical and phlegmatic races turn out to be, in the end. But make no mistake, David, this is our own accomplishment. Civilization is being saved, not destroyed. You will see, in the end. We are the masters.'

Queston said: 'Then why should you have bothered with my ideas? Why bother to castrate my book? Why have I been hounded from the beginning? And why bring me here?'

'The Minister wanted you. You don't acknowledge us as masters. You, or your journalist friend. Such men are rare now, David.' He smiled again. 'Such men are dangerous.'

They walked through the empty streets, through darkness lit only at long intervals by a few dim lamps, until they stood at Carfax in the centre of the city, where four deserted roads met; while the tower clock over their heads chimed out its cracked tune of the hour, and all over Oxford he heard the clanging, ringing, scattered clocks join in, and over them all the six long deep strokes of Tom. When all the metal voices died away, he heard footsteps ringing faintly, gradually nearer, from the Cornmarket. He wondered why he did not move, did not run. Thorp-Gudgeon stood a short round shadow at his side. The footsteps grew louder.

Two figures came round the corner, and he saw that they were Oakley and Beth alone.

'David!'

She ran to him, and flung her arms round his waist, pressing her cheek into his shoulder. He felt her shaking, and held her close, and kissed her hair. 'Thank God. Are you all right? Have they hurt you?'

She murmured inaudibly, still clutching him. Oakley said, behind her: 'She's been in a woman's college somewhere. I think they treated her O.K. My guy made me wait down the road there till a woman brought her up. Cosy old dame, seemed quite attached to her. They said we'd find you here, and vanished. They're crazy, the lot of them. I've been locked up in some morgue of a college all day. What about you?'

Thorp-Gudgeon moved forward; he said silkily: 'I think it's time we made a move.'

'Ah!' Oakley's pale head gleamed in the darkness. 'Old Pangloss is still with us, is he? When do I get my notebook back, friend?'

'You're a little late,' Thorp-Gudgeon said obscurely.

They followed him down the High Street; no cars passed, no people, no movement anywhere. Queston could think of nothing but Beth at his side; he gripped her hand fiercely, and to have her there sent everything that had happened back into the shadows, turned fear into unreality. He did not even care very much where they were going, or why. He noticed that Thorp-Gudgeon had put on the gown that he had been carrying in a loose black bundle under his arm. Half-way down the street two other men, in gowns and squares, suddenly turned out of a side road with a small marching squad of armed Ministry police. Thorp-Gudgeon bowed slightly as they passed, but said nothing.

'The watch is out,' Oakley said sardonically.

Thorp-Gudgeon stopped them at a great pair of black gates over broad steps, and rang a bell. It clanged tinnily inside.

'University College,' he said casually. 'The oldest in the university, by some accounts. Balliol has a more substantial

claim, but the Minister comes of those who believe Alfred created the spirit of this place in A.D. 872.'

Queston said: 'Thanks very much.'

Oakley clasped his hands. 'Gee, Prof!'

Beth was recovered enough to join in. 'Fancy!' she said, and giggled.

Thorp-Gudgeon turned contemptuously, and put his hand a second time to the bell. A small door swung open suddenly in the great gate, and they went inside.

'Lambs to the slaughter,' Oakley said softly. 'Can't we make a run for it?'

'No. Try.'

A curious spasm crossed the journalist's face, a confusion of effort, surprise and alarm. 'No more we can. What is it?'

The porter said: 'Good evening, Mr Thorp-Gudgeon, sir. You know the way.' He made a strange, ducking little obeisance.

Queston nerved himself for astonishment, for the parade of force and fear that must surround Mandrake. But the lodge was empty. He was puzzled; their reception must be waiting somewhere else. He thought of the black-uniformed men marching in the street.

There was no one. Thorp-Gudgeon led them along one side of the dark quadrangle, and turned into a cloister. From dark to blacker dark; Queston could not see where to tread. Beth gasped suddenly, and clutched at him, and he saw a glistening figure lying on a raised slab before them, motionless, and naked. Thorp-Gudgeon chuckled maliciously in the darkness. 'The poet Shelley,' he said. 'One of the university's less distinguished sons. He was sent down.'

Then he opened a door, and light flowed out over them, and they went dreamlike down a flight of steps into a long, low room that swamped Queston instantly in the helpless knowledge of fantasy.

He saw wires, maps, strange glass screens set in the uneven stone walls, as if the headquarters of some impossible mechanical war had been built into a cave; but all these things he saw only in a half-glance, because he was looking beyond

them, over thick carpets and heavy armchairs, through air smelling faintly of leather and smoke, to the man alone in the room.

He saw a young man, dark-haired, the face obscured, sitting reading in an armchair at the far end of the room, a curl of smoke rising blue-grey into the light over his head. He wondered vaguely what an undergraduate was doing there. The moment struck at him, and always afterwards he found himself strangely remembering it; the sudden familiar calm, and the sense of normality after months of a mad world.

'Good evening, sir,' Thorp-Gudgeon said.

The young man threw down his book and flicked upright, coming swiftly towards them; a young man's stride, a young man's smooth jaw. He said, with an astonishing, winning smile, 'Good evening, Queston. It's been too long since we met. How do you do, Miss Summers, Mr Oakley. My name is Mandrake.'

The others had gone. 'I shan't keep you long, Miss Summers,' Mandrake said to Beth, with the same brilliant smile; and she had gone out looking anxiously back, but without protest.

Queston stood there, lost, speechless. Somewhere in the room he heard a wavering buzz like a trapped wasp. 'Excuse me a moment,' Mandrake said.

He turned; and in the moment that he turned, as the light fell clear on his jaw and neck, Queston saw something that almost made him howl with relief. The spell broke. The man was not young at all; his skin folded dry into fine creases when he bent or turned his head, and beneath the deceptive smoothness it was worn and dark. As he crossed the room with his curious springing stride the first impression of boyishness vanished; there was a frightening suppressed vitality there, but not youth.

As he thought about it, this second enigma seemed to Queston more subtly horrifying even than the first.

Mandrake disappeared behind a high wooden screen at

the end of the room; the buzzing stopped, and his voice murmured unintelligibly. Queston looked round at the disturbing room. Its rough-plastered stone walls were painted a livid green; one, at the far end, was completely covered by a vast map of the British Isles, studded with red pins and networked with heavy black lines. The pins obviously marked towns; but the lines seemed to him to make no sense at all.

In the long wall opposite him two square brick pillars reached from floor to ceiling; the bricks glared rough and red, with no attempt made to conceal them. There were no windows anywhere; but between the pillars, two bulbous television screens and a complex mass of dials and knobs and lights. A green light began flashing as he watched. He was reminded of the videophones he had seen in America; but this was far more complicated.

Then he felt himself watched, and turned round. Mandrake had emerged from behind the screen; he said, smiling: 'Toys. Immoment toys. They become more necessary, unfortunately, as their efficiency grows less. But do come and sit down. I am so sorry. Was it Herodotus who said: "The Gods are always waiting"?'

'I was never a classicist,' Queston said shortly. He moved across the room and sat warily in one of the big, enveloping armchairs.

Mandrake went to a table. 'Drink?'

'Thank you.'

'What will you have? Sherry, whisky, gin, vodka?'

'Whisky,' Queston said desperately; with every moment his sense of reality was slipping farther away. Mandrake clinked bottles deftly, a tall, dark-suited mystery. Everyone in Oxford seemed remarkably well-tailored. He glanced down wryly at his own fraying jacket and trousers, and thought of the heavy homespun of the Gloucester women.

The whisky was a mistake; the first gulp brought his self-possession warming back, but the smell of it brought associations of too many other things, and the spell broke, and sitting there he knew again beyond everything that he was

in a world gone mad, and that this man was the centre of its madness. The still centre. He looked at him. Was it possible?

Mandrake settled himself into the high-backed wooden chair where he had been sitting when they came in; there was bland relaxation on his strong, rather bony face, barred with black eyebrows; he looked the pattern of a self-consciously civilized don. He picked up the book he had been reading, and waved it at Queston. 'Fascinating.' His voice was like the rest of him: young-old, eerie, the age indefinable. Queston could not see the jacket of the book, but he knew what it was.

'Fascinating,' Mandrake said again. 'A most imaginative piece of work. I had no idea you would get anything like this out of your cave men.'

Queston drank some whisky. 'Did you hunt me down to tell me that?'

Mandrake said, unexpectedly: 'Very well. We will put our cards on the table. I knew you were a direct man.' He sat upright but easy in the stiff carved chair, and tapped one long finger on the book. 'In here you propound a theory – briefly, that an intelligence higher than our own is embodied in the earth, and is working to destroy mankind. Working through man's own attachment to the earth.'

'Roughly. After its doctoring, I doubt whether there's much of the theory left in the book.'

'A quibble, Dr Queston. We have changed the presentation, as a safeguard – no more. But this is your theory. This is what interests me. You are a serious scholar of considerable, I might say world-wide, reputation, and this is what you believe.'

'You know it is.'

'You are mad.'

'Am I?'

'Of course you are,' Mandrake said wearily. 'Everything that has happened to this country so far is a matter of deliberate policy. Long planning, and careful suggestion. Do you take us for agents of the Devil? A great deal has been done

that you can never be told, on an international level, but it has been done consciously, by scientific means.'

'I think you flatter yourself.'

Mandrake leaned forward; his eyes were dark and deeply shadowed, as though the flesh beneath the fine skin there were black. He stared into Queston's face. 'Do you realize,' he said, with a tautness that cracked suddenly like hysteria, 'that we can save the world?'

Queston stared back. Now it came. He felt a strange, triumphant exhilaration, as if he were in a cage with some savage creature that snarled instinctively, and would spring soon when it saw that it was caged. He said again, coldly: 'Did you hunt me down to tell me that?'

'You can help us.'

'I hardly think so.'

'O yes, indeed you can. It is vital now . . . '

Mandrake's voice dropped again, gentle, intimate. Sonata form, Queston thought: from the moment it had begun, from the moment he had first entered the room. First subject, second subject, intertwining, dropping in key; after the exposition the recapitulation; quicken the pace, hold the attention. Then gently now, andante – and from there, where do we go? When he comes to working out his theme, what then?

Mandrake said, smoothly: 'Are you familiar with the work of Price?'

'Price?'

'The Oxford philosopher. Notably what he was doing some twenty years ago, linked in some ways with that Cambridge fellow, Broad. Price postulated the theory of a collective subconscious – not the Jungian variety, nothing so simple. He suggested that the unit of consciousness was not a mind, but an idea. That once conceived, an idea, whether or not it was expressed in any way, took on an existence of its own. That there exists – perhaps the only thing that does exist – a world of ideas with which we are all linked, through our idea-forming minds. And which is therefore capable of influencing us all. It accounts for many things.'

'Which is presumably why it was postulated,' Queston said, bored. 'Most dons prefer to work off that kind of academic ingenuity by writing thrillers.'

'It accounts for ghosts,' Mandrake said, as if he had not spoken. 'For telepathy. For extra-sensory perception. For mediumistic – events. For insanity, even.'

'Ingenious.'

'More than ingenious, Dr Queston. It is a theory which we accept.' He smiled. 'It has been the basis of our work these last ten years.'

Queston stared at him. 'You can't be serious. All you've been operating is a peculiar form of mass hypnosis – and that has succeeded almost by accident. A tiny extra push for something caused and controlled from elsewhere.'

'O no. There is something you do not know about. We have founded the secret of control, you see. There is a method of governing the minds of men that can succeed without any of the trappings of communication. We know, at last, that an idea of sufficient power, properly projected – and you do not know what I mean by projection – can overwhelm all other ideas. We have the collective subconscious – ' he held out his hand, the palm cupped, the fingers crooked '– like *that*.'

Queston shrugged contemptuously. 'You've read my book. You know what absurdity I must think this. Do you really think I'm likely to help you?'

'Shall we say rather that you are going to stop hindering us?'

'I'm not hindering you. You've killed all possible acceptance of my book, by ridicule. What can I do?'

