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*They're back—in the kickiest,  
'round the world caper of their career*

# The Beatles in **HELP!**

a novel by Al Hine

Plus 8 pages of exclusive photos from the movie.



*Now the craziest movie ever made  
starring Ringo, Paul, George and John*



## ❧ THE STORY THUS FAR? ❧

A lovely Eastern girl, chosen as a sacrifice to the abominable blood goddess Kaili, has sent Ringo Starr a fan letter containing a Sacred Ring.

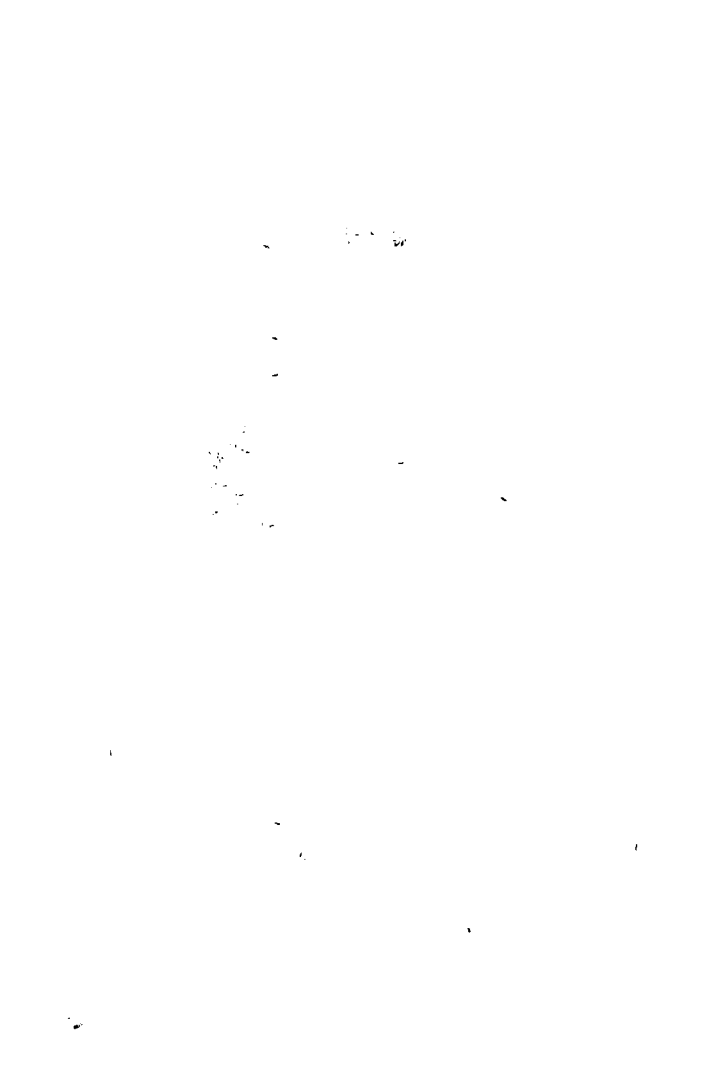
Clang, the vicious High Priest of the Kaili cult, accompanied by merciless cutthroats, has sped to England to regain the Sacred Ring.

## ❧ MEANWHILE . . . ❧

Ringo is stuck with the cursed circlet—for no power known to man or Beatle can dislodge it from the left index finger of his star-doomed hand.

- *Can the lads from Liverpool defeat the terrifying forces of the inscrutable East?*
- *Will Ringo ever play the drums again?*
- *Will the Beatles ever laugh and love again?*

## ❧ READ ON . . . ❧



**The Beatles in**



**HELP!**

**AL HINE**

A DELL BOOK / an original novel

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FROM THE WRITHING STATUE OF THE MANY-ARMED KAILI—super goddess of super wickedness—a dim, blood-red light bathed the temple auditorium. Clang, Kaili's High Priest, curled his cruel lips in a sneer of ecstasy, his own complexion spooky red in the reflection of illumination from the goddess. Red-bathed also were the faces of the faithful, swaying and chanting in gleeful anticipation of a sacrifice to come.

Clang raised his hands in the awesome silence of the temple.

"In the name of Preverti," Clang intoned, "daughter of the mountains, whose embrace with Rani made the whole world tremble . . ."

"Tremble!" a thousand pious voices chanted in response.

"Tremble," Clang continued, counting the house with a practiced eye. "Whose name is the Night."

Clang made the slightest of nods toward the far end of the auditorium and a sub-priest swung open the double door. Through the door came the Victim, a young girl, nude and painted shocking red from head to toe. She lay stretched out on a slab like dhooli carried toward Clang and the altar by a squad of frozen-faced, dedicated Thugs, every one of them six feet or over in well-muscled height.

Clang raised his arms once more in benediction.

"Whose name is Baleful," he chanted. "Whose name is the Terrible. Whose name is the Inaccessible. Whose name is the Black Mother, Mother of Darkness."

His congregation moaned in abasement and thorough satisfaction.

"Kaili!" rose the response in one wail from myriad throats.

The tall Thugs had reached Clang. They removed the body of the Victim from the dhooli with the careful skill of a TV surgical team and transferred it to the blood-red table directly in front of the goddess. The Victim, heavily sedated with the most modern and miracle of anaesthetics, still showed some evidence of dissatisfaction. She stirred uneasily on the table and whimpered unhappily.

"Sssh!" Clang chided her with grandfatherly concern. To the congregation he picked up his ritual: "We turn our faces to Kaili Ma, Drinker of Blood, Black Mother."

"Kaili Ma!" the crowd echoed him.

An assistant handed Clang an elegantly curved knife. Aside from the marking "Made in Germany" just below its jeweled handle, it was as authentic an example of Oriental craftsmanship as had been seen since the Crusades. Clang brandished it aloft, catching and reflecting the ominous red light from the statue of the goddess.

"Killer of Demons!" Clang raised his voice to near hysteria. "Drink of this vessel, gorge on this blood, our offering, as you gorged on the blood of Raktavi and his Thousand Giants. Drink!"

Clang whirled with balletic grace to plunge the Sacred Knife into the throat of the helpless Victim.

But before he could finish his downswing, a hand intervened. Ahme, the beautiful and imperious Priestess of the Cult of Kaili, stood between Clang and the sacrifice.

"Hold!" Ahme protested with a tone of authority.

"Hold?" Clang inquired, his knife still raised.

"The Ring," Ahme said, pointing to the bewildered Victim. "She is not wearing the Sacrificial Ring. She cannot be sacrificed without the Ring."

Clang stepped back and scratched his head in bewilderment with the Sacred Knife, nodding in forced agreement.

"Where is the Ring?" he asked. "Search her."



Thugs moved forward to inspect the body of the Victim with respectful efficiency.

"The Ring, the Ring, the Ring," the congregation chanted in frustration.

At the same moment, sleek and efficient young men from Clang's intelligence department were feeding information into the electronic computer at the rear of the temple. Sensitive transistors nudged each other, lights blinked, coded tape spewed from a slit in the mechanism disgorging binary information quickly translated by priest-technicians: "Tiffany's, Cartier's, Woolworth's," the chief-priest technician muttered. "Nonsense! Atlantic City boardwalk auctions, pooh. Ringo! What is Ringo?!!"

More information was fed into the computer while the thronged faithful chanted.

"Ah-hah!" cried the chief-priest technician as he motioned to a standby Thug.

"Fetch the television pickup and projector," the priest technician directed. "Tell Wing-Sal to put up the screen."

Behind the Victim, a Thug quickly unrolled a large movie screen. The other Thug, working with the priest technician had set up a combined television receptor-projector at the far end of the auditorium. The moans of the congregation were halted in midvoice as the screen caught an image and an indescribable sound.

"She loves me, yeah, yeah, yeah!" came hoarsely from the screen, the new chant drowned in the yelps and screams of other, different worshipers bounced by Comstat from Great Britain.

Across the screen, looming like giant shadows over the mob in the temple, the Beatles played and sang their siren songs. The camera moved in for a close shot of Ringo, brushing his cymbals and then executing a brilliant series of rim-shots on his snare drum. From the index finger of his left hand one special ring caught the television light and outgleamed all the other rings with which he was adorned. From it came an inner fire, a spiritual glow transcending even television's dross.

A sigh like the hiss of a cobra ran through the audience in Kaili's temple. Clang signaled with one bronzed hand and Thug ushers passed out darts to worshipers in the forward rows. They began to throw.

A colored dart caught Ringo's shadow image on the screen smack in his right eyeball. Another to the center of his forehead. One to the cheek. Still another stabbed his heart. One touched his cheek before wavering and falling to the altar floor.

"The Ring, the Ring, the Ring!" Kaili's devotees chanted.

"Shocking!" Clang commented.

Bhuta, Clang's faithful assistant, handed him a dart and Clang tossed it with deadly accuracy at Ring's Adam's apple.

On her table the Victim twisted to watch, writhing now in pleasure, murmuring "Ringo!" in near ecstasy.

"Shocking!" cried the voices of the faithful.

Ahme had come to Clang's side and was showing him an Eastern Railway guide and a BOAC timetable.

Clang turned the pages of the BOAC booklet and tapped a beautifully manicured fingernail at the most convenient flight.

"Monstrous!" he turned to his audience.

"Monstrous!" they cried.

"Ringo!" the Victim squealed.

"Despair!" Clang intoned.

"Despair!" his followers echoed.

"Make the necessary preparations for our immediate departure," Clang said sotto voce to Ahme.

"They are made," Ahme said.

"At once," Bhuta edged in jealously. Ahme sneered at him, but he was not moved. "Without delay. And with accompanying Thugs."

"Over the water we must go," Clang said. "Calcutta to London. Bhuta."

"You ask of me, Master?"

"Obedience and love," Clang said.

"This is so," Bhuta said, bowing.

"Ahme," Clang said.

"This is so," Ahme said.

"The Ring," Clang's voice vibrated.

"The Ring!" answered the single voice of his followers.

"To England!" Clang cried. "To England for Kaili!"

He threw his last dart and it stuck in Ringo's ear on the screen. As Clang left the altar stage, he turned to a visiting clergyman, observing the procedure for the International Council of Prelates.

"I'm sorry," Clang said. "Temple only half-filled. Not like the old days."

"I know," the visiting clergyman said. "It's a real problem everywhere."

"Ringo!" squealed the victim, still on her table.

**PLEASE DO NOT REVEAL  
TO YOUR FRIENDS  
HOW THIS NOVEL BEGINS**

IN ENGLAND, CLANG'S TARGET, ISLAND OF THE DESECRATION of the Sacred Ring of Kaili, things went on much as usual.

Two women loitered on the pavement of a terraced street, waiting and watching for the Beatles to come home after their latest performance. The modest yet tasteful houses of George, John, Paul and Ringo fronted the pavement opposite the waiting crones, identical fronts differentiated only by doors painted red, green, orange and blue.

Around the far corner with a respectably muted squeak of tires careened the Beatles' spotless and shining Rolls.

"Wave at them," the older woman said.

"I don't like to," her companion complained, lifting one arm limply.

"Go on," the first woman said. "Wave. Really."

"Shall I?" her friend put more motion and emotion into her gesture. "They expect it, don't they?"

Both women dutifully flailed their arms in the air.

The boys, spying this tribute from the rear seat of the Rolls, waved back heartily and this, in its turn, excited the women to more frenzied waving.

"Lovely lads," the first woman said, "and so natural. I mean, adoration has not gone to their heads one jot, has it? You know what I mean—success?"

The other woman continued to wave even after the doors had closed behind her heroes.

"Just so natural," she said, "and still the same as they were before . . . not spoilt them one bit, just ordinary lads."

As the four ordinary lads popped through their respective red, green, orange and blue doors separately, they were reunited in the single, huge and totally extraordinary house that existed behind the four humble fronts. Carpets that had cost a king's ransom (a minor Balkan king, but nonetheless a king) partially covered a thick expanse of green grass that stretched across half the living space. Rare crystal chandeliers shone elegantly over the museum treasures that were its furnishings.

The four idols flashed one another smiles of relief at having once more found sanctuary in their own insulated menage. Only Paul broke short his smile as he caught, through a Regency window, the flutter of one of the pavement women waving still.

Without a moment's hesitation he turned and darted back out through his colored door to return her wave. From the worn marble of the doorsill he waved with all the grace of a Royal Navy Captain going down with his ship. His companions looked out at him gravely.

"Oh, the deep pain of success," George commented. "Oh!"

"I can't imagine what he's at," John said under knit brows.

"It seems he's waving," Ringo hazarded tentatively.

"Well," John said, "they expect it, don't they? And Paul gives it to them, doesn't he? For he's very cognizant of the power of the fan, is Paul—and very lovely, except for his chin."

Ringo ran ringed fingers thoughtfully through the lush pastures of his hair.

"I thought he had a very fair chin," Ringo argued judiciously. "I'm told it's his best feature."

"No," John shook his head firmly. These little discussions of their personalities and attractions were a traditional feature of Beatle homelife. "No, it'll be his Waterloo, his chin."

"I'd rather date than go around steady," George interjected. There had been moments lately when George was

unable to utter any sentence that did not fit into an interview from a teen-age magazine.

"Well," Ringo said, friendly but cutting, "you've not been the same since you got elected Mister Raveable."

George pondered.

Paul came back in through his little door, wreathed in smiles. He toned down the smiles to a shy grin as his three companions fixed him with six questioning eyes.

"There's a future for you, y'know," John said, "waving—as a Queen."

Paul held on to his grin and merely smacked a punch to John's shoulder as he passed him, crossing the long room to the spiral stairway that led down to a huge theatre organ. The organ, a model with a range from vox humana to steamboat whistles from the Robert E. Lee, was his pet and pride.

As Paul descended, John, George and Ringo all said grave "Hellos" to their lovely lawnmower, which had clipped its feckless away across the room like a tot looking for companionship at a new school.

John called down to Paul, who had begun to noodle a tune with one finger on the keyboard of the organ as it rose magnificently to floor level: "Aren't you going to say Hello to the lawnmower?"

"Hello," Paul said, smiling agreeably. "I'll kick your teeth in."

The lawnmower—it had been around the boys for some time and could follow the flashing kaleidoscope of their merry moods—took Paul's railery in good part and went on clipping the velvet expanse of lawn that covered most of the floor, clicking its two sets of false teeth in a series of winsome smiles.

It was a typical At Home with the Beatles, an average British household embellished with just a few of the amusing trimmings made possible by global success and wealth beyond the dreams of avarice. This little hideaway off an unobtrusive London street was an amalgam of the taste of each of the boys and a haven for all from the mad-

ding crowd. From fur throw rugs to carefully trimmed turf, from organ to neon lighting, it bespoke a quiet and homey good taste reinforced with a yeoman backbone of loyalty to Queen and Country.

Paul went back to picking out a tune on the organ.

John strolled to his own small corner, less than an acre of spring lawn, and pushed aside a cleverly constructed false bookcase. Neatly hidden behind it was a real bookcase and from it John took his well-thumbed copy of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, with which he climbed down into his pit for a good read. The pit contained a bed properly equipped with push buttons so that John could raise his head or his feet at will, and even raise the whole bed to the level of the pit's edge.

Ringo, both restless and hungry, sauntered across the lawn portion of the room to an automatic-vending-machine area. On a sanitary yet colorful expanse of linoleum, the boys had had installed every variety of commercial vending machine as well as a long bank of refrigerators in pastel and pop-art patterns. Ringo passed along the rows of machines, unable to make up his mind between fish and chips, hot dogs, pizza, and a host of other imported delicacies.

In his own corner, George, wrestled manfully with his copy of the *Wall Street Journal*, an entertaining little newspaper to which he had become addicted ever since a kindly stranger in New York City had sold him several hundred shares in a nonexistent uranium ranch.

Ringo finally decided what he wanted and opened a refrigerator containing a large cow. Fresh milk, he thought to himself. There's nothing so dear to my palate.

From the hot-meats vender across from the cow refrigerator, all unbeknownst to Ringo or any of his mates, there beamed a strange and observing eye.

George stirred unhappily in the coils of his *Wall Street Journal*, his keen financial mind distracted by Paul's organ-plunking. From a recessed cabinet he withdrew ear-plugs, which he put in place to aid his concentration.

Ringo, holding his milk glass in his right hand, inserted his left into another vending machine to get a sandwich. Too late he discerned the form of Ahme, Priestess of Kaili, cunningly disguised as an egg-and-chopped-liver.

"Hey!" Ringo cried and tried to pull back his left hand. Ahme had fastened on to it with the relentless ardor of a jungle constrictor and was tugging at the sacred ring.

"Hey!" Ringo cried again, more loudly. "Someone's got hold of my finger."