Mandrake stood up, looking down at him; he was very tall. 'In its present state, the collective subconscious is an intensely dangerous and powerful thing. Any intrusive intellectual stream, if it is strong enough, can divert it to fantastic ends. Your mind, working as it does with great intellectual voltage, forms such a stream.'

'How very tiresome for you,' Queston lay back in his chair, and sipped his whisky. The man was mad: desperately,

terribly powerful, and mad. 'And what fearsome result does this have?'

'Earthquakes,' Mandrake said.

Queston choked, swallowed, and began to laugh. He heard the laughter gurgle harshly through his skull, and it poured and rasped and gasped out as if it had been there held back for a long time. He laughed; he felt tears spill out at the corners of his eyes; he bent over his knees, shaking and spluttering. Without looking up he said through his catching breath: 'I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll *blow* your house down.' Then he choked again, and went on laughing hopelessly until the laughter became a pain and at last died.

Mandrake stood watching him, impassive. He said softly, 'For a man who has watched several thousand people die at his own hand, Dr Queston, you seem in remarkably good spirits.'

Suddenly there was an extraordinary menace in the quiet, standing figure, the intent face. Reflected light glittered for an instant on one of his eyes, and was gone; and Queston, exhausted by laughter, felt a hollowness inside his throat.

'For God's sake, Mandrake – '

'You will understand, shortly. I imagine you remember what happened at Gloucester.'

'Thorp-Gudgeon said – '

'James Thorp-Gudgeon says what he is told to say, like most people. You and I know what happened. And I know that your mind was behind it all.'

'My God,' Queston said. 'I think you really believe it.'

Mandrake picked up his glass from the table, and stared down at it. 'It took us too long to find out.' He swung round, suddenly savage. 'In this world of ideas, the balance of power is delicate. The man who creates a belief such as yours is dangerous, Dr Queston, intensely dangerous. He interferes, he jams transmission. He can deflect forces of inconceivable strength into channels of disaster. He can by accident create a giant form of psycho-kinesis – and that is what you have done.'

'You're insane,' Queston said in despair. 'You're puppets,

and you think you are masters – and God help you, you think I'm one as well. I tell you, Mandrake, you and your toy-soldier terrorists can do nothing to stop what's happening to the world. Something else is working on the little people you think you control, and the shaking of the earth is simply a sign of its impatience. There's a force let loose all right, but it's not of your making. And neither you nor I can lift a finger to stop it.'

'And I tell you we can and shall,' the Minister said. 'You have shattered the work of ten years, my friend, and now you are going to make amends before it is too late.'

As he spoke, the querulous buzzing wail began again from behind the screen. It seemed very loud. Queston heard his own voice rise shrill over it: 'What are you going to do?'

Mandrake smiled politely. 'Excuse me.' He crossed behind Queston's chair and disappeared: his voice came muffled: 'Who? . . . Yes, put him on at once.'

There was a pause. Shaken as he had not been before, Queston drank the last of his whisky in a large gulp. 'You are going to make amends . . .' Would they kill him? Why hadn't they killed him before? The man's insane, insane. If he touches Beth –

'*Damn!*' Mandrake's voice was shouting violently and alarmed down the telephone. He supposed it was a telephone. He stood up, quietly, and crossed to the screen. Mandrake was hissing: 'Finish them, then. No, damn you, I don't care how. And send emergency forces out to Bristol. Divert from Gloucester, there's not much more they can do there. How's the south coast? Good. The Exeter and Plymouth groups into Cornwall, if they can get in. No, not Portsmouth, the Channel will be affected soon. They're all alerted, are they? *What?* God damn and – well, tell them to do their best.' His voice dropped back under control. Queston moved quietly round so that he could see behind the screen. It was some moments before he believed what he saw.

Mandrake was sitting before a bank of dials and switches like the control-panel of an aircraft; red lights glowed,

needles flickered, with no indication of what any of them meant. *All* radio? He looked at Mandrake; a microphone jutted towards his face, he clicked one switch back, and pressed another. A yellow light shone.

'Klaus? Is that you? Have you heard – yes. Yes. Very well. Finish as soon as you can, and come down here.' He pressed the switch slowly up again, and sat very still. The yellow light flicked out. He sat looking straight ahead, into the dials, through the dials. Queston sensed fear, and anger; involuntarily he moved back.

The Minister rose to his feet and came out into the room, and for those few steps his walk was old, ancient, puzzled in defeat. He looked at Queston. He said, his voice flat: 'Do you know what a tsunami is?'

'A tidal wave, of sorts. Tropical. I saw one in Chile once. Monstrous things.'

'Caused by earthquake,' Mandrake said. He stared, and the age creasing his face smoothed and straightened into the calm confident menace of before. His voice rose.

'A tsunami hit the west coast of Britain half an hour ago. Eighty-foot waves, Dr Queston, moving at several hundred miles an hour. I have little hope for the western towns of Cornwall and Wales. The destruction sweeping up the Severn at this moment is indescribable.'

'My God,' Queston said, appalled. He thought of the Chilean chaos he had seen twenty years before. The sea had retreated, suddenly and terribly, leaving a great impossible expanse of mud and sand and weed-green rocks, and then roared in again in a raging towering brown wall of surf, a great hundred-foot terror pouring noise and death and ruin irresistibly through a dozen towns. He had been safe in the hills; but after that the landslides had begun. He tried to picture what the ravaged Welsh coast must look like, and felt cold. He thought of words he had forgotten: himself, comforting a small sad man on a deserted railway station. 'We'll go to Wales, we'll find your wife . . .' Not much to find now.

He was horrified, but he knew he was not surprised. The

censor was watching, calculating, in his brain, as it had always done. This now would be the end; the knowledge, like the memory of a sweating dream, that had lived with him for years; that had shouted too late in his book. He felt almost relieved. This he had expected, but they had been too intent on their frantic race of suspicion, and he had not cared to do more than stand aloof and prophesy. And then the earth had woken, then it had begun, and Mandrake and the rest used as tools but too deaf to know it; always deaf, blind, insensate, falling into the oldest, most fatal error, basing their system on the small mind of man.

And the pride of their belief in it, he thought, looking at the Minister's taut grey face, was the worst blindness of all. You might almost believe it the old warning come true: the deadliest of sins, bringing the fall and end of the world –

But not the end of the world. Only the end of man.

They stood a yard apart, facing each other, and the full extraordinary force of Mandrake was in his eyes.

'Ten years' work,' said the slow voice. 'Ten years' control. A nation at peace, and now – this. Your beliefs have grown like a cancer. You should have been destroyed long ago, before it could have begun. Before your mind could have given birth to this vehicle of destruction. You should have read Price, Dr Queston. You should have read one thing he wrote. He said: "Ideas are dangerous things, because they have a tendency, however slight, to come true." '

The madness of it was impossible. 'You *cannot* believe,' Queston said desperately, 'that the earth is shaken only by my belief that it's able to shake.'

'There are others like you. Christopher Oakley, and others. We have eradicated most, but there are too many still. The rootless, aimless ones, the old danger to any society. O, they haven't your originality. Their thoughts are vague, but they are similar enough. Your ideas are the core round which their thoughts have clung.'

'Without their knowing, of course. Up in the collective bloody subconscious. Shaking the world.'

'Don't sneer, my friend,' Mandrake said softly. 'You are a heretic, but like most heretics you will recant.'

Queston sat down deliberately on the arm of a chair. A packet of cigarettes lay on the table, with a lighter. He took one, and lit it. Blowing out smoke, clinging to the absurdity of bravado, he said: 'Do you propose to kill me?'

'O no,' Mandrake said. The door of the room opened, but neither of them moved their gaze; they stared taut as bull and toreador (and which, Queston thought grimly, is which?). 'Killing you would not kill the ideas you have created. The mind that made them must make others, with the same conviction, to nullify their force. It may be too late, but there is nothing else to do now. You are Luther. His beliefs started a fire, but when he saw the flames he helped to put them out.'

'Perhaps I'm Latimer,' Queston said. 'He was burned.'

'But you would burn the whole world with you, David, and no martyr has as much licence as that.'

It was another voice, and it came from behind him. He saw Mandrake's eyes shift. He turned, and at once he knew the black hair and the square red-patched face and the grey eyes. He said nothing.

'They think they'll be in touch with the south coast again in half an hour, Minister,' Brunner said. 'Some kind of electrical discharge. Of course, they could try the other way – '

'No,' Mandrake said shortly. 'On no account. Far too dangerous, now.'

'I told them so.' Brunner was like an eager black puppy, gazing up with something like love. Watching, Queston felt the old dislike, and a new contempt.

'Take Dr Queston up there,' Mandrake said. 'Let him – talk – to Atkinson.'

Brunner smiled unpleasantly. 'You'll like Atkinson, David. Regius Professor of Medicine. A neuro-surgeon.'

It wasn't real, it was two madmen playing a child's game – and then Queston thought of Beth, and was flooded suddenly with a desperation more urgent than anything he had

ever felt before. He grasped Mandrake's arm: 'For God's sake, man, get out of this before it's too late. Think that you might be wrong, just for a moment. Can't you see, it's a two-way channel you're using – all the time you think you're in control, the control's working the other way, on you.'

'Ah yes, the atomic intelligence,' the Minister said contemptuously. 'The world defending itself from destruction. You fool, Queston – these fantasies themselves are the destroyers. Nothing has power but belief, and the more perverted the belief, the more disastrous its power.' He shook his arm free, and he was something from the passionate remembered arguments of Queston's youth: the entrenched academic, unshakeable this side of death, putting his life's obdurate case. 'I stake my hand on the hidden powers of the mind of man, and I have all history to prove me right. And you have nothing but superstition and myth.'

Brunner sniggered. 'Back to religion. He sees himself as Noah.'

The switchboard was buzzing again. 'Take him away,' Mandrake said. 'I brought peace of mind to the people of this country, out of a world going to ruin, and no one is going to destroy that work.'

Queston moved to stand in his way, ignoring Brunner. He laughed. 'Peace of mind? Under the cosy iron hand of the Ministry police?'

'Rubbish,' Brunner said. 'We have emergency powers.'

'The people of this country are nothing but a lot of hypnotized ostriches. Have you seen their eyes?'

'Of course,' Mandrake said. He looked at him, smiling, and Queston felt his stomach twist as he saw the old appalling blind stare, the other-listening, the eyes looking out of a mind connected elsewhere. What was this man?

Brunner came towards him. Queston said quickly, playing for time: 'There must be a reason for it all. You are too secret.' The buzzing behind the screen rose insistently. 'You achieved peace by disarming,' he said, and Mandrake paused, waving Brunner to answer the noise.

'Yes.'

'All of you?'

'Yes,' Mandrake said easily. 'A general disarmament treaty was signed five years ago. All the nuclear powers – the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain, China and Federal Europe.'

'Yet three months ago there was a major outbreak of nuclear war?'

Mandrake smiled. 'You know as well as I that there has been no such thing. It is politic to have people believe so for a little while – men can have peace given them, but they will not perpetuate it unless they have learned humility, and gratitude. There is considerable trouble outside, certainly, but it will be very rapidly calmed when the spiritual force that we are about to generate in this country reaches its highest level. Surely you don't seriously believe that we would all have disarmed for fun?'

Queston's mind ached; he did not understand. Certainly he knew that the great explosions of three months ago, that Oakley had spoken about, had not been bombs: they had been the first eruptions of the Intelligence, and what they had done to the countries where they had taken place was best not imagined. But what did Mandrake think they had been? Was there any conceivable chance that they could have come from some other cause? For if Mandrake were honest in what he said about general disarmament, there was an unnerving possibility that he, David Queston, had been wrong all along. Total disarmament for five years, absolute trust between nations, took away the threat of the greatest holocaust. Freed from that, why should the earth rise against man?

He said uncertainly: 'How sure can you be that the disarmament treaty is fully observed?' And Mandrake laughed in unaffected amusement, and he knew suddenly that he had not been wrong after all.

'Politicians are not altogether naïve, Dr Queston. One can be sure of nothing in this world. But our anti-missile missiles are exceptionally effective now, and of course we have the eight-minute warning – I have direct lines from

this room to the radar stations in Yorkshire, Essex and Northern Ireland. And the unanswerable strength of all those three, of course is the laser system.'

'The laser system?'

'Ah yes. I was forgetting your remoteness from the world. Not the tame little lasers you would remember, the high-energy beams that brought us all our television shows so much more effectively. A much fiercer animal. Did you know the way lasers were used in industry – to cut metals, diamonds and so forth? This is our laser, going hand in hand with the radar – but a hundred thousand times as intense as that cutting beam. Guarding these shores, Dr Queston, we have beams of radiation as hot as the sun, that can be focused on any object rash enough to come within range of the radar scopes. And instantly that object will be vaporized.'

'Charming,' Queston said. 'I see you have great faith in your neighbours.'

Mandrake waved one hand impatiently. 'But the greatest safeguard of all, naturally, will always be the deterrent itself.'

Queston stared, wondering if he had imagined what he heard.

'The deterrent? When you've disarmed?'

'Nuclear disarmament is a simple process. To disband an army, now that is an undertaking. And an even bigger one to put it together again. But a bomb? We have none stock-piled, but do you think it would be difficult to put that right, if there were need? Do you think the peaceful uses of nuclear energy differ very much, in basic terms, from the business of exploiting its destructive power? Swords or ploughshares, the muscles behind them are the same. We agreed to keep the *status quo*, we suppressed the imperialist instincts, but do you think any of us could afford to forget that?'

Queston said slowly: 'So there is no trust in your peaceful world.'

'Shall we say there is no risk,' said the Minister.

Switches clicked; Brunner swung the screen impatiently

back and said, from the great bank of dials: 'They're worried, sir. The interference has stopped, but they can't get anything from the stations in the south. A faint signal comes from Dover, but apparently it makes no sense.'

'An emergency code, probably,' Mandrake said irritably. 'Tell them to check.'

'They have, sir. They say it's deliberate gibberish.'

Queston felt a curious quiver of anticipation.

'Damn.' Mandrake paused, irresolute. 'There's only one thing we can do.'

Brunner nodded, bright-eyed, and licked his lips. His tongue made a sticky, greedy sound against the skin.

'Only one thing,' Mandrake said again. He was savouring the words, mock-reluctance masking the same greediness, like a man denying praise. Queston looked uneasily from one to the other. Then Mandrake moved, suddenly decisive.

'They checked the video power last night?'

'Yes,' Brunner said. 'It won't run for long, though.'

'Long enough, I think. Let me come there.'

He took the seat before the flickering, flashing panel, and looked back towards the broad glass screens that Queston had seen in the brick-pillared wall opposite the door. One switch clicked, and the lights in the room dropped to a dim glow. Queston blinked, and gasped. It was blue light: the same peculiarly insistent blue glow that had shone in the nightmare cave at Gloucester. Brunner glanced at him.

'Minister, we're losing time. I should take him up to Atkinson's people.'

'Very well,' Mandrake said, intent over the dials.

Queston felt for the first time that they were real people, would do real things; his fingers curled into his palms, and he waited for Brunner to come near.

Then Mandrake said suddenly: 'Ten minutes won't make all that difference.' He was looking at Queston with a small austere smile, and again the shock of recognition came: Queston saw, incredulously, the half-withdrawn, half-proud eagerness of one scholar who speaks to another. 'I should like you to see this,' he said; and it was the classic approach

of the man who has an experiment, theory, thesis, recognizable only by an equal; and so few equals that any one of them must be seized while he is there as audience.

And then the fine chord snapped, and Mandrake was changed again, rougher-grained, the politician. The smile was a different smile. He turned back. The pride lost its reticence, became open, almost lascivious. 'You have never seen anything like this before, Dr Queston. Few men have ever dreamed of it. You will see that I am right about everything that we can do, and be convinced at last, I think . . . but I'm afraid you won't remember it for long, if Professor Atkinson is as efficient as he has always been.'

'So that's it,' said the laconic swift censor in Queston's mind; but then the thought was doused as soon as it came.

Under the luminous blue light, glowing from high circles that seemed to float in the dark ceiling, the Minister bent eagerly over his rows of twitching needles and bulbs; his face seemed to change, to grow softer and open-mouthed, with imbecile intensity as if he were in a trance. Queston thought of the wretched Warren. It was absurd and faintly horrible, like a spiritualist service *de luxe*.

He heard a low throbbing resonance fill the room, indefinable but insistent. The screens in the wall drew his eyes, growing luminous with a strange deep white light subtly filled with other colours, melting and changing, red, yellow, green, blue, through the spectrum – yet not the clear colours of broken light but all somehow perverted, softened, turned to unpleasant pastel shades. They compelled his eyes, swirling and twisting, and all the while the humming pulsation seemed to grow and fade and yet always remain the same; and then slowly, within the colours and within the sounds, disturbing, jarring patterns began to take shape. He knew that they were clutching slimily at his reason; that he was not seeing or hearing, but caught in something that had total, terrifying control over the seventh sense.

He forced himself to look away, to think coherently. He looked at Mandrake; he had thought the man could not

see the screens, but now he realized that a mirror hung over the banked switchboard, angled to catch the reflected picture down, and that the Minister sat there like some insane organist with his head raised and his hands weaving meaningless patterns to and fro over the controls. Suddenly it was all frightful, the madman and the light and the noise; the sense of immanent terror was on him again, as it had been while the senseless Warren gibbered possessed, and he knew that he must not stay there in the room, that his reason would not be able to tolerate the monstrosity of what was to come.

As he turned, the door swung violently open. It banged loud against the wall, and a figure fell forward out of the dark.

'Minister!' The high terrified voice was almost a scream.

At the very edge of the abyss, the light and the sound exploded, as if the organ that was not an organ had been flung into a great crashing discord. Queston's mind cringed and whirled under the impact; a fearful, bruising eruption, as if the universe shook. And then relief came, flooding in to bring him back into sanity before he had been caught quite away. He never forgot the intensity of that relief.

The room rang with smitten silence. He saw that a second, smaller form also stood in the doorway; and that the first, whimpering softly, did not move. 'Minister!' The voice was lower now, and recognizable.

Mandrake said: '*You bloody fool* – '

'Don't blame him,' said the small man in the doorway. 'He didn't have much choice.'

'Oakley!' Queston leapt forward.

'Put some more light on,' Oakley said coldly to Mandrake; there was absolute assurance in his voice. After an instant, Mandrake moved, and the room was bright again. Queston saw James Thorp-Gudgeon before him, stooped and dishevelled, the small eyes wide with fear in his pasty, podgy face. His tie was askew, his thin hair wisping in wild strands, his mouth slack and wet. He no longer wore a gown. He looked extremely unattractive. He was clasping one forearm to his chest; it seemed bent at a curious angle.

Oakley stood behind him, in shirt and trousers. He moved

slightly backwards, so that the revolver in his hand covered the whole room. 'Come on out past me, David.'

'Where's Beth?'

'Outside, keeping watch. Quickly.'

Queston came past him, still dazed. He said foolishly: 'Where did you get the gun?'

'From our fat friend. He was trying to show off, I guess. Do they have guns?' Oakley was watching the three men; suddenly he snapped: 'Come away from there!' Mandrake, who had moved gently towards the screened switchboard, jerked forward to where Brunner and Thorp-Gudgeon stood in the middle of the room.

Queston looked at them. 'I don't know. I doubt it. Those suits hang too well.' He grinned, seeing from the bitter twist of Brunner's mouth that he was right.

'Good.' The journalist's flippant detachment was all vanished; he spoke crisply, a copy-book outlaw, a thin white wire of a man. 'Not a squeak, any of you, or I shall shoot. I've got nothing to lose.'

'If you try to take your friend away, or get him killed,' Mandrake said quietly, 'you will lose everything for all of us.'

'I've had my indoctrination, thanks,' Oakley looked contemptuously at Thorp-Gudgeon. 'It didn't take. David?'

'Yes?' Queston had been peering out into the gloom for Beth.

'Anyone around?'

'No.'

'If Beth sees anyone she'll whistle. Now quickly. There were Ministry cars parked outside when we were brought in. We have to get one. Officially. That means a big bluff. Taking one of these boys – ' he jerked the revolver, and Queston saw all three heads jerk with it – 'along as a guarantee.'

'Which one?'

'Would they miss Fatso?'

Queston looked from Mandrake's cold furious face to the cringing Thorp-Gudgeon. 'I doubt it.'

Oakley grinned. 'We'll move up to top league. Take Big Boy himself. Come on, Minister.'

Brunner swung a stiff arm forward in protest. 'The Minister is bound to Oxford. If you take him out you will kill him.'

Oakley looked at him, and said a single casual word.

'I swear it.' The sweat glinted on Brunner's forehead. 'Queston, tell him. You can't do it. You've seen the pull working. Take me, you and I are the same. I'm not bound anywhere. Only the rootless can go, now.'

Queston studied Mandrake's unflickering eyes. 'O, come. He's above such things.'

'For God's sake,' Brunner said urgently. 'You can't. It's true. Minister, tell them.' He turned, protective and passionate, but Mandrake did not move, and he flung round again. 'Queston, *you've seen what happens.*'

'Yes,' Queston said. 'I have. Come on, Mandrake. We're going for a drive.'

Mandrake stepped forward in silence. Oakley came down the steps, his revolver steady. 'Better do something about those two. Here.' He pulled his tie from his neck, and held it over his shoulder.

Queston followed and took it. He unknotted Thorp-Gudgeon's tie. There were tears of pain on the pudgy face. 'My arm, David. Mind my arm.'

'It's broken, I guess,' Oakley said.

Queston moved the fat, quivering form to stand back to back with Brunner. He tied Thorp-Gudgeon's sound arm tightly to Brunner's at the wrist. Then he looked round the room. At the far end, on the map-covered wall, a pipe ran high up along the rough-plastered stone. He led them towards it, and tied Brunner's other wrist viciously tight to the pipe so that his arm was held high in the air.

'That'll hold long enough. Nobody'll hear them down here. The radio's the danger.' He went to the switchboard at the opposite end of the room, peered at the back and jerked out as many free wires as he could see. There were small white

flashes as they came away. For the first time, Mandrake made a sound of protest, like a groan.

'Beth whistled,' Oakley said suddenly. He put the gun in his pocket and kept his hand there. He said softly to Mandrake, 'You're taking us to Magdalen Bridge. Find a reason, and make it good. If you do anything to give a warning, I shall shoot you. Whatever happens to me afterwards, I swear I shall shoot you first. Now move.'

Mandrake walked out, very upright, into the dark. Queston saw Brunner's chest heave with an indrawn breath as he swung the door to; locking it, he put his ear close. Through the heavy oak, and two feet of stone wall, the helpless shout was no more than the faint echo of a sound far away.

He followed Oakley, and Beth came to him out of the shadows by the glimmering Shelley memorial. He put his arm round her shoulders and pulled her close, hard, for a second; she put her cheek briefly against his neck. Her skin was cool.

'Over there,' she said softly. 'Coming towards us.'

They strained dazed eyes into the darkness, and heard slow footsteps chewing the gravel.

Oakley said low to Mandrake: '*Now.*'

The Minister's tall figure strode out from the murk of the arch, and they heard his voice firm and peremptory. 'Jeffries!' Queston thought, ridiculously: 'He can see in the dark . . . '

The footsteps paused. 'Mr Mandrake, sir!' Startled and respectful.

'I want a car at once to go down to Magdalen, and then round to Christ Church. Is there a driver about?'

'There's a couple just come into the lodge, sir. I'll get one of them at once.'

'Christ Church?' Beth whispered anxiously. Queston pressed her hand, but said nothing. He had seen Oakley's shoulders already hunch like a dog's pricked ears at the man's words. But then they had relaxed. In a moment he relaxed as well. Magdalen was only a few yards away; even

Mandrake was unlikely to want a car for that distance, on a fine night. The second part of the order made it plausible. Mandrake was not only doing as he was told; he was adding coolly ingenious extras of his own. Either he was very anxious to avoid death, or he was planning something.