From his pit John sighed disdainfully. "Are you trying to attract attention again?" he asked, not even putting down his book.

"She's pulling at it!" Ringo cried in some agitation.

"Our little romance lived and died two years ago," John advised him. "It cannot be made to live again."

Ringo, alone with this unknown threat, tugged harder.

Inside the machine, Ahme was possessed by a frenzy of balked rage. She no longer made the slightest attempt to appear to be a harmless sandwich, but bared her teeth and bit at the ring, which refused to remove itself from Ringo's finger.

Ringo winced at the sharpness of Ahme's teeth.

"Mouth!" he cried aloud in incoherent alarm.

Deep in the vending machine Ahme worried his finger like a dog with a particularly delightful bone. It was more than Ringo's flesh and blood could bear, and with a high dog-like yelp of his own he reeled backward, pulling the automatic vendor with him.

Crushed plastic crackled, wrapped sandwiches tumbled pell-mell around the fallen form of Ringo. The vending machine rolled in its death spasm across the linoleum; but, silently and unperceived, Ahme slunk out of the room.

The commotion was too great to be ignored.

Paul stopped his assault on the organ and John push-buttoned his bed up and peered over the edge of his pit. Only George, walled off from the rude world of sound by his earplugs, remained immune.

"He'll do anything, won't he?" Paul remarked, taking in



Ringo's prone figure, the wreckage of the vending machine, the scatter of sandwiches across the floor.

"She had me finger," Ringo said between protest and explanation as he drew himself to a sitting position among the strewn delicacies.

"Stop trying to drag everything down to your own level," John scolded. "It's immature, son."

John pushed his button and let his bed sink back to the lowered privacy of his pit.

Paul went back to plunking at his organ.

George, earplugged to oblivion, never knew what had happened.

Deserted and desolate for the moment, Ringo sat on the disordered linoleum and stared at his aching hand. The finger adorned with the Sacred Ring was red and swollen from Ahme's angry assault.

"I thought, well, y'know," Ringo explained aloud for at least his own satisfaction, "I thought she was a sandwich until she went spare over my hand—tooth marks! Now see what's happened after me slaving over a hot drum kit all day!"

He shrugged and pulled himself to his feet, crossed the vending section to press a button summoning the automatic floor-sweeper, mop, sanitizer and general disposal unit. In five more minutes of automated efficiency, the room looked as if nothing had happened. Ringo was in his own corner again reading *The New Statesman* and trying to forget that anything out of the ordinary had occurred.

Outside, on the sunny, bright London street, Clang, the High Priest, sat cunningly disguised as a knife-and-scissors grinder. He had the whole paraphernalia of his cover profession: a sharpening wheel with a seat attached, a bundle of knives and scissors which he sharpened, throwing sparks from the wheel, to give the impression of professional business. Bhuta, at his side, wore Occidental hand-me-downs in his role as the knife-grinder's assistant.

Respectable passersby passed by respectably with never

a hint of mayhem or the mysterious East penetrating to them from the knife-grinder and his mate.

"I know the Temple is cold," Clang muttered to Bhuta, "but I think there is more to an empty temple than the odd wind whistling up your dhoti."

Bhuta nodded with obedient intensity. Clang turned his head sharply as he caught a glimpse of Ahme, silently and slinkily approaching from down the street by the colored doors of the Beatles' bailiwick.

"So!" Clang hissed as Ahme drew abreast of his whirring wheel. "The Ring?"

"No," she whispered, shaking her head discreetly. "I could not get it off, Swami. No."

"Oh, dear!" Clang complained petulantly. He stabbed the knife he had been sharpening into an umbrella-like sheathe and slapped his evil palm with frustration. A malignant Oriental oath escaped his cruel lips, and even Bhuta blanched at the fervor of Clang's hatred and wrath.

Impatiently, Clang twisted the lever that transformed his ostensible knife-grinder into a high-powered motorcycle and roared off down the street, sparks still flashing from his grinding wheel. Bhuta and Ahme, afoot, followed dutifully to the appointed rendezvous. New and even more malevolent machinations were in the offing.

The followers of Kaili struck again that very night.

All was quiet as the Western front inside the tasteful luxury of the Beatle domicile. Each Beatle in his own corner slept the sleep of the just and affluent, soft on contour mattresses in each sleeping pit, lulled away to dreamland by gentle strains of music from a tape recorder.

At floor level, yards above the slumbering artists, the greenish beam of an electric torch flickered across the floor from pit to pit. It paused impatiently above George's pit, then skittered on across and found Ringo's.

All four of the boys slept protected by a metal grille covering their pits. The rewards of success are great, yet numbered among them are threats of kidnapping, assas-

sination and simple psychotic attack. George, Paul, John and Ringo had learned to take the bitter with the better, and, accordingly, had built precautionary protection into their cozy mansion. Every night, as the taped music came on, the grilles settled into place above the sleeping innocents.

Above Ringo's pit, Ahme, for it was she wielding the spectral lamp, paused and withdrew from her robes a telescoping rod. She extended it to its full length and disengaged the predatory prongs at its far end. Moving silently and expertly, Ahme unfastened the grille and inserted the rod downward toward the unconscious Ringo.

Shining her dim light as a guide, she carefully avoided casting any sudden, wakening beam in the area of Ringo's face. The prongs first caught the coverings at Ringo's feet and pulled them aside to reveal his sturdy toes, the great one of his left foot with a small alarm bell attached to it. With a hiss of caution, Ahme moved the rod to miss the bell and upward to Ringo's head. Softly pulling the covers downward, she discovered Ringo's left arm and then his hand and the finger, still swollen from the attack in the vending machine, bearing the Sacred Ring.

Ahme gave a sharp turn to the controls of her end of the rod and the prongs clenched on the Ring. She pulled hard but the Ring stayed firm. Ringo's arm lofted into the air above him and jerked about with the pressure from the rod.

Ahme set her lips in a thin, tight line of concentration. It was now or never. She braced herself against the side of the pit railing and gave a tremendous heave on the rod, like a sporting fisherman in an ad for Canadian whiskey.

Her tug pulled Ringo erect and awake. His flailing free arm hit the battery of alarm clocks at his bedside. There was a strident ringing from four different bells and a cunningly contrived mechanical rooster crowed loudly and set the lawnmower to work, clicking handsomely across the greensward. Its bright blades all but caught the trailing fabric of Ahme's sari as she fled soundlessly across the room.

Ringo clambered from his pit, rubbing his eyes, shaking his throbbing left hand. He peered over the edge of John's pit in suspicious accusation.

"You," Ringo said sadly. "Have you been messing about with me in my kip?"

"Eh?" John blinked his eyes in half-wakefulness.

"I mean, you know, with a fishing rod?"

"Gerron," John said, rolling over and pushing his head into the soft darkness of his pillow. "I wouldn't touch you with a plastic one."

Ringo sat unhappily and lonely. His hand stung. He could not deny that evidence. But everybody seemed to think he was dreaming or crazy. He shook his head. Perhaps the whole business was a dream and, if he could go to sleep again, he might be able to wake up and find everything friendly and normal again.

He lowered himself back into his pit, saw to it that the grille swung into position, closed his eyes and finally found sleep again. All four Beatles slept. It was Clang and Bhuta and Ahme who were wakeful, frustrated, but with a barrellful of monkey business still unhatched.

By morning Clang, Bhuta and Ahme were back lurking on the street before the Beatle residence. The knife-grinder disguise had been abandoned. Clang and Bhuta now wore Western garb although neither could erase a certain slinky remnant of the Eastern bazaar that clung to them beyond redemption. Ahme had adapted her sari partially to English and Continental mores, but she, too, more exotically and attractively, held to a mysterious and subtle trace of her true heritage.

The three of them loitered like aimless tourist pedestrians along the pavement. A block away, hiding its 200-horse-power motors beneath the guise of a delivery van, lurked their getaway car, idling by the curb, a villainous Thug, veteran of racing at Le Mans and Daytona, at its wheel.

Paul was the first Beatle out of the house that morning. Perfectly tailored and ready to face the world, he came through his door and beckoned to the Beatle Rolls.

Clang approached him in a slimily furtive manner, a combination of pander and beggar.

"Hey, Beatle!" Clang insinuated, running a loathsome hand over Paul's shoulder. "How about this, eh?" Clang tweaked a leather bag from under his coat and began to display its contents to Paul. "*Shufti?* Gold, all of it pure gold in easy-to-handle denomination nuggets. Not a mark on them, eh?"