They followed him into the yellow-lit lodge; he glanced at them coldly over his shoulder as if stressing his authority. A man in the dull black Ministry uniform leapt out of the lodge, hastily pulling on his cap, and the porter opened the door cut in the great gate.

'Thank you, Jeffries,' Mandrake said. 'I have my key.'

'Good night, sir.' The door closed again. But Queston noticed an inquisitive head peeping dark from the dim-lit window of the lodge.

The driver unlocked the car, took off his cap, and stood holding the door at the back.

Oakley said politely: 'After you, Minister.' His right hand remained firmly in his pocket. Queston looked at the buttoned holster on the driver's belt, and held his breath.

Mandrake's face was blank. He paused, and looked out at the empty road over the car roof. A distant car's engine hummed somewhere, and died away. There was no other sound. He inclined his head to Oakley. 'Thank you,' he said gravely. He climbed into the car.

'Perhaps Miss Summers would like to sit in front,' Queston said hastily. 'I'll go round the other side.' He ran to the other door, and then he and Oakley were sitting on either side of Mandrake; Oakley half-facing him, hand in pocket. Beth slid into the front seat, and the car moved off. For an instant Queston was aware of nothing but the shape of her head, silhouetted against the windscreen.

Round the long curve of the High Street, the driver slowed the car. 'Magdalen, sir?'

Oakley pointed silently to the near side of the bridge.

'Just this side of the bridge,' Mandrake said.

The car stopped. There were lights beyond the bridge, and moving figures. The driver turned off the engine, and made to open the door.

Oakley said quietly: 'Just a moment, driver. Sit still, and don't make a sound. I have a gun pointing into the Minister's stomach. If you don't do exactly as I tell you, I shall shoot first him and then you. Especially – ' his voice hardened as the man's left hand involuntarily jerked ' – if you try to reach your gun.'

The driver sat still. He had a square head; the back of his neck was thick, the hair shaven. He said stolidly: 'Is it true, sir?'

Mandrake's voice seemed to come with difficulty. 'Quite – true,' he said. He had begun to shake violently; next to him, Queston felt the compulsive jarring of his body, and he did not think it came from fear of being shot. He leaned forward and took the revolver from the driver's belt; broke it, and spun the loaded chambers. He had seen no cartridges on the belt. 'Any more?'

'In the front there,' the man said.

Beth opened the locker above her knees, and rattled a box. The noise came very loud.

Beyond the bridge, lights began to dance as if someone came towards them.

'Now,' Oakley said, 'will you, David, or shall I?'

'Stay there.' Queston got out, and moved quickly round to the driver's door. He opened it. The man sat looking at him, expressionless, his eyes flicking down to the gun barrel and up. Queston said: 'Get out, and stand where you are. If you make any attempt to raise an alarm before we've gone, we shall shoot the Minister at once. Do you understand?'

Suddenly the look of other-listening was on the man's heavy face; vague, half-possessed. Queston felt the old distaste. 'Get out.'

'You wouldn't shoot the Minister?' It was as if the man repeated a blasphemy.

'That depends on you. If he dies, you'll have killed him.'

The man got out at once. He looked back at Mandrake, like a sad dog. Then he stood in the middle of the road, his arms hanging limp, watching. Queston slipped into the

driving-seat; switched on, felt the wheel affectionately, looked at the petrol gauge. It was registering full. He handed the gun to Beth. 'You only have to pull the trigger. It reloads itself. No noise, and not much kick.' She took it gingerly, and nodded.

'Not a hope of bluffing here,' Queston said, looking towards the lights. 'Neck or nothing. All right?'

'O.K.' Oakley said softly, behind him. 'But the Minister looks sick.'

Queston thought for a swift instant of the pull of place: the farmer at Stonehenge . . . would leaving Oxford kill Mandrake? Too late now. He pressed the starter, felt his right foot take life of its own; and the car swept forward up and over Magdalen Bridge.

'Keep low,' he said to Beth.

The lights were arc lamps. It was like a frontier post. He saw figures moving on the road, and a low striped pole barring the way before them. Fifty yards away he slowed, turned his headlamps full on and sounded the horn. The trumpeting roar leapt out into the silence, but none of the figures moved to raise the bar. Two men set off up the road towards them, flashing torches and shielding their eyes.

'Right,' Queston said under his breath. He turned off all his lights and put his foot down hard. The car howled, leapt forward; he saw Beth duck, the lights flash close, and startled faces, with black open mouths. Light, white light, blinding, and then the striped pole a barrier before them, nearer, nearer; and in the second that his arm came up to ward off flying glass he saw that there was no need. The big car took the crashing impact of the bar on the apex of its heavy steel radiator, and they were through and away, the splintered wooden arms tossed aside harmless in the road.

The beam of the headlamps rode before them, thrusting the darkness to either side. Ten minutes from Oxford, and no word spoken inside the car.

'What time is it?' Beth said.

Oakley said from the back seat: 'Quarter of twelve. David, what road is this?'

'The London road. Goes through High Wycombe. It turns off north soon. Better decide where we want to go.'

'I've been watching out back. They aren't following. Why not?'

'Are you sure?'

'No sign of lights. No one could take this road without them.'

'They must be there somewhere.'

'Maybe. But you'll have to stop soon. Our friend here is in a bad way.'

Queston's eyes were strained forward on the path of running light, and the hedges flashing without colour on either side. He said, without turning, 'What's wrong, Mandrake?'

'He's out cold,' Oakley said. 'Passed out when we crashed through that pole. I don't like it. His breathing's odd, and his pulse is getting faint. It's as if he's going deeper under all the time. Maybe he knocked his head. Or maybe – ' He stopped.

If you take him out you will kill him . . . Queston knew he was remembering Brunner's anguished plea. He glanced in the driving-mirror. Nothing. Only the dark that swallowed the road again when they had passed. He slid the car slower on to the grass verge, on a long curve in the road.

Silence washed round them as he switched the engine off. He wound down the window, put his head out, and listened for the sound of a following car. Still nothing. Only the murmuring, menacing emptiness that made no noise.

He put his hand automatically forward into the map compartment, and found a heavy, rubber-coated torch.

'Let's have a look at him.'

He shone the torch on Mandrake's face. Beth turned to look, made a small frightened noise and drew closer to him. Mandrake's head was flung back on the seat; his face was white and glistening, and the light carved deep scornful dark lines down from nose and mouth, and shadowed the eye-

brows into a black-gashed frown. It was a mask, chalked and empty. And no way of telling what lay underneath.

'Tough baby, isn't he?' Oakley said.

Beth's voice was husky. 'I was too frightened to look at him properly before. He's evil.'

Queston said slowly: 'And defenceless.' He snapped off the torch, bringing darkness down like a blind, and felt Beth jump. 'Let's get him out into the air for a couple of minutes. But we can't spare more.'

Together he and Oakley dragged Mandrake out on to the grass. He had seemed a narrow-built man, but he was very heavy.

'His breathing seems better.' Queston straightened up.

'Leave him for a bit,' Oakley said. They spoke in half-whispers, without the scuffle of their movements the road was utterly silent, and the darkness hung all round them, threatening.

Beth said, from the car: 'What are we going to do with him?'

'If we take him farther away – ' Oakley left the words hanging.

'I know,' Queston said. 'And how do they reconcile *that* little phenomenon with being masters of the collective subconscious, I wonder?'

'Old Gudgeon tied himself in knots trying to defend it. All he really had to offer was that if you push propaganda hard enough, it can end up having hold of its author as well. It's possible. I knew an advertising man once, wrote so much crap about a soap powder that he finally bullied his wife into using nothing else. Used to quote his own slogans at her.'

'Guard thine own,' Queston said bitterly.

'White is right, I think it was,' Oakley turned towards the grass verge, peering down through the darkness for the solid black of the man lying there. 'How's the – *Christ!*'

'What is it?'

'The torch. Quick.'

Queston fumbled for the switch on the heavy rubber

case, and the torch-beam flared out over Mandrake. He was not as they had left him. He was crouched, kneeling with his head twisted against the ground; his cheek flat against the grass, so that in the sudden light they could see his face. It was white, ravaged, impassive, exactly as it had been before; but the eyes stared open, unblinking. He turned his head slowly away from the light like a sick man, and they watched astounded, without a word; and painfully and slowly the Minister moved forward, away from them, on his hands and knees, crawling back along the road.

'Mandrake!' Oakley said, croaking.

The slow, degraded crawl paused, and the figure stumbled clumsily to its feet, and went on, step by gradual step, lurching away.

Oakley's voice rose. 'Mandrake!'

Beth said: 'I don't think he can hear you.'

'Let him go,' said Queston.

'He's dangerous.'

'I doubt it, now. And what could we do with him?'

'Kill him.'

Queston held the dwindling, sleep-stumbling figure in the spraying beam from the torch. 'You can shoot him in the back. Or you can take him farther from Oxford. Which d'you prefer?'

Oakley shrugged. 'He won't rest till he finds you again. It's your funeral.'

They watched the shambling, eerie shape of Mandrake disappear out of the end of the light.

'It seems a funny thing to say,' Beth said, 'but will he be all right?'

Oakley laughed shortly. 'With any luck the first car chasing us will run him down.'

'They won't chase us,' Queston said. He felt very tired. 'They have other things to worry about. He's safe enough. He's going home.'

They went back to the car, and sat in silence. Beth reached for Queston's hand; he put his arm round her shoulders.

'O love,' she said softly.

He felt her hair like a breath against his neck. He looked down at her, and she turned her face to him, a featureless glimmer in the dark car; but when he kissed her their mouths met and clung, and the dark was not there, or the despair, but only a long singing white world that was all the endless ache of wandering dissolved into certainty. He cupped his hand round her cheek, and kissed her eyes.

Oakley said, from behind them: 'I don't want to break up the party, but – '

There was pain in the voice, but Queston did not notice; he felt Beth's smile under his hand, and laughed. 'Go ahead. I've got my girl back.' He pulled his arm over to the wheel, ruffling Beth's hair, and started the car. It was like waking to sunshine after long sleep; the world was as easy suddenly as when he was young. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'where would you like to go?'

'Is there anywhere we can go?' Beth said.

The car stirred as Oakley moved suddenly. 'Listen!'

'What is it?'

'I heard something. Switch off again.'

The engine died, the silence murmured in their ears.

'Nothing there.'

'It was some way away. It sounded like – damn, it couldn't have been. Come on, let's go. This road's giving me the willies.'

Queston drove slowly, watching the road. 'We'll go up to Aylesbury. Tell me when you see a turning, Beth.'

'Keep away from the big towns,' Oakley said. 'Apart from the Ministry and the great unknown, they're getting dangerous.'

'How?'

'Gudgeon was trying to tell us how lucky we were to be in Oxford. He let something drop about typhoid.'

'And smallpox in London,' Beth said. 'David, quick, there's a turning here.'

He swung round, and they were in a narrower road, twisting between hedges; grey, unreal in the headlights.

'We can cut east from Aylesbury into the dead lands.'

The car hummed on. Queston relaxed into his driving, awake and alert now, enjoying the easy power of the turbine. He felt Beth's head droop on to his shoulder, and become heavy; in a moment he knew she was asleep. He said quietly: 'Back there. Before we started again. What was it you heard? You said it sounded like – and then you stopped.'

'It sounded like Gloucester,' Oakley said. 'And it came from Oxford. Or where Oxford used to be.'

He woke with a jerk of guilt, thinking himself still at the wheel, and then he felt Beth beside him, and saw Oakley's head and shoulders outlined against the windscreen ahead. The windows were cold grey.

He looked out at the rushing road. They were in the dead lands again, the long bleakness of London's suburbs: the decaying lines of empty houses, deserted factories, but worse than he remembered. The winter grass drooped lank beside the road; outside the houses, fences that had clasped at privacy leaned and gaped; here and there a roof had collapsed, and the house stood crumbling in its broken-windowed row. A dead England. How many people were left alive?