Paul looked judiciously at the bag of precious metal. Long sessions with legal and financial advisors had steeled him against carefree violation of currency regulations.

"We get lots of those," he said blandly.

"No!" Ahme was at Clang's elbow.

"We *do*," Paul insisted, misunderstanding Ahme's address. "We're loved!"

"Is not the Beatle with the Ring," Ahme whispered into Clang's ear. "He."

"Am I not?" Paul inquired.

"No," Ahme said, and bewitched by a twinkle in Paul's eye, added: "Unfortunately."

She remained at Paul's side as Clang accosted John, who had just emerged from his door.

"Hey, Beatle!" Clang saluted in oily tones. He nudged John slyly in the ribs, hinting every variety of East-of-Suez vice.

"You shall have fun, eh?" Clang baited John. "Leaping ladies in no problem of garments. Not much on. Adventure-crazy strip chicks all more panting than China. Eh?"

John remained unmoved.

"Dancing girlies," Clang warmed up, "lascivious, stimulating beyond your wildest fancy. Many in full color?" He leered, waiting for John's collapse.

"No, thanks," John said. "I've read it." With Mayfair aplomb he handed Clang a copy of *Playboy* magazine.

Ringo and George had already stepped into the waiting Rolls while Clang played out his tragicomedy with John.

"No," Ahme tried to explain to Clang.

Paul and John boarded the Rolls and closed the door behind them.

"Is not the one, Swami," Bhuta declared.

"My gosh," Clang swore. "To me they all look the same with their similitude and language."

As the Rolls pulled away, Ahme could not help herself from giving a flirtatious wink at Paul. Something alien and treacherous to Kaili had entered her heart. George, looking out of the Rolls window, intercepted the wink and assumed it had been aimed at him.

"I didn't encourage that wink," he insisted to his uninterested companions.

Behind the Rolls the fake van had drawn up, its powerful motors throbbing, and Clang, Bhuta and Ahme climbed within it. The Thug driver depressed the power pedal and the awkward contrivance surged along the narrow street with the roar of an airborne jet.

The Beatles, in the back seats of the superbly equipped Rolls—a television set blinked forth News of the Day and a stock-market ticker awaited only the market opening to begin spewing forth its informative tape—were in a slightly puzzled mood. For the first time they seemed to have an inkling that more was afoot in their existence than the usual innocent fun and games. Typically, they glossed the unknown threat with wit and high good humor.

"Gold," Paul said thoughtfully, unable to forget the leather pouch of glittering precious metal that Clang had so freely displayed.

"People often confuse immorality with being fashionable," George said, unable to erase Ahme's wink from his memory. "Or so I'm told. . . . Gold?"

"Doesn't take him long to poke his big neb in if you mention money," John quipped.

"I was tempted with gold, George," Paul tried to explain.

"Did you see her wink at me?" George asked.

"You won't believe me," Ringo began.

"Nobody winked at you, George," Paul said.

"I was offered immorality," John contributed.

"A lot of song and dance goes on about immorality," George suggested.

"Beyond my wildest fancies," John said reflectively.

"Most of it true," George held to his line.

"So I'll say no more," Ringo subsided.

"I believe you, Ringo," George said.

"Gold, George," Paul continued.

"Do you believe she winked at me?" George asked Ringo.

"No," Ringo said. "You see, there was this fishing rod. And, anyway, they all wink at Paul."

The ticker tape clicked on with a sudden hum, and tape began to worm from the glass dome. George leaned over to inspect it.

"I'm two points down on my gilt-edged," he muttered, interpreting the arcane symbols on the tape.

"Don't worry, son," John cheered him. "I'll buy you a drink."

The Rolls was weaving through congested city traffic now, but the souped-up van kept close on its rear bumper. Clang, Bhuta and Ahme sat forward with the driver. In the rear, ranged in military immobility on benches, sat a trained suicide squad of Thugs. All were menacingly silent and grim.

In the Rolls the television newscast blared above gray images of the Archbishop of Canterbury and other religious dignitaries from abroad: "The Archbishop stated at a reception given earlier today for High Priests from all over the world . . ."

In the van, Clang thought aloud to himself: "We must come closer in understanding and coexisting with the churches of the Western world. Their problems are our problems. They're doing no business at all. . . . Now! Grab him!"

The van had drawn abreast of the Rolls. Clang pushed an alligator on the end of a pole through the van window and into the open window of the Rolls. The perfectly

trained creature closed its mouth with a grating snap in the direction of Ring's left hand. Only a sudden lurch of the Rolls in traffic saved him. The traffic shift left the alligator gaping in surprise at a small lap dog held by two ancient ladies in an old Rover that had taken up the place of the Rolls. The dog instantly went insane and yapped in elaborate affection at the reptile as Clang, with a dejected snarl, drew back his pole into the van.

"Keep following them," he directed the Thug driver. "Wherever."

The Rolls came smoothly to a stop before the acting studio of Sam Ahab, sage and mentor to stars of stage, screen, television and simple hopefulness. There are few actors (if any) so high on the scales of popularity and prestige as not to admit that their art can be sharpened by a brushup session with Sam Ahab. As for fresh members of the profession, Ahab training is their entrée both to casting office and to cocktail party. As much as any one person Sam Ahab had a corner on the development of mimetic talent in the Western world. Naturally, it was to Sam Ahab that the boys turned for training when their skyrocketing careers pushed them from pure musicianship into the dramatic arts.

From the Rolls, they mounted the steps of the Ahab studio. The most modest of notices on the door simply proclaimed: "Sam Ahab, Teacher of Dramatic Art." No more was needed for a name to conjure with on three continents.

Said John to Paul, entering the sacred door: "I heard you last night doing Shakespeare in the toilet when you thought we were all in our pits."

"It's no place, is it?" Paul admitted.

"You'll believe me, Sam," Ringo began a plea as he caught sight of his mentor, a commanding although not tall figure in blue jeans and sweat shirt, standing on the bare stage-like floor of the studio with a handsomely busty young woman costumed as Lady Macbeth.

But Sam had already headed directly for John.



"Now, John, Baby," Sam said, looping a tutorial arm over John's shoulder.

"I can talk to you, Sam," Ringo interrupted.

Sam frowned. In his studio he reigned as absolute czar. There was no court of appeal to his decisions. And here was Ringo, a nice enough chap, a Beatle to be sure, but a tyro as an actor, actually *interrupting*.

"Would I be making a tiny ricket if I asked you to lope?" Sam said in a voice of steel.

"Hey, up, Sam!" George tried to put all at their ease. Unsuccessfully.

"Is it in your manner to be loose and lope?" Sam asked Ringo.

"Because you're human . . ." Ringo faltered.

"Is it in your interests to come here?" Paul put in.

The discussion, as not infrequently in Beatle colloquies, seemed to skip several frames of reference and break through to the stratosphere.

"For a lad of your connivance, fitted as you are," Sam Ahab went on more reasonably, "you should find the loping a little doodle . . . good."

"You believe me, don't you, Sam?" Ringo remained rooted in his original premise.

"I'm here," Paul said, "because they expect great things of me in my next film. It has been promised."

"I know you won't believe me, Sam," Ringo kept to his plea.

"Do we start right off acting now?" George wondered. "Give me the wire for off John, 'cause I've got me earplugs in."

"But it is straight up," Ringo said. "I tell you." He was lost and ignored.

"Acting!" Sam Ahab said in a stentorian tone.

"Now?" John asked. "Lope?"

"Acting?" the master lowered his voice but kept its cutting edge. "In *my* school we don't act. In *my* school we *transcend*."

"I'm the only one who's worthy of the medium, y'know,"

Paul admitted. "These others, they're just clowns."

Lady Macbeth, without entering into the disjointed conversation, had moved into the circle of Sam and the boys, somewhat magnetized by Paul. She wriggled winsomely and was now less purely Lady Macbeth than combination of Juliet and Ophelia.

"I know I can talk to you, Sam," Ringo bored in, encouraged by a general easing of the atmosphere.

"Chat," Sam said. "Chat is your god. Will you cease the flaming rabbit!"

"That over there, Sam," John gestured to the side of the stage.

"Time enough for chat when you're old," Sam warmed to a philosophical diversion. "Like me. Older, and hard pressed."

"That bird with the lofty carriage," John said, pointing a discreet finger at the costumed Lady Macbeth, whose wriggles were now quite obvious.

"Get away from Lady Macbeth," Sam said. "Have you no pity?"

"I was rudely awakened this morning with a fishing rod, Sam," Ringo managed to start his own weird chronicle.

". . . is she transcending?" John asked, still fixed on the busy actress.

Lady Macbeth was smiling openly now, both smile and décolletage beamed directly at Paul. Sam dashed furiously across the room to stand between them.

"Is she hell as like transcending," he said. "She's *acting*. And a right load of old pony it is, too. I've been trying to transcend this one for weeks."

"I knew you'd disbelieve me, Sam," Ringo muttered hopelessly. Nobody, neither buddies nor mentors, was ever going to hear out and accept his tale of disguised sandwiches and nocturnal fishing rods. A lad might as well go home and douse his head for good in the swirling Mersey.

"Come on," George said impatiently. "Are we starting? It's costing me a little bundle, this tuition."

"Come on, Paul," John chimed in. "I'd like to see Paul

do it. Makes the rest of you look dead rough, he does, y'know. He has the gift; we're expecting great things of him."

All four Beatles arranged themselves on the stage area as Sam, transformed into his educational self, shouted "Transcend!" to all and sundry.

Ringo began.

"Now is the winter of our discontent," he intoned.

"Made glorious summer by this son of York,  
And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house  
Into the deep bosom of the ocean buried."

There was undeniable transcendence, for, though the body was the body of Ringo, the voice that emerged in rich, pear-shaped tones, was a precise duplicate of Sir Laurence Olivier's.

John took up the exercise.

"How all occasions do inform against me," he recited.

"And spur my dull revenge. What is a man,  
If his chief good and market of his time . . ."

He, too, had achieved a breakthrough, for the tones that billowed from beneath his Beatled thatch were indistinguishable from the best LP of Sir John Gielgud.

Paul next.

"My gentle Puck, come hither," he said. "Thou remember'st

Since once I sat upon a promontory.

And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back . . ."

And from his throat came the exact intonations of Richard Burton.

In response to a signal from Sam, George took his turn.

"Oh for a muse of fire that would ascend," he spoke,

"The brightest heaven of invention:

A kingdom for a stage, princes to act . . ."

Alas, it was pure George Harrison that spoke the noble lines. The contrast with Old Vic and Liverpudlian was startling to say the very least.

From Ringo's first speech, music had begun to curl from the backstage fireplace like incensed wood smoke. It had

begun as a fairly simple tune, but as it continued it took on a hypnotic and almost threatening quality. The Beatles (save for George, who remained caught up in his own dramatic rapture), Sam and Lady Macbeth all gradually succumbed to the spell of the Oriental rhythm.

Lady Macbeth, nearest the fireplace, was the first to go into a gliding dance of her own. Soon she was joined by Ringo and Paul. Sam and John were caught up, too. All five of them, even as George said his piece, were swaying and tripping to the exotic melody.

"Ah ha!" Clang said happily, crawling into the room over the harmonic hearth, closely followed by Bhuta and Ahme.

George alone, protected by his earplugs, gaped in astonishment at the interlopers. The others were too busy, too fully captured by their dance.

"The Ring!" Clang cried.

"This," Ahme directed him, taking the dancing Ringo by his wrist and leading him past the startled, wide-eyed George.

"You what?" George asked. He was aware of all the others dancing, of Ringo being led away by a strange girl, of the intrusion of Clang and Bhuta. None of it seemed to fit together, but it might very well be part of Sam Ahab's program of transcendence; one never knew in an acting school.

"I what?" Clang countered with silky dignity. "Dance! How are you impervious to sacrificial music, eh? Drops?" He rummaged for drugs in his outer garment but was unrewarded.

"Swami," Ahme asked, still steering a bedazed Ringo. "Help this self."

"Sahib," Bhuta was at Clang's side. "I have made the necessary preparations for . . ." He gestured toward the end of the room.

"Bhuta," Clang said, not to be balked of his role of command. "Make the necessary preparations for an immediate vise."

"Straight away, vise," Bhuta said, bowing to the floor.

"Oil," Clang added.

Bhuta scurried to obey.

On the edge of the table at the end of the room, Bhuta had set up a portable, screw-on vise. Other lethal equipment was spread about ready to hand.

Ahme led Ringo to the table, Clang following close. George watched like a man mesmerized into watching a television program he'd never planned to look at.

At the table, as the others danced obliviously, Ahme placed Ringo's finger in the vise. She and Bhuta squirted oil all around the Sacred Ring. They spun the vise as tight as possible and then both pulled at Ringo. Nothing happened.

"Is hopeless," Bhuta said, out of breath from his exertions.

Clang watched with folded arms and a scowl.

"Prepare the theatre then," he said.

"Swami," Bhuta cringed obsequiously, "I have already made the necessary preparations for . . ."

"You mean?" Ahme asked, holding a hand to her mouth in shock.

"I mean," Clang said in tones that brooked no disagreement.

"You mean?" George asked reasonably. He had joined the group—where else was a nondancer to go?—and felt he should participate socially in whatever was going on.

"We mean!" Clang said.

"Immediate surgery," Bhuta said brightly, uncovering an array of instruments ranging from tiny scalpels and eyebrow tweezers to a giant cleaver.

"Where?" Ahme asked hesitantly. "Wrist or just a finger?"

"I'll take the whole hand," Clang announced after thought. "It's much too near the knuckle for precision surgery. Mark it."

He hefted the meat cleaver, nodding approvingly at its

wicked balance, as Ahme took a magic marking pencil and circled Ringo's wrist.

Clang moved closer with the cleaver as Bhuta held Ringo's arm to the table.

"That could go septic!" George cried in alarm. Friendly sociability could be carried too far, and he charged into the sacrificial quartet at the table.

Clang swung at George with the cleaver and had a near miss. In disgust, he threw the cleaver bodily, missing George again, but almost severing the top of Bhuta's finger. It soared past the table, past Ringo's arm, and embedded itself in a mirror.

"Well bowled, sir," Bhuta had to compliment.

In the confusion, the Oriental music came to an abrupt stop. The Thug technicians outside, hearing the thunk of the cleaver, assumed the job was done. While the dancers were coming out of their daze, Clang, Ahme and Bhuta fled through the front door. George pelted after them, but by the time he reached the door it had been slammed and held firm against him.

Sam Ahab was angry and outraged.

He stood in the center of the floor, shaking his head in anger and humiliation.

"That's it," he said. "That's it! The last time I take on bleeding primitives. I'm very choked. You've stomped my studio. My shrine!"

"No, no, Sam!" John protested, hazy himself, but sure of his innocence.

"There was some strange music," Ringo said, waving his left arm to restore circulation.

"A strange power," George said.

"This strange feeling," Paul agreed, punching his head like a swimmer trying to drain water from his ears.

"Doesn't half-hurt," Ringo said, still shaking his arm.

"What?" John asked.

"That thing!" Sam exclaimed, suddenly glimpsing the cleaver welded into the mirror like Excalibur in the magic stone.

"They seemed," George ventured as sole eyewitness, "to want his ring." He pointed to Ringo. "Seemingly . . ."

"Me finger," Ringo said, examining the vise-swollen digit with concern. "It's all . . . hurting."

"That chopper," Sam ruminated. Two and two were gradually being put together.

"What strange power lies in Ringo's ring?" John questioned. "From what strange source did you acquire it—this strange ring—Ringo?" He looked almost severely at his fellow Beatle as if to blame him for the recent confusion.

"This Eastern bird," Ringo explained. "Y'know, a fan. She sent it to me with a book."

"Bags me two's on the book then," Paul cried, ever alert even in moments of crisis.

"You won't reckon it," Ringo said sadly. "It's all too far-fetched. Doesn't half-hurt, y'know—me hand."

"They were going to chop it off, I'm afraid," George said.

All eyes were suddenly focused on the cleaver.

"That thing," Sam said in tones of disgust and command. "Remove it."

Lady Macbeth, silent till now, suddenly took in the full signification of the hideous instrument.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" she cried in crescendo.

Sam rushed to her side and comforted her with kindly caresses.

John pulled the cleaver from the mirror and handed it to Lady Macbeth. He felt the moment called for shock therapy.

"Is this a chopper that you see before you?" he said.

"Try it on your old man. It's sure to ring a bell."

**IN THE WEEKS THAT FOLLOWED  
6 MORE ATTEMPTS WERE MADE  
TO STEAL THE RING**

IN THE WEEKS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING, SIX MORE ATTEMPTS were made to steal the Ring, most of them with a total and callous disregard for what might happen to Ringo in the process.