He moved gently away from Beth; she murmured, and curled into a corner of the seat. It was very cold. He leaned forward, propping his chin on the back of the seat beside Oakley. The journalist grunted. His hands rested easily on the wheel; his cheeks were hollow, and shadowed with red prickles of beard.

'These damned automatics. I used to like English cars in the old days – they had gears to keep you awake.'

Queston said curiously: 'How did you come to be in Gloucester when we met?'

'The last of the great news stories. Not that I should ever have got it out of the country. I was tailing the Ministry men – Mandrake had sent observers down to that great ill-fated jamboree, because he apparently had his doubts about the woman who was running it. Dunno what they were

going to do to her. That's one little lot of thugs who won't do very much any more, anyway.'

'I'm surprised they didn't make you stay in London, if you were born there.'

'So was I, frankly. I guess I made such a nuisance of myself they decided it wasn't worth it.'

'And you didn't feel the pull, even a little? No roots?'

'No roots. None in England, either – or anywhere. That's the job, to some extent. You find two sorts of pressmen, David – one has a pipe, and a garden, and three kids, his great domestic bastion against the rat race. Only the domesticity and the race between them grind him down, poor sod, and he ends up a bald worried old hack with an ulcer or a whisky nose. The other sort are the bastards. You know – bright young men, and it takes so much adrenalin to go on being bright that they have to use women as fuel. And they don't put down roots, except in bars. The only thing about the bastards is, they're the ones who can sometimes write.'

'Could you write?'

'No,' Oakley said, and grinned. 'O, I thought so. So bright it blinded you, I was. I wrote what was the definitive novel about newspapers, for six months until the next guy wrote one, and I had a couple of plays put on at scrubby little dives in Bayswater, and that was it. Not exactly an *œuvre*. After that I stuck to newspapers. And campaigning against the Ministry, when anyone would let me.' He yawned, and the car swerved.

'I'll take over in a minute. Where are we?'

'I'm O.K. Edge of Chelmsford, I think. I kept straight on, more or less. We're getting short of gas.'

They skidded through a roundabout; the cluster of lamp standards in its centre leaned on one another like tall thin loving drunks. Back on the main road, Oakley skidded to avoid a fallen telegraph pole, its wires hanging lazily looped from the next. Queston peered round, in the dull dead light of after-dawn.

'What's happened to this place? Not a quake.'

'Bad storm, I guess. I was caught in the skirts of a hurricane called Connie once, way back. The morning after looked a bit like this.'

They passed a chicken-house upside-down on the pavement; a metal roof ripped and hanging from a factory; a lamp-post lying smashed into the window of a shop. Paper blew and bustled in the road.

'We do need gas,' Oakley was looking at the petrol gauge again. As he glanced up, he suddenly cursed, pushed his foot at the brake and lurched the car to a whimpering stop. Queston was nearly shot over the back of the seat.

'What the hell – ?'

'Look.'

Ahead, the houses on the right of the road thinned, and gave way to fields. A low, dead horizon, stretching flat where land met sky; but against it, dark figures moving slowly in a field.

'Who are they?'

'I don't get it. This is dead land. No one lives here, there's no pull.'

'They might be from Chelmsford.'

'Out here? We're as far from the place as we took Mandrake from Oxford.'

'They might be something else,' Queston said slowly. He felt excitement rise in him, at the stirring of an idea sown by something Mandrake had said. He pressed Oakley's shoulder. 'Drive up to them. Slowly.'

'Are you crazy? We've made it out of one cage, I'm not chancing another.'

'I tell you it's all right. I think we've found – O, come on.'

Oakley was not listening. 'I'm going to turn, before they spot us. Damn lucky they haven't already, or heard the engine. We must be downwind.'

'No.' Queston was already opening the door. 'I'm going to talk to them.'

'You *are* crazy.' Oakley stared at him. His voice rose: 'David, for God's sake – '

'Shut up. You'll wake Beth, she needs rest. Turn the car if you like, but I'll be back.'

'Well, at least take this with you.' He held out his gun.

Queston shook his head. He said obscurely: 'It's got to start somewhere.' Then he walked away from the car, down the dead road.

The wind was cold on his face, but it woke him; he realized suddenly that he was very hungry. The figures in the field were moving methodically, slowly; as he came nearer he thought they were picking things up. He began to hear voices indistinctly on the wind. He walked on, past the last houses. Fields stretched flat and open on either side; away from the car, he knew himself entirely defenceless and alone. But a certainty was growing in him. He walked on. He could see both men and women there now; beyond them, in the early grey sky, he thought he made out two curious rounded shapes on the horizon.

Then the figures saw him.

There was a strange sudden flurry of movement, and then they were not there. Queston paused in amazement, about fifty yards away. The field was empty. He peered at the dark soil, studded with rough hummocks of grass, but he could see no one. He began walking again, more warily.

As he drew level with the field, the hedge cut off his view. He stood irresolute, and then he heard a voice.

'Who are you?' A strong, rough voice; he thought it came from inside the hedge.

He clenched his fists, and took the risk. 'I'm a friend. I'm –' he paused, feeling for the words to convince. 'I'm wandering. I need help.'

'Come over here,' the voice said.

Queston walked towards the hedge, his heart jumping in his chest as if it tried to get out. The branches before him grew wild and straggling as all the hedges in England now; he wondered irrelevantly whether they would have grown right across the fields in ten years' time. No men; the hedges are the masters now –

'Stop there,' said the voice.

Queston stopped. He said clearly: 'We are all rootless. There's no need to suspect me. I'm running from the Ministry. I am not armed.' He spread both arms wide.

'All right, mate,' the voice said cheerfully. 'Spare us the dramatics.' A figure rose on the other side of the hedge: a big, battered man with long grey hair. Queston moved close and saw the broken nose and watery, half-closed eyes, and wondered why they should seem familiar.

The man half-turned back to the field. 'All clear,' he called. 'Panic over.' Other figures rose round him, men and women shaggy and tattered as tramps; and Queston realized that they had vanished, in the half-grown grey light over the hummocked field, simply by dropping flat on the earth.

He found the gate, and climbed over it; the big man came to meet him.

'My name's David Queston.'

'Bill Milward. You on the road, then?'

'Yes. With two friends. We managed to get out of Oxford.'

The man hissed through yellow, broken teeth. 'Takes some doing. They after you?'

'I dare say. There's no sign of them yet.' They were Maquis meeting in occupied territory; he was struck by the sense of comradeship against a common enemy, and realized how the balance could change. It had occurred to neither of them yet to mention the land.

He said: 'What are you doing?' The others had moved away, back to their stooping and gathering.

'Potatoes – this is a field they never bothered to clear. The frost's got most of them, but there's a few left. We scrounge what we can get, where we can find it. Can't stay in one place, it wouldn't be safe. Anyway we're a fidgety lot.' The sky behind him was beginning to glow cold-blue and red as the sun crept up towards the surface. The man called Milward blew on his big hands; he wore a heavy stained greatcoat over bulging layers of nameless garments, but his face was twisted with the pain of cold. He said: 'Where you making for?'

'I don't know, really. Got any suggestions?'

'Up to you, mate. We just keep moving. About this far from London, there's a clear belt all round.'

'Clear of what?' Queston said.

The man's eyes slipped aside from him; he said evasively: 'Them. The Ministry. People. *You* know.'

Queston looked at the scattered, slow-moving group. Some were young, some middle-aged, though it was difficult to tell through the long hair and muffling clothes. There were no children, and no one really old. 'Who are you?'

'Oddments,' Milward said, and grinned. 'We've met up on the road. My wife and I, we were in London, but we left. Didn't like the way things were going. I did a few jobs for the Ministry, but I like being my own boss. Always moved around a lot. And we didn't belong anywhere, so we just kept on moving. People were getting a bit nasty in the towns, anyway – you know? Then we met a young chap and his girl, and they was doing the same, so we teamed up. And so on. We get on all right. We're all a bit independent-minded, you might say, but you're with people you know you can trust, see? We're O.K. Things have been tough, but it'll be better when the winter's over. We reckon we'll go down along the coast, it'll be clear then. Might even settle down.'

'Why will it be clear then?'

'Storms,' the man said briefly.

Queston remembered Mandrake's report of the tsunami. 'You mean there'll be no one left there.'

' 'Sright.' He jerked his head at the workers. 'One of our chaps comes from Dover. Said it's shocking all along there. Great waves and gales bashing at the towns – and none of them'll leave their homes, the stupid idiots. They just sit and wait for it. The drownings are something chronic.'

'Bill!' It was a woman's voice, shrill and frightened. They saw her stand staring, pointing; and then they saw the car draw slowly up alongside on the road. Oakley's fair head was at the window, peering at them.

Milward seized Queston's wrist, twisting it angrily. 'If you've been – '

'I told you I had friends with me.' Queston began to struggle, but relaxed, remembering Oakley's gun. He might get the wrong idea. With his free arm he waved gaily towards the road.

'Don't kid me. That's a Ministry car.'

'Of course it is. We pinched it from Oxford.'

The word was like magic. Milward looked at him calculatingly through the furrows enfolding his eyes, and let him go. 'Pinched it, eh? That's good going.' His voice was tinged with respect, and the echo in Queston's mind suddenly rang clear.

'Good God. In Slough last year. With a Ministry van, clearing the shops.'

'What?'

'I knew I'd seen you somewhere before. You sold me three shirts once.'

The big man stared at him; then his face creased and split into the rows of broken teeth, and he thumped him on the shoulder. 'Well stone me, so I did. Well, fancy that, now. Fancy seeing you. I thought you was a bit dodgy then, if I remember. Suspicious bastard, I am. But you got to be, up to a point, see? All right when you're sure. I'm a bloke's best friend when I'm sure about him. Hey, Shirl!' He shouted to one of the women.

Queston waved at the car again. 'Stay there. Shan't be long.'

Milward turned to him, alight like a gleeful child; it was the Maquis bond confirmed, Queston thought, smiling at him. The brotherhood of the fiddle; one of the few things to survive. Well, it was something.

'This is the wife. Shirl, this is that chap I told you about. The one driving through Slough, when we was loading that time, that I flogged some shirts to. Mr Western.'

'Queston.'

'Pleased to meet you,' the woman said. Under the dark woollen scarf her face was sharp-boned and shrewd, with a calculating Cockney toughness. She was about forty-five; wild strands of faded blonde hair wisped out over her fore-

head. Her skin was veined with the cold, but she looked as if she could cope easily with Milward, or anyone else.

'It was you did it,' Milward said eagerly. 'We talked about you, see? Well I dunno, fancy seeing you again.' He bubbled with enormous schoolboy delight. 'When we started thinking about going off, I remembered you. It was obvious you didn't belong nowhere, see? And I thought, if one chap can manage on his own, so can we. And Shirl thought so too.'

Queston looked at the wife, wrapped against the bleak morning, her nose and eyes red with cold; and he thought of the life she must lead. 'I hope you don't regret it.'

'We knew what we were doing.' Unexpectedly, she grinned cheekily at him, and jerked her head at Milward. 'They always get their own way. Let him go off without me and he'd be in trouble in no time. I know him. Anyway, London – lot of zombies they were, them and their old home town. Those bloody women with their slogans . . . what I say is, it's the people you want to be with that matter. You know? Not the place you're in.'

Milward let out a great embarrassed laugh. 'That's right.' He was not looking at her, but Queston could see the pleasure in his face.

His wife jabbed a finger at his large chest. 'Well, don't get big-headed about it, mate. I could do with a good square meal, all the same.'

'We'll make out,' he said. He was still grinning. 'Give us time.'

Then the light round them changed, and the sun came up, a muted orange blaze on the horizon under the heavy grey sky, and a long red edge of cloud.

'Why are you out so early?' Queston said.

'Early morning's safest for open land like this. No one about – police, I mean. They tour about a lot, you want to watch it. Not so many lately, though. We'll be off soon – we're lying up in a place at Chelmsford for the time being.'

'Chelmsford?' Queston stared. 'But that's not in the

dead lands – there must be people there. And it's a fair-sized town. And then there's the other business . . . how can you be there?'