Centuries of heaped treasure from the past were available to Clang as a bankroll. Squads of devoted Thugs whose chiefest pleasure was to kill and maim were his willing instruments. And he himself was core and commander of a sophisticated inner circle of Kaili, Western-educated priests from every institution of learning, from M.I.T. to Cambridge, from Princeton to U.C.L.A., who had absorbed the latest and most dangerous advances of the Western World's science only to turn it to their own fell devices.

This was the ancient and all but irresistible force marshaled against poor Ringo and the seemingly harmless bauble on the index finger of his left hand.

The boys had discussed the unusual affair of Sam Ahab's studio as well as Ringo's earlier apparition of a fishing rod. But no matter how long the discussion, there seemed to be no sense to either subject and they had finally dismissed them from their thoughts and returned to their normal, carefree approach to life.

**( 1 )**

It was several days later when John and Ringo together stepped into an elevator in a modern office building to pay



a business call on an agent. They were pink and happy from a night's sound sleep after a successful television appearance and at bantering peace with the world. Little did they notice the concealed trapdoor in one wall of the elevator directly under a red arrow pointing to the letters "OFF."

"What was it first attracted you to me?" Ringo asked as the elevator door slid shut behind them, the only passengers in the unusual cab.

"Well," John thought. "You're very polite, aren't you?" Ringo smiled assent.

The aperture behind them opened and a bronzed, sinewy hand shoved the lever from "OFF" to "ON."

At the moment the lever touched the "ON" signal, the entire back wall of the cab became magnetized with tremendous force. The two Beatles were drawn sprawling against it as every metal object on their clothes—tie clips, mechanical pencils, WE TRY HARDER buttons—were pulled to the magnetized wall.

"Hey!" John cried, pulling himself free and leaving some shreds of fabric behind him.

"Hey!" Ringo cried, held fast and firm to the wall by the ring on the index finger of his left hand. He tried to pull away, but the ring would not come off his finger nor would the wall give up its pull.

John tried to help, but even this double effort was nothing against the power of ring and magnet.

There was the ghost of a disappointed whisper from behind the wall and another hand, a slimmer, more feminine one this time, pushed through the secret door and turned the lever back to "OFF."

Ringo fell in a slumped heap as the power released him. Metal objects flew back through the air, John's pencil set to Ringo's pocket, Ringo's tie clip to John's tie. It took them a good twenty minutes to sort themselves out before going on to bigger and better things.

Another day passed before the next attack.

**( 2 )**

This time, a sunny morning, Ringo was alone, tripping cheerfully down the street in front of the Beatle home to mail some answers to fan letters.

Squatting like an evil toad inside the mailbox was Bhuta, prepared with one of the new-model snap-on handcuffs. One link held one of his own hands, the other was open and ready for Ringo.

Ringo pushed a bulky envelope of autographed 8-x-10 glossies into the box. It was an outsize envelope, and he had to give it an extra shove. As he gave it a final push, Bhuta reached up and caught his wrist, pulling it into the box.

Ringo emitted a startled yelp. In the gloomy interior of the box, Bhuta's incisors shone with sinful glee and he came near to gibbering with excitement.

Quickly Bhuta swung the open handcuff forward and snapped it tight. But in his excitement, he snapped the handcuff on his own wrist!

Ringo, his hand free once more, reeled back and hurried home.

He was alone again when the third attempt was made.

**( 3 )**

This time he had left his mates to finish off an interview with the teen-age correspondent of the *Formosa Good-Times Daily* after which he betook himself to an instrumental shop to scout for a new snaredrum.

He had spent a pleasant half-hour doodling with bongos, admiring cymbals, testing the tensity of snares and even trying out a set of castenets to the approbation of the other customers in the shop before heading into late-afternoon pedestrian streams homeward. Out of consideration for traffic jamming he concealed his identity as best he could, bending his head low into his furled coat collar and keeping his beringed hands in his pockets.

Part way down the block from the music emporium, Ringo was enraptured by a weighing machine. It offered not only weight, but the weighee's fortune, all for a halfpenny. Ringo stopped, mounted the weighing platform and dropped a coin into the proper aperture.

The machine whirred and rattled; Ringo was looking up at an attractive bird in sealskin boots so his hand was a moment delayed in reaching down for the fortune-weight ticket.

A blessed moment! For just before his finger groped into the opening, a razor-sharp guillotine blade descended, slicing the fortune ticket in two.

Ringo drew back his hand as if he had been stung. Carefully, using the gummed end of a pencil, he fished the ticket out. Put together, he could read: "165 pounds, Ooops!"

George was with Ringo the fourth time the Kaili gang struck.

## ( 4 )

Once again it was broad daylight. George and Ringo, en route to a reception for an American disc jockey, remembered that they had left no instructions with the lawnmower about the week's laundry. Sometimes it was contributed to starving children, sometimes it was sliced into neat souvenir packets for fans, sometimes it went to wax museums in various quarters of the globe, and sometimes it was merely laundered. Without explicit instructions, the lawnmower was likely to pout however.

"I'll tell him to send it to the World's Fair," Ringo said. "Wherever there is one."

He popped into a sidewalk phone booth as George stood outside.

Ringo lifted the receiver, deposited his coin and dialed.

In a long sewage tunnel under the street a gang of husky Thugs, led by the still-handcuffed Bhuta, yanked on a heavy chain in response to a command from Clang.

"Pull!" said Clang.

The Thugs tugged and the chain, attached to the phone booth, tightened and exerted its pull.

George, seeing the booth containing his pal begin a quivering descent through the pavement, made a manful attempt at opening the door to free Ringo. Too late. The bottom of the door was already caught below pavement level. George pounded from the outside of the booth, Ringo from the inside. Well-bred passersby pretended not to see the outrage and consoled each other with memories of England's glorious past.

The sweating Thugs, under Clang's direction, did their work well. The booth was now almost fully underground. George alternately pounded and tugged at the vanishing roof, but to no avail. As the roof sank below street level, George was seized with a sudden urban inspiration.

Dashing swiftly, he deserted the kidnapping site and located the nearest guide to London's underground sewage system. The colored sewer map located for George his present position as well as the most likely route for Ringo's future.

Memory of the map impressed on his quick mind, George headed down the street, checking off manhole covers, and at last removed one; but there was nothing below. George referred to the second hand of his watch and tried another manhole cover farther down.

Now he was warm. In the dank darkness beneath him he just caught sight of Ringo's booth, now lying on its side like a glass coffin, moving away. Ringo was struggling with the door.

George scurried on toward other manholes, other underground exits.

In the tunnel below, heat and lack of air was taking its toll of the Thug chain gang. One exhausted helot fell down in his tracks, crying: "Water!" Clang cursed and tried to drive the others on, but the example of the first dropout had sapped the morale of the others. Some dropped the chain altogether. Others simply stood idle, stubbornly refusing to pull. Bhuta, to give a devil his due, continued to

try, but more than one man's strength was needed.

Clang called upon Kaili. Bhuta seconded his pleas. Amid muttering and faint rebellion, the gang was formed again.

But this delay had been enough. Ringo forced the door and rolled himself secretively toward the nearest escape hatch. Once up the ladder and out of the sewer, he brushed off his clothes and mingled casually with the crowd.

George drew abreast of his friend and clapped him on the back admiringly.

"There's always a long wait at the Baker Street sewer," George said as the two boys strolled away without a backward glance.

Attempt Number Five involved all four of the crew and threw some additional light upon the threat that menaced them.

## ( 5 )

They were playing a guest appearance in a smart nightclub. Taking a break after their exertions, they had repaired to the Gentlemen's Room for a revivifying washup.

Paul and Ringo had finished washing their hands. Ringo turned to the blower-dryer, held his hands beneath it and stepped on the operating pedal.

But this blower did not blow. Instead, it was a giant suction device of incredible power! It sucked the sleeves from Ringo's smartly tailored jacket and then went after him, body and soul. Trousers, shirt, shoes followed the jacket into the pseudo blower. Ringo pranced unhappily in his underwear, unable to remove himself from the suction area.

In a trice Paul had come to Ringo's rescue, but only to lose his own clothing in the suction stream.

So much pressure was building up that miscellaneous items from throughout the handsomely appointed lavatory were being swept away. Soap, towels and signs reading "All Employes Will Wash Their Hands" flew past the struggling Paul and Ringo.

John threw open the door as Ringo had grasped Paul's ankle to save him from total destruction. Paul held on to a sink, and the sink came loose and was sucked away. John, from the doorway, was slowly but certainly drawn into the whirlpool. Likewise George when he appeared on the scene.

The boys held on to each other as best they could, but it seemed, as ceramic and metal whizzed by them, that they could be no match for the deadly suction.

Suddenly, from a hidden opening beneath the blower, there emerged a delicate feminine hand. It turned the dryer lever from "ON" to "OFF" and the four Beatles collapsed in a moist heap on the debris-scattered tile flooring.

The hand was withdrawn, but the oblong opening remained uncovered for just a moment.

In that moment, there appeared in it the beautiful face of Ahme, erstwhile High Priestess of Kaili! Winking one large and luminescent eye, she spoke in clear and somehow reassuring tones.

"I am not what I seem!" Ahme said, and vanished.

All four boys blinked.

"My shoulder's soaked right through to the skin," John complained.

"There's more to this than meets the eye," Ringo said mournfully.

The other three Beatles could not forbear laughing heartily at Ringo's sudden apprehension.

## **EVERYONE LAUGHS AT RINGO'S** **SUDDEN APPREHENSION**

"Ho!" laughed George.

"Ho, ho!" laughed Paul.

"Ho!" laughed John, still rubbing his shoulder.

## **—[ BUT THE VERY NEXT DAY . . . ]—**

The sixth attack came the very next day as the Beatles were busily engaged at their recording studio.

### **( 6 )**

Sound balances had been checked, the number run through once for the engineer, all was going swimmingly.

"Might make it in one," the engineer opined and gave a signal for recording.

The boys went into the song with a will, singing, playing, keeping the sensitive balance that had made their name a byword throughout the civilized world. Visions of sugar-plums and another Gold Record danced through their heads as they played.

Only the engineer in his glassed-in booth seemed disquieted.

He was shaking his head unhappily even before the number was finished and the boys had downed tools.

"Buzz somewhere," the engineer said.

"Yeah, I heard it, too," verified a technician.

"Buzzing noise," the engineer repeated. "Shall I ask them?" He picked up the mike connected to the world outside his booth. "Boys, are any of you buzzing?"

"No, thanks," John said politely. "I've got the car."

"Eh?" the engineer said. "No, listen. You'll have to do it again. Extraneous sound. Hear?"

He turned up his own volume, and through the whole room could be heard a strange buzzing noise not unlike a saw cutting hardwood.

"Was it you?" John turned to Paul.

"No," Paul shook his head.

"Don't look at me," George said.

Ringo smiled placatingly as a saw in the floor below completed its circular cut around him.

Where Ringo was was suddenly nothing, nothing save a scattering of his drum kit and a gaping hole.

As soon as Ringo fell to the floor below, Clang—for naturally it was he behind these foul devices—and his gang spirited him away quickly to a deserted warehouse section of the studio building. There was nothing for the other Beatles to see when they gaped through the hole except sawdust.

In his hideaway, Clang motioned to two Thugs who held Ringo firmly in an iron grasp. Bhuta, always helpful albeit still handcuffed, added his own weight as Clang plugged in an electric hedge-clipper and moved forward toward Ringo's left arm.

Ringo cried soundlessly against the gag in his mouth. The Thugs and Bhuta held his arm in position. Clang advanced, the steel teeth of the clipper humming in his grip.

From behind a storage rack, Ahme watched. Just as Clang was almost within arm-clipping distance, she picked up a heavy transcription disc and pegged it at him. It caught the High Priest smartly in the middle of his back and bounced from him to smite one of the Thugs holding Ringo. The hedge-cutter fell forward and took a hefty bite out of Bhuta.

Ringo, shrewdly taking advantage of the disturbance, was up and away through the far door held open by Ahme.

She slammed and locked the door when Ringo was through it.

"Who . . ." Ringo said, turning to her.

"Flee!" Ahme directed curtly.

". . . are you?" Ringo finished.

"Run!" Ahme commanded.

"Oh," Ringo said. "Will you explain everything when the opportunity presents itself?"

Ahme nodded. The door trembled as several heavy Thugs hit it from the other side.



"Flee!" Ahme said.

Ringo looked at the trembling door and needed no further admonition. He was down the hall and away in a flash.

IT WOULD BE WASTEFUL OF A READER'S TIME—THE MOST precious commodity a writer can ask for—to cover in detail the various discussions the Beatles had of their mounting series of adventures. Suffice to say, none of the discussions came to any clear conclusion and the boys, in the dogged way in which their ancestors had built an Empire on which the sun never set, continued to go about their day-to-day business as best they could.

By general agreement, Ringo was allowed to go nowhere alone, but any other precautionary measures seemed impossible. To call in police, or even private agencies, against a threat they could not define would have been hopeless. It was on their own eight sturdy shoulders that responsibility rested.

Several afternoons later, Paul, George, Ringo and John—Ringo walking carefully in the middle—strolled toward Ganesagut's fashionable restaurant.

They had just turned under the entrance canopy when a Thug in a doorway up the street waved to another Thug on a nearby roof. The roof Thug waved to a third Thug, perched high in the craggy reaches of St. Paul's, who yelped to a Gunga atop Nelson's Column. The Gunga took off his dhoti and flapped it madly to attract the attention of a mate in Islington, who shot his rifle into the air to attract the attention of a traitor in the Admiralty. The Admiralty traitor flashed a code message by signal lamp to Clang, who was having tea in proper ecclesiastical sur-

roundings with a few Church of England prelates and one visiting Greek Orthodox.

Clang dominated the tea table.

"Sex is creeping in," he told his brethren, "being *thrown* at youth. They see it in the marketplaces, the bazaars, the temple even. Can you wonder they turn their noses up at a mystical impulse?"

A listening Bishop Hmmm'd and nodded weightily.

"We're taking up fox hunting," Clang continued, "so that young people can be involved in their own sacrifices. Can understand the deep significance of blood well shed. Of course, I can't expect you to see eye to eye with me, but I'm sure we can agree to differ?"

He looked up from his tea and scones to catch the Admiralty blinker.

"If you'll pardon me . . ." Clang said.

He whipped off his dog collar as he left the table and, dashing through a clump of bushes, drew a large knife from his belt.

The other clergymen looked after him.

"In his own way," the Bishop allowed, "he's a deeply religious chappie. Tally-ho!"

"Very tally-ho!" Clang cheered himself on toward Ganesagut's Indian Restaurant.

In front of the restaurant, the four boys had momentarily split up. John and Paul had stopped by a newsstand and George was envying a pair of boots in a neighboring shop window.

Ringo stood alone at the restaurant entrance, looking nervously up at the doorman, who was terrifyingly authentically clad in the gear of some variety of Sikh, complete with a huge, curved scimitar.

The grim doorman stood stiff and silent, his right hand at the handle of his snickersnee.

Ringo smiled weakly at him and craned his head toward George. George turned away from the window for a moment to smile reassurance at Ringo, before turning back

to his boots. By the time George had turned back to his boots, the price, originally in pounds, had been unobtrusively altered to guineas. George's lip curled in anger. Sometimes being a Beatle was too obvious.

Ringo, still deserted, looked up at the doorman with a craven, friendly smile. He held out one ringed hand under the doorman's fierce beard.

"It's played out anyroad, isn't it," Ringo said feebly. "Y'know, rings . . ."

"Very nice," the doorman growled. It seemed to Ringo that he had tightened his grip on his sword.

"It's yours," Ringo babbled. "Take it."

"No good to me, mate," the doorman said in perfect Londonese. "My missus wouldn't wear a ring like that—ostentatious, it is."

John joined them.

"He griffing you up, is he?" he asked Ringo. "Get him to cop hold of it, feel the strange power."

"I'd rather not," the doorman demurred courteously.

"No," Ringo said in relief. "He's from the West."

"No," the doorman denied hotly. "Stepney."

"No," Ringo tried to explain. "I mean you are all English and not cognizant of rings?"

"Certainly!" the doorman said. "What do we pay unions for? No, I tell a lie. We have got one from the mystic East, or we did have." He turned and shouted. "Hey, Abdul!"

"Darling?" a small ersatz-Oriental gentleman piped from the interior.

"We did have one, didn't we?" the doorman asked. "A lad from the sunnier clime, east of Suez?"

"And very nice he was, too," the imitation Abdul admitted. "I don't think he's still there, though. But I'd be happy to show the young gentlemen through the establishment."

All four Beatles were delighted at this opportunity for a behind-the-scenes glimpse of a great restaurant in action.