'Things have been happening. Don't know what, exactly.' Milward pulled his coat round him. 'We kept miles clear of the towns for a long time, but after a bit we began finding a lot of them empty. Chelmsford is. No one there at all, that we've seen. Mind you, we never go right in, just find a place on the edge – there's been pretty nasty goings on in some of them. The buildings all beaten up, or burned, and stinking like merry hell. And bodies . . . But the other – when a place gets like that, it begins to go. That feeling that means you can't get near, it gets less. Funny thing. Like as if the old ghosts aren't bothering with their haunting, because there's no one left to haunt. Except us, and we don't seem to bring it on. Dunno what to make of it, but there it is.'

Queston said slowly: 'So when the people are gone, the barriers come down.'

'That's right.' Milward took a deep breath, after the stumbling uneasy effort of finding words, and became cheerful again. 'You ought to join up with us, you know. Be glad to have you. Things are easier with a goodish number. You find a place for the night, patch it up enough to keep the weather out, then have the floorboards out of the one next door for fires. All in a jiffy. Then we're asleep soon after dark – no light, see. It could be worse. Why not come with us?'

Oakley sounded the horn from the car.

'I wish we could,' Queston said, and he meant it. 'But we'd bring the Ministry on your tail. They'll be after us, if they're not now. I'd better go. If we ever lose them, we'll come back and join you.'

'You do that. Welcome any time.'

'Take some spuds with you,' the woman said, and although he protested she was away, in her flapping coat, tossing handfuls of loose potatoes into a sack. Milward walked with him to the gate, and nodded casually at the car.

'Morning.'

Oakley blinked at him. 'Hi.' He relaxed almost imperceptibly, and Queston saw his hand come empty out of his jacket pocket. Beth was upright and wide-eyed behind him, gazing anxiously out. The woman, coming up behind them, glanced shrewdly from her to Queston and back again: opened the car door and pushed the sack at Beth.

'Here y'are, duck. Have some spuds. Got more than we need.'

'O,' Beth said blankly. 'Thank you. Thank you very much.' She gave the woman a sudden brilliant smile, and Queston, watching, yearned for her.

He turned abruptly to Milward. 'Thanks a lot. I wish we could pay you for them.'

'Ah no – what can you do with money now? Anyway you paid me too much last time.' He grinned.

'They were good shirts. I've got one on now.'

'Have you?' The big man beamed with delight again. He moved round the front of the car with him, and the broad grin was still on his face, but he said softly, his eyes grave: 'D'you reckon we've got long left?'

Queston said quietly: 'Fifty-fifty chance.' For an instant they looked at each other. Then he got into the car, and wound down the window. 'See you again. Soon, maybe.'

'Go through Chelmsford. With the windows shut. Then branch left at the other end, New London Road – you'll find some petrol.'

'Thanks. Good luck.'

'Good luck, mate.'

Oakley raised his hand, and drove them away. The sun rose into the cloud, and the sky was dull grey again, and the light was cold.

It began as snow, gusting down in broad flakes on the wind, leaving a thin, shabby white coat over the roads and fields. Then the patches of sudden melting crystals on the windscreen changed to wavering streams, and it was raining. The white coat melted gradually away; the cold seemed less

intense. But the rain grew heavier, and all the sky was low and grey.

Beth had been sick. She lay huddled on the back seat, wrapped in a rug. Queston had taken over again at the wheel; he drove in silence with Oakley dozing at his side. They nosed cautiously into Chelmsford, and he found Milward had been right. There was a prickling uneasiness about the place, but no more than that; it allowed them through. But something far worse was the desolation; the streets littered with the wreck of some appalling nameless catastrophe, with houses in ruins, paving-stones torn up and scattered like playing-cards, torn and broken furniture tossed indiscriminately about. And the dead, lying here and there where they had fallen. Queston caught sight of what had been the face of one corpse, and afterwards drove very fast, backing and turning; from blocked streets to find a way through. When they were clear of the town the obsession for escape eased, and he slowed down, shuddering. Empty or not, the towns were places to be left alone.

Milward had been right about the petrol too. In the London road they came to the great bleak garage of an A.A. depot; the pumps were dry, but behind the main buildings they found a stack of about fifty two-gallon cans. There was no sign that anyone had lived in the place for months.

They splashed back to the car, laden. The rain had soaked them within seconds, and Oakley's hair was plastered mud-coloured to his head. Queston could feel his shirt wet against his back, under his jacket, and the rain trickling down his back.

'Who on earth left it there?'

'Must be a Ministry store. Better be on our way.'

'I wish we could find some food.'

'I have an idea about that,' Oakley said. He set the petrol cans down, and shook the water out of his eyes. 'You fill the tanks. I'll be back.'

He loomed up again through the rain as Queston was easing himself wet and cursing into the car.

'Blankets, candles, matches. Cigarettes, God bless them.

Cans – shove them on the floor.' He slid in beside Queston, gasping.

'*Kit!*' Beth said from behind them. Her voice was shrill with alarm. 'What happened to you?'

Queston, who had been gaping at the tins and bundles, turned sharply round, and saw that Oakley was shivering with more than the cold. His fists were tight folded, and great shudders running over him as if he were in a fit. His face was bloodless, grey-white. He said through clenched teeth: 'Find a house on the edge. With a garage. Time we stopped.'

As they drove, his self-control came back, and he talked. The stores had come from one of the forgotten, ten-year-old fall-out shelters. Not many towns had built communal shelters like Gloucester, he said; in a place the size of Chelmsford, families had bought their own. 'If they were scared enough, or rich enough. Those big houses round the depot were the right size for either.'

He had gambled on the shelters' emergency stocks being forgotten when the houses had been evacuated and cleared; and he had been right. In a dripping, overgrown garden he had spun the locks on the big steel doors that opened down into the earth. But he had not reckoned with the effect of going down.

'It was fantastic. I don't know how to describe it.' He laughed, shakily. 'And brother, when *I* don't know how . . . I've never been so scared. Simple stark fear. Not of anything in particular, just an absolute paralysed terror. If I hadn't been so damn hungry I'd never have got down. And if you two hadn't been here I'd never have got up again. It was like being shouted at. Like someone pushing you.'

'I know,' Queston said. 'I've had some.'

'Why wasn't it there at Gloucester?'

'God knows.'

They came to a between-towns road of big detached houses set back behind trees; deserted, but apparently untouched. They chose one half-way down. Queston broke in through a back window; then he carried Beth inside while Oakley put the car in the garage. She wound her arms tightly round

his neck, and he kissed her. The rain spangled and tossed her hair.

'Carrying you over the threshold, not quite in ideal circumstances. How d'you feel, love?'

'Better. I'm sorry to be a nuisance.'

'Don't talk rubbish. We'll eat soon. Got a pain anywhere?'

'No.' He put her down on the bare floor of a room in the front of the house. As he bent over her, he said curiously: 'Why do you call Oakley Kit?'

'Well . . . it's his name. Isn't it?' But she was not looking at him, and for a cold moment he had a sense that she was hiding something, not saying everything that she might say. Kit . . Kit . . . there was something about the name, or her use of it, that troubled him; and it was not only the intimacy of the shortening. He supposed 'Kit' must be short for Christopher. It was not a name he remembered ever hearing before. And yet, somewhere, there was an echo nagging in his head.

He shrugged his shoulders, and went out to the car. There was too much else to think about. A fire to dry them, for a beginning.

The wind was rising; the rain whipped their faces in vicious squalls. It was midday, but dark as a stormy twilight; in the garden the bare trees lashed and whimpered and groaned, and he had to shout to make Oakley hear.

'Are there tools in the garage?'

'I think so. A few.'

'Bring a hammer. And an axe.'

'What for?'

'You'll see. Damn!' Lightning ripped the horizon, and after it a long rumbling growl. Queston tripped over the doorstep.

'I dream of a very large Scotch. And a steak.' Oakley slammed the door against the wind, and helped him up. Outside, the rain pattered and swished at the walls. Thunder grumbled again, more loudly.

'Thunder's getting nearer. I don't like the sound of it. That noise snarls – it's like a summer storm. Only there

weren't any in the summer, were there? Just that crazy heat. Saving them up, maybe.'

Queston said: 'You may be right, at that.' White light flashed at the hall window, and he jerked again. 'I hope this place has got a conductor.'

'We don't live here. We'll be O.K.' Oakley paused at the door of the room, his arms full of boxes, and half turned. 'Maybe I'm nuts, but doesn't it strike you as odd, the way nothing has ever happened to us? Floods, typhoid, riots – but never where we are. Quakes – but only the fringe of them touches us. And when we're in the middle of one, none of us gets a scratch. Only bumps on the head, from another kind of source.'

'By the law of averages, something should happen any moment now.'

'No, I mean it. If this is coincidence it's a helluva big one. Damn, you're the theoretician. Hasn't it occurred to you?'

'It's a good romantic idea. You surprise me.'

'Ah, drop dead,' Oakley said resentfully. He opened the door.

O yes, Queston thought, it's occurred to me all right. He had thought of it, in the times when he still believed thinking worth while. The rovers, the rootless, those not under the spell – perhaps, because they couldn't be controlled mentally, they could be brought no physical harm. If it was the same force working the two things.

Or perhaps they were simply allowed to go free. To start again. With no frontiers to extend, no homes to guard against imagined attack, they had never been the destroyers. There was no danger in them. He had imagined, sometimes, a great line of them stretching through the centuries, differing in nature but not in kind: the wandering scholars, the Romanies, the monks and adventurers and aimless, amiable men. The weak ones. The mercenaries, who would indifferently kill for their hire but never motivate the war. The travellers, wandering all countries without discriminate love, in search of something they might one day find but

would never recognize. And himself, Oakley, Milward; the nameless ones adrift unharmed on the dead roads now. A pretty negative crew, but without malice; capable of learning a lesson. Yes, that's right, Christopher, it's odd nothing has ever happened to us, we must be the chosen people. There's just one thing. What about Mandrake? Nothing happened to him either, unless he did get run down. Like hell he got run down; he's still there, somewhere, waiting. Is he one of the chosen people too? In this neat little set-up, what about him?

But he said nothing, and he followed Oakley into the room. It was cold; draughts gusted in from the windows. He bent to drop his load of tins, and as he did so he caught a glimpse of the journalist's face which sent his mind suddenly blank.

Oakley was standing looking down at Beth, curled unhappily in her blanket on the floor, and it was as if a mask had dropped, leaving his face naked. Startled, Queston saw there tenderness and compassion and a kind of regret, in a depth that he could not understand.

The wind blustered and grew, shaking windows and doors; once or twice they heard a slate crash down from the roof, and sometimes a sprinkling of mortar-grey soot spattered down into the hearth, puffing smoke out from the fire. They had followed Milward's advice, wrenching floorboards up from a back room; the heavy wood burned hot and glowing as coal.

They roasted potatoes in the embers at either side; heated stew in tins, drank the juice from tins of fruit. Even Beth ate well, and the storm shrieking outside seemed less alarming. Queston and Oakley sat half-wrapped in blankets, drying their shirts and trousers by the fire. Through the rain-blurred windows they could see trees whipped to and fro by the gale.

Beth lay with her head on Queston's lap, and he stroked her hair. 'The last time I did this you were asleep. In a house,

beside a fire. You looked wonderful. I didn't dare touch you when you were awake, but just for that moment – '

She smiled up at him. 'I wasn't asleep. I felt your hand on my head, so gentle. I remember breathing very softly, and keeping my eyes shut, in case you thought you'd woken me, and moved.'

Queston felt slightly foolish. 'You mean you were pretending? And you never told me?'

She said lovingly: 'O darling, don't be silly.'

Oakley lurched to his feet on the other side of the fire. 'Close your eyes, honey.' He dropped his blanket, and pulled his trousers back on.

Queston was suddenly certain that the words had been chosen at that moment to ridicule him. It was as if they were both joined in secret mockery. A cold flicker of jealousy went through him; he said, irritable and martyred: 'You'd both better get some sleep. I'll keep an eye open, just in case.'

'Good idea,' Oakley said cheerfully. He looked completely disreputable, with an untidy red bristle of beard above his crumpled shirt. He lay down on the floor, pulled the blanket over him, and was asleep almost at once. Beth was already breathing long and evenly. Childishly suspicious, Queston raised her nearer eyelid with one finger to see if she were really asleep. The upturned white glared, inhuman, and he hastily took his hand away again.

There was an hour of the rain driving down, streaking and battering louder even than the wind. Queston sat listening, in the bare room dim-lit by the fire. The hot wood was glowing a duller red now, fringed with ash, but there was still warmth enough, and he put on no more fuel; safer to avoid the chance of sparks or smoke from the chimney giving them away, even through this filthy rain.

Out of an immense weariness, he sighed, and heard the sound as if its sadness came from somewhere else. Even if they were to survive, what would be the point of it all? On all sides men who had refused to trust other men had brought about their own destruction: what guarantee was there that those who remained would not, in the end, do the

same? He had gone his own way before, apart from them; out of what had been, he realized now, a kind of contemptuous arrogance. They had been worth nothing to him; they had been nothing more than the chessmen in an academic game that he played to fill in the weary time of living. If living had held little point for him then, what could it have for him now?

But as he looked at Beth, he knew. She delighted in the world, even now; and in him. On their trust of one another they could build a world of their own – whatever happened, however little was left. There would be enough men and women like Milward's group, living on their own faith that survival was worth the trying.

He watched the firelight on her cheek, and ached for her even through the exhaustion of his body; it had been too long since they had made love. The delirium of that was the symbol of all he now had: the urgent surrender that was a gain, the total involvement in another mind and body that finally showed him himself. He thought: I would do anything to keep her from hurt. All my being depends on her, she is all of me. He thought in a kind of yearning agony of the way they had thrust and twined and afterwards lain quiet together. And he thought, in a different anguish, of the day in the caravan when he had bullied her into confession of things in the past: hell, that was a terrible day, what would be the significance now of things in the past . . .

Kit. O God, Kit. That was where the echo had come from. It was in that confession, talking of a man she had loved, that she had used the name before. Suddenly Queston was sitting very still, and the warmth of the fire did not keep him from feeling deadly cold. *Kit.* He heard in his mind Beth's involuntary cry of anxiety, as Oakley came to them grey and shaking out of the streaming rain.

Despising himself as he did it, he searched fiercely back for every word that she had said, before, and found fearful new meaning in them all. 'He wasn't old . . . it was a writer. His name was Kit. He wrote plays.' Hadn't Oakley said

something about writing plays? And then Beth, again: '. . . he turned up any hour of the day or night, it was because of his work . . . We weren't living together, at the time. I used to wish we were. I loved him very much . . .' And when they had met Oakley in Gloucester, he had known Beth's name.

He needed no more than that. He was shaking as he sat there, looking at them both. Masochism seared into his imagination, so that the two sleeping figures lying apart beside the fire came together in his mind; and he did not know which was worse, the pictures he drew of them from years before or the hundred possible spectres that rose sneering at him out of the time since Gloucester. And he had convinced himself so soon that Oakley and Beth had become lovers again, since then, that the shaking turned from self-hurt to blind rage.

Suddenly unable to watch them any longer, he stumbled up and went out of the room; up the bare, creaking wooden stairs and into the room above. Through the rain-streaked windows the road below lay grey and empty, as dead as the bleak garden. Queston paced to and fro, trying in black misery not to think, not to guess and imagine; but it was no good. His one hope swept away from him, he was on the edge of an abyss whose existence he had never known before. Before he loved Beth, he had been a solitary; but in committing himself to her, he had changed that for ever. If she had betrayed him, there could be no going back to solitude; there could only be loneliness.

When the empty cold became worse even than his jealousy, he went back downstairs. Oakley sat upright, and grinned at him, scratching his head so that the hair stood up in fair spikes. 'Jeeze, you sounded like a herd of elephants up there. You look pooped, come and get some sleep. I'll take over for a bit.'

'I'm all right,' Queston said coldly. A sense of martyrdom was some comfort, at least.

Beth said sleepily: 'O come and lie down, darling. You do need rest.'

So she was awake too. Of course. They would have made the most of his absence.

'Come over here.' Oakley got to his feet. 'I think I'll keep an eye out upstairs too, the view must be wider. Hell, it's cold, though, away from the fire. Didn't you freeze up there? I'm taking this.'

He went out, clutching his blanket round him, and they heard his feet clump up the echoing stairs.

Beth extricated one arm and held it out to him, lying smiling upwards in the firelight. He thought, dispassionately: she's beautiful, I've never seen her look so beautiful.

He said, his voice flat: 'He was your lover, wasn't he? He's the man you lived with.' He longed for her to laugh at him; to deny it even though it might be true.

Something in Beth's face died, and she drew back her arm slowly and lay very still, looking up at him. It seemed a long time before she said: 'Yes.'

'You've both been acting very well. It never even crossed my mind.'

'It was all over years ago, darling.'

'O, sure,' Queston said.

'Truly it was.' She sat up, wide-eyed. 'I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but there didn't seem any point. We thought it would be more sensible all round not to.'

An immense bitter anger spurted up in him as she said 'we'. She looked very young, her hair rumpled and her skin shining, and for a moment he felt as helpless as though he were talking to a child. He said: 'I thought we were as close as two people can be. Obviously my standards aren't the same as yours. You like to keep things hidden, you like to live secret. Haven't you ever heard of lying by omission?'

'What good would it have done to tell you? You know what happened when I did before. You'd only have been hurt, the way you are now.' She stood up, tugging awkwardly at her sweater like a schoolgirl, and came towards him; but then stopped a few feet away.

'I shan't touch you, don't worry,' he said in disgust. 'I'll leave that to our friend from now on. First thing to-

morrow we'll drive back to Milward and his people, and I'll join up with them. Then you two can have the car and go off together.' Somewhere in his mind the small objective censor was showing him his own vehemence, the pitch of his voice and the cold lines of his face; he could see them as if he were acting, and yet not control them.

Beth said patiently: 'You're being foolish. I promise you nothing's happened.'

'How am I to believe that, when you don't tell me until I force you to?'

'Look,' she said. 'In love, you don't wait until somebody's proved their honesty before you start trusting them. The trust has to come first. Then if you trust them enough, they'll be honest with you – as a kind of reward, if you like.'

'My God,' he said, appalled. 'Do you really believe that?'

'Yes, I do. David, please, I love you. I don't feel anything at all for Kit Oakley. Can't you even try to trust me?'

The fire spluttered again behind her; outside, the wind and rain were beating at the house more savagely than before. Out of the black sea of his rage. Queston surfaced into a great weariness. Nothing would ever come to any good; no one would ever act in any way but this, the way she took. Faith would always be blurred by suspicion; honesty always hedged about with some kind of precaution. Mandrake, Beth: they perpetuated one another.

But it had to stop somewhere. He said slowly: 'I can try. I haven't much choice.'

Overhead there was a hollow thump, and the sound of Oakley's feet scraping the floor.

Beth jerked at the noise. 'Don't tell him you know. Things would be impossible. We can't afford to have everyone under an even bigger strain. Not now.'

He laughed abruptly, and thought the sound was like a groan. 'Covering things up to the end. My open, straightforward girl.' He stared sneering at the appeal in her eyes; and then suddenly everything was gone from their faces, to leave only a fierce communion of loving. Or so it seemed

to Queston. She came towards him, tentatively, and he took both her hands; even now, he thought, he saw his own life in her face. He did not kiss her, but held her hands so tightly that he felt his nails sink into the skin.

Then they heard Oakley running down the stairs, and he burst into the room, dishevelled and urgent.

'Outside. Look.'

Queston contemplated him coldly, bleak with exhausted jealousy; but when he turned to look outside, everything that was in his mind fell away. He dropped Beth's hands.

It was moving slowly past the house: a shadowy shape through the trees. A black Ministry car. He crossed to the window; then ducked hurriedly as two other cars followed it, faster, and vanished up the road. Suddenly the house seemed restless, uneasy.

'They're after us.'

'Thank God for the rain. No tyre tracks.' Oakley came to join him, and looked out at the bare garden; dark, hanging clouds held down the afternoon, and thunder was rumbling again overhead. Rain hissed down the windows in malicious gusts.

'Jesus, look at it. Well – do we go or stay?'

Queston looked at Beth, standing tousled and anxious. She said: 'They mustn't catch you.'

'Come on.' Oakley began piling blankets and tins together.

'We shouldn't get Beth out again in this. Perhaps they've gone straight through.'

'I'll have another look from upstairs.'

He was down again swiftly. 'They're searching every house in the road. Two cars parked up the far end, and they're working down this way. Great thugs in Ministry uniform, and one man in a raincoat. We have to get out, David, quick.'

'How the devil did they know we were here?'

'Second sight, maybe. Or your friends in the field.'

'It wasn't them,' Queston said. 'Anything else, but it wasn't them.'

'Have it your way. I just don't have your touching faith in people.'

'I haven't had it long either.' Deliberately he looked across at Beth. 'But there doesn't seem to be much else left to have faith in, now.'

'There's always luck,' Oakley said, his pale eyes glinting. 'Sweet simple luck, which is what the world runs on. And brother, do we need it now. Come on.'

They bundled into the car, Queston and Beth at the front. The rain drove in at the broad back window, through the open garage doors; great blurring streaks of water broken into drops only by the gusting wind. The roar of it was all round them, and the deeper growl of thunder overhead. A white branch of lightning split the sky above the trees, and the electric snarl of it cracked and rumbled down. Beth said shakily, and they understood her: 'I wonder which is worse?'

'*Now*,' Queston said. The engine howled up through his fingers, bringing a kind of delight; he let power flare into the car, and swung it backwards out of the gates, round in a shrieking tight turn and away up the empty road, towards an east unbroken black as the sky all around.

'Caught them with their pants down,' Oakley shouted, behind him. 'Inside a house. Driver's gone tearing in after them. No sign. We'll have a good start. Ah, here they come–'

Queston skidded round a bend, and houses cut off their view of the road behind. The air was growing dark, as the muffled afternoon light died behind the clouds; there was a ghostliness already round the edges of buildings and trees. Lightning flashed suddenly round them with a vicious simultaneous crack, and Beth flinched against him. He heard somewhere through the din of the storm the clattering thud of bricks falling to the road.

Rain whipped at the car; the windscreen-wipers flicked desperately under streaming arcs. Queston clenched his teeth as he forced the car through the juddering wind that tore and strained at the wheel. He was driving diagonally into an easterly gale.

Through the gloom he saw a turning ahead. Oakley yelled: 'I think I can see them. Go south!'

'No. The coast.' He was certain of it, but there was no reason at work; only an instinctive mastering mechanism that drove him as he drove the car. He fought the wind with his hands and wrists, throwing the car recklessly forward but never quite into the skid that would hurl them off the road.

The land was low now all round, through the blur of rain and dying light. For an instant Queston gasped under a complete convinced sense of familiarity: I have been here before, I have been here before . . . Then it vanished. In a long flicker of lightning he glimpsed on the horizon two rounded shadows, unidentifiable, flashing into sight and out again; they were the mysterious shapes he had seen from the field where Milward and his group had worked, but nearer and bigger now.

Lightning came again, dancing behind them; the two shadows were great spheres, like dark new planets towering over the earth, or the impossible domes of a dream city. 'In Xanadu . . .' His mind groped as he struggled to head the car into the gale. Thunder roared and bellowed round them, the air shook with it; he was conscious of being very small. Anything could happen, anything was possible. Where were they?

Beth had seen the strange shapes too, she touched his arm. 'David, look! What is it? Out there!'

Oakley called through the noise: 'Coming up behind us. Got their lights on. About a mile back.'

'Need ours soon.' Queston was peering into the murk. The sky flared, and the two dark spheres jumped into sudden sight again, ahead, to the left of the road. This time Oakley saw.

'Jesus!'

Beth's voice rose, and cracked. 'What are they? O David, they're horrible. Don't go near them, don't – '

'Take your choice – Martians or the Ministry.'

'Martians nothing,' Oakley shouted, gripping the back of the seat between them. The car was pitching and swaying

like a boat. 'It's the Bradwell warning station. The laser. And damned dangerous if it's still switched on.'

'Bradwell?'

'Built around 1972. Covers Europe and the Channel. Mandrake was behind it, in his early days. Peace through watchfulness, that was his line then. They moved about three thousand people to build it there – Christ-awful row at the time. And some nasty things happened when the back to your roots game began.'

'D'you think Mandrake got back to Oxford, when we left him?'

'Before the place caved in – or afterwards?'

The sky raged and thundered over them; blue-white light flashed on wet roofs, and houses silent and dark.

'This is some kind of town.'

'Maldon.'

The word rang through Queston's spinning brain like a trumpet, and suddenly the emptiness that had always been a part of him was peopled, and everything was there clear, clearer than it had ever been. Mandrake had been right in one thing: ideas could come true. But not only new ideas; ideas that had been conceived a dozen centuries ago. Maldon . . . Maldon . . . 'There was a battle there once–'

'They're catching up!' Beth was staring over her shoulder. Queston wrenched himself out of his mind, glanced in his mirror, and saw swaying points of yellow light like two pairs of eyes. The sky was almost dark now; he could not make out the shapes of the cars. He slowed slightly, saw a turning on his right and skidded down it, rocking the car hard down on one side. Twisting round two more corners, he came out on an open road sweeping south through fields flat as the sea. Towering over them, on the horizon, flickering light and dark in the lightning crashing continuously now out of the sky, the two dark spheres of the laser station loomed bigger still. It was a poor road, and he had to switch on his lights; the car leapt and jerked. He looked in his mirror, and saw the yellow eyes reappear.

'We passed a danger notice.' Beth stared back out of the rear window. 'I couldn't see what else it said.'

'Faster than light,' Oakley said softly. Through the thunder, Queston could hear his voice, and the words seemed meaningless. But he thought they had the intimate allusiveness of a private joke; and he heard Beth laugh. He gripped the wheel harder.

The headlamps caught a board, and staring red letters: DANGER.

'There again.' Oakley peered swiftly. 'It's the edge of the radar field. They leave a terrific margin, of course, and there's no danger from the laser in this direction. Maybe the radar isn't working now, anyway – you can't tell whether the scanners are moving.'

'It'll be working all right. That's what's caused all the trouble since the beginning.' Queston's lights picked up another notice: BRADWELL 100 YARDS. Suddenly he was swept with rage at the monstrous, devastating suspicion that had become both power and paralysis; and the furtive, watchful bulk of the radar station seemed one vast symbol of everything that had woken the earth into violence. He said abruptly: 'I'm going in there.'

'David, no!'

Ahead of them he saw the main gate of the station, and the rough side road leading in; and he saw that the entrance was clear. Broken by the storm, or by some other violence, the fence lay flattened for several yards, and the gate hung deserted and open at one side. He turned hard to the left, switching off his lights, and plunged down through the entrance to an uneven causeway of rough stones. The sense of familiarity grew stronger: how did he know this place?

He wound down the window as he drove, and put his head out; the wind lashed full into his face with icy, whipping rain, and he drove as fast as he dared down the bumpy road, watching its dark edge. Oakley shouted at him; he caught the word 'tunnel' but nothing more. He could feel Beth's hand nervously gripping his knee, her fingers tight and afraid.

Then suddenly there was an iron gate before them; no fence, only a gate alone, barring the road between towering posts. He thrust his foot at the brake, and heard a tyre burst, and the car slewed giddily round and stopped.

He looked back. The yellow eyes of light were turning towards them off the main road.

'Stay there.'

He ran through the raging rain to the gate, but it was locked. In a flare of lightning he saw that it barred an entrance where the road tilted down into the earth, and he remembered Oakley's shout. This tunnel was the only way into the station: the only safe way.

He stood under the storm, and before him there was only the gate that reared up alone, with nothing on either side, barring a road that vanished under the earth, and beyond that nothing again. Only the open fields stretching all round, shining wet in the flash of lightning, white under a black sky.

He knew there could not be much time now, and he knew he was glad. He went back to the car. 'The gun there, love, quick.' Beth handed him the revolver. Oakley was already out in the rain with his own.

'Stay inside,' Queston said to her. Exhilaration had hold of him, he could feel his lips wanting to stretch into a smile. But she must stay safe. His voice whipped out curt in the wind. 'Get down on the floor. Curl up. And don't move.' He wished he could see her face.

The first car drew up ten yards away; their own lay sideways, blocking the road. Oakley pulled him down behind the bonnet, and a spotlight leapt out from the other car. But the beam shone harmlessly over their heads, lighting the rain into swift slanting lines, and did not move.

The lightning snapped in jagged streaks now, and the sky roared, as if all the elements bore down to batter at them. It was a storm more violent than anything Queston had ever seen, and they stood at its centre. And the place was alive, the flat dead beaten fields and the marshes beyond: under the rage of the rain and wind, they hummed with a life and a controlled menace that he could sense like an animal smelling

death. He dug his fingers into the hard rubber of the car tyre.

Behind the spotlight, figures moved.

'Queston!'

The voice was faint, shouting into the wind, with a strain in it more than the effort to be heard.

'Queston! Come out, you and the other, and the girl will be safe.'

It was impossible, but there could be no mistake.

'My God,' Queston said. 'It's Mandrake!'

'It can't be. Not here – '

'It's Mandrake, I tell you.'

'Was he shamming? Hell no, the man was nearly dead. We took him less than a mile from Oxford, from his roots, and he nearly died – '

'You must have been right about Oxford. It must have gone. Like Gloucester. So somehow that released him from the pull.'

'He's a fiend,' Oakley said hoarsely. He sounded almost afraid.

'Queston!' The voice came again through the storm. The beam of light was abruptly cut off. But in the same moment lightning flared once more, and they both saw one of the uniformed Ministry drivers moving silently up along the edge of the road.

Oakley shouted: 'Get back, or I'll shoot.'

The driver jerked up his arm; in the chaos of thunder and rain they barely heard the shot, but the bullet rang near them, glancing off the car. White light flashed again, briefly flooding the road, and in the same moment Oakley fired across the bonnet and the man in uniform twisted sideways like a dancer, clutching his chest, and fell backwards to lie still in the field.

And Queston, crouching, felt the first gentle tremor of the earth.

He screamed a warning at Oakley, lunged for the door and pulled Beth out of the car. They staggered as the second tremor came, a long hideous ripple over the earth as if it were

water; and still the thunder was crashing overhead and the sky awash with white light. The storm was the voice of the earthquake, roaring like a great rage. And then almost at once the third shock came, a rippling, juddering shake that sent all three of them stumbling helpless back off the road like swimmers caught by a wave. Clutching at Beth, clutching for his own balance at the air, Queston heard a roar that was not thunder, and through it the thin squeal of voices in mortal fear; and on the road he saw the twin headlight beams of the two Ministry cars shake, and lurch, and gradually tilt up to the sky.

When they were almost vertical the arms of light lurched more wildly than before, so that for a swift horrible moment it was as if they were alive, waving for help. Then they leapt round in a rushing arc and suddenly died in the dark; and through the rearing lightning he saw the long gaping black fissure that had swallowed them; and heard no more cries; and there was nothing.

Nothing but Mandrake, standing before them at the edge of the road, alone, his raincoat flailing open and his face contorted against the wind and rain. The lightning glinted on the gun in his hand, and Queston saw with a cold shock that he was laughing: a grimacing perversion of laughter, shaking his body but not his hand or his eyes, and the more frightful because in the howl of the storm it made no sound.

In the same instant he realized that his own hand was empty, and that in the tossing of the earthquake he had lost his gun.

He had forgotten Oakley. Beside him, the journalist fired and leapt at Mandrake in the same swift lunge. But Mandrake's gun was too quick for him, and in mid-stride his small body spun round and fell.

Beth screamed. Queston stood limply holding her, staring without movement as if he watched out of a dream, while Mandrake raised his arm again in glaring triumph and took deliberate aim.

No sound came through the tearing wind; only the face changed. The gun was empty. Mandrake's dark, young-old

face crumpled out of triumph; and Queston woke out of his spell and flung Beth aside, and stumbled towards him with destruction in his hands.

The Minister stared for a moment in animal fear, and then he turned and ran. Racing, half-falling, his coat flapping like the wings of a great bird, he made first for the main road; then veered away from the long dark gap that yawned before him in the earth, and ran with long wild strides over the fields. Before him, the two dark spheres loomed in the flickering sky. High up, Queston saw now the skeletal outline of the radar scanners; and saw that one of them, shifted out of alignment by the earthquake, leaned crazily downwards now towards the part of the field where Mandrake ran.

Queston shouted in horror to no one but the wind: '*The laser . . . !*'

It was as if Mandrake hit an invisible deadly barrier. His scream came back on the wind, a swift sound cut off as soon as it began; and suddenly he was gone.

At once the storm erupted into a new tremendous violence. All the earth and sky seemed to flash and roar and explode round the spot where Queston stood; all reality disintegrated into a crashing chaos, drawing him into it so that he had no existence of his own. Deaf and blind with the force of it, he became aware through the blazing roar in his senses of a surrealist image dancing in disorder: the twin domes of the laser station out over the saltings, dark against the awful brilliance of the sky. Blue light ran over their rounded outline like water, like the leaping flame-edge of an eclipsed sun; and as he watched, suddenly first one and then the other exploded, blurring the picture into a great orange glare. He saw glowing shards of metal, flung into the air, rise and curve and fall lazily down, and through the howl of the storm the new splitting note of destruction came to him on the gale.

Then gradually, very gradually, the roar and blaze of the storm began to die. The lightning flickered down, and the thunder began to grumble more gently, farther away; the wind faltered, and the viciousness went out of the rain.

Beth said: 'What happened to him?'

'The laser. His favourite toy. Mr Mandrake's gone to join the Intelligence. Maybe they were one and the same thing all along.'

'I don't understand.'

'The radar at that station was set to pick up and identify any approaching foreign missile, and train a laser on it – a fantastic beam of light that vaporizes anything in its path. So, pouf – no more missile. Only something happened to the radar, in that earthquake. It picked up Mandrake or some other object instead.'

She nodded, dully, and turned to where Oakley lay in the rank grass. 'Christopher.'

'Yes,' Queston said.

He knelt and turned Oakley over, wiping the mud from his cheek. The heart-beat was strong. There were small patches of blood on both front and back of his jacket; the bullet seemed to have gone straight through the shoulder without deflection, narrowly missing the collarbone.

'He's all right,' he said. 'He'll be all right.'

He stood up, and looked helplessly out across the dark saltings, through the rain that had died now to a fine insistent mist. Beth came close to him, and he held her tightly for a moment.

'Everyone'll be all right now,' he said. 'If there's anyone else left. Just the three of us, if we don't find anyone. The earth will go back to sleep now. We have to make sure we let it lie.'

He took the belt from her coat and used it to tie Oakley's injured upper arm carefully to his side. Then he picked him up out of the wet grass and carried him across to the car; together he and Beth manoeuvred the limp figure inside to lie on the back seat. Queston tried the engine; it seemed to be undamaged still. If he drove carefully, it would be possible to get back to the main road across the fields, skirting the long black fissure gaping silent in the earth.

'I'll have to jack up the front for a while,' he said. 'But see if you can do something to fix up his arm.'

He took the spare tyre from the boot, and began to change the front wheel whose tyre had blown. He was not quite sure why it should suddenly be as important to him to look after Oakley as it was to look after Beth. But he knew that there was a lot to be done.

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There were no stickers saying 'MANDRAKE MUST GO'

Instead, people's eyes clouded
with awed obedience at
the mention of the all-powerful
Minister of Planning's name.
But
why were people afraid?
Where had everyone gone?
What force was dragging Britain,
city by city, towards
a horrible, unnatural end?
Was it

MANDRAKE?

Cover photographs by Michael Busselle