John, examining the stokehole, stumbled upon a seem-

ingly authentic Eastern gentleman standing on his head in the coke pile.

"Doesn't the blood go to your head, sir?" John asked respectfully, Ringo at his side.

In the kitchen, George examined the multiplicity of pots and pans and special service dishes.

"Doesn't the Eastern flavor come rather expensive?" George wondered.

In the ballroom, Paul observed a handsomely proportioned belly-dancer, who gyrated for his delectation alone.

"Doesn't the blood go to your tummy?" he asked.

In the stokehole, Ringo and John remained fascinated by the upside-down Oriental.

Taking a wild chance, Ringo held his left hand down by the eccentric's face.

"Is it nasty, this ring?" Ringo asked. "Sir?"

The upended Indian emitted a shrill cry of terror as his eyes fastened on the ring. He dropped to his feet and screeched to the high heavens and lower hells: "Kaili!"

The scream echoed through the restaurant above, already the scene of subtle activity by Clang and his Thugs.

Under the front canopy, the Stepney doorman had just had a scarf whipped around his neck by an expert Thug. As his body was removed, another Thug, wearing his turban, had taken his place in time to greet and usher in a chinless aristocrat with a beautiful bird on his arm.

Abdul, the headwaiter, standing behind Ringo and John at the stokehole, was silently choked and replaced as the Oriental head-stander left the area to fall exhausted on a bed of nails in an adjoining cubicle.

George, sniffing into various pots in the kitchen, was oblivious of the fact that behind him cooks and busboys were being deftly strangled and replaced by followers of Kaili.

Even in the ballroom . . .

Ahme put her hand over the mouth of the belly-dancer, steered her into the arms of waiting Thugs, and took her place. She took Paul's arm and led him onto the dance

floor. Her center gyrating convincingly, she whispered into Paul's ear: "Your friend is in mortal danger. I can say no more."

Even as she whispered, the entire orchestra was throttled and replaced by Thugs who took over the instruments without missing a beat.

The chinless customer drummed fingers on the top of his table and nudged his bird's foot under it.

"What a jolly place," he said. "Different, isn't it?"

He watched the removal and replacement of the orchestra as a special treat devised for his entertainment. His bird smiled.

By now George and Ringo and John had been shepherded out into the ballroom, where Clang himself, every inch the maître d', held out chairs for them. They peered at Paul, still dancing with the alluring Ahme.

"You eating, Paul?" John asked.

Ringo observed Paul and Ahme's terpsichorean maneuvers.

"Looks as if he's on the menu, doesn't he?" Ringo observed.

The three nondancing Beatles sat and George gave their order to Clang.

"Soup," George said.

"He has three hours to live," Ahme whispered into Paul's other ear on the dance floor.

"Say no more," Paul said nervously.

"I can say no more," Ahme said.

"Am I going to have to tell him?" Paul asked. "Don't look now . . ."

"Would you be so kind," Ahme said, waltzing Paul away from Clang, who was whetting a long knife. "I can say no more."

Bhuta handed Clang another vicious knife to sharpen.

"I ordered soup, too," John said.

"Soup," Clang said briskly, not interrupting his knife-sharpening.

"Soup," Bhuta echoed at Clang's right hand.

"Soup," said a hideous Thug to the kitchen.

Thugs in the kitchen cheerfully ladled a tureen full of soup, the missing chef's white hat floating on its surface.

In the ballroom Clang had moved closer to the boys at the table. Speaking directly to Ringo, he said insinuatingly: "Pardon me, sir, that's a very fascinating ring you've got there . . . unless I'm very much mistaken . . ."

"The Dreadful, Sacred, Sacrificial Ring of the dread Kaili," Ahme hissed to Paul, waltzing nearby.

"Say no more," Paul said.

"I can say no more," Ahme agreed.

"Is it?" Ringo blurted, overhearing. "Oh!"

George was fascinated by their serving of soup to the exclusion of other Oriental mysteries.

"What's this?" he asked, tweaking the chef's hat from the bubbling tureen.

"If he is to be sacrificed to dread Kaili," Bhuta worried to Clang, "why is he not painted red?"

"That's a question I've never been able to pluck up the courage to ask him," John joined the conversation. "It being intimate, y'know. Personal. But I will because I'm his best friend." His attention was momentarily diverted. "What's this?" he asked, removing a pair of spectacles from his soup.

Paul still spun about the floor with the delectable Ahme close in his arms. Her offbeat beauty, the warmth of her nearness and the expertise of her dancing all combined and conspired to remove his attention from anything she said, however earnestly she spoke above the whirr of Clang's knife-sharpening.

"A victim is offered to the dread Kaili," she tried to explain to Paul. "Every day. All are happy to go. There is much competition and rivalry to go. He who wins is privileged to wear the Sacred Ring from sun to moon, from moon to sun, and at the end of the happy day is slaughtered. Jolly with a knife. I can say . . ."

"No more," Paul completed for her. "But say it again, though."

"A victim is offered," Ahme began again.

Clang was standing with his knife behind Ringo, who had just raised to his mouth a spoonful of soup containing a season ticket to football home games.

". . . slaughtered jolly with a knife or so I'm told, with that ring . . ." Clang said.

"Three hours to live," Bhuta footnoted, looking at the Mickey Mouse on his wrist.

"As little as that? Mm," Clang checked his own Disney creation.

"You've got till five."

"Before a new victim is chosen," Bhuta said.

"You are a very lucky sir to be chosen," Clang assured Ringo. "My old miserable mum would give her right hand to be chosen." He ran the knife delicately over his whetstone.

"What's *that*?" John asked, peering at Ringo's spoonful of soup.

"A season ticket," Ringo said, beginning to grow irritable with Clang's sermonizing. "What d'you think it is?" He turned to Clang. "Here," he said, "I've not been chosen for anything. I've been blackguarded into it." He made a valiant effort to remove the Sacred Ring. "Come off."

"I like the Eastern way you talk," Paul confided to Ahme, swaying in his arms. "Deep down from your tummy, y'know. Stereo."

"I don't believe all that old cobblers," John tried to smooth Ringo. "D'you, Ringo?"

"She's winking at me now," George said, excited beyond his soup and staring at Paul and Ahme.

Sure enough, over Paul's shoulder, Ahme was beaming a thoughtful wink at George. As he picked it up, she moved her head toward Clang and nodded. George allowed himself a closer look at Clang.

"Here," George complained, fishing yet more foreign matter from his tureen. "Somebody's been in this soup."

"Come off," Ringo told him and returned his attention to Clang. "I got it from this Eastern bird—lady," he de-



tailed. "In a fan letter. I get all sorts. It's rubbish, though, isn't it? Sacrifice? No." He tugged harder at the circlet of metal. "Come off!"

"So get in touch with the proper authorities," Clang said smoothly, "and give back the Ring to this bird. She will then go happy to Kaili, who is in high dudgeon and dying for a drink of blood. Thank you."

George had continued to stare at Clang.

"I *know* that fella," he muttered.

"Three hours," Bhuta chanted.

"There's *footprints* in this soup," John said.

"Cop hold of it," Ringo pleaded, holding out his hand to Clang. "You have a go."

Ahme gasped and whirled away from Paul.

"He's the one who tried to chop your hand off!" George cried in delayed recognition.

"Flee!" Ahme cried to the boys at the table.

Paul grabbed John, John grabbed Ringo and they fled. Only unflappable George remained at the table, ordering the rest of his meal from the nearest Thug.

"I'll have the Madras curry," George said, "*with* roll and butter, if you please. Now mind it's not overhot."

A flaming scimitar slashed its way quite through the table, cloth, wood and all. Unflappable George flapped and ran to join the others.

Ringo led the flight down the street, John and Paul close after him, George racing to catch up. As he ran, Ringo still tugged helplessly at the Sacred Ring.

Back at the restaurant, Clang shrugged philosophically and clapped his hands to signal his Thug brigade. In less time than it takes to tell, the restaurant was once again its normal self, the regular orchestra playing, Abdul in his usual position as head waiter, Clang and Bhuta garbed respectably as visiting Churchmen, neatly furled umbrellas held between their knees.

"Oh, yes," Clang said to Bhuta, "but the Temple must be made more attractive for young people. They must not feel it is a stuffy old place with nothing exciting going on."

"I wish our people could see the work we do in heathen countries like this," Bhuta said with a sigh. "I'm blue and white with bruising."

"I'll have the steak and kidney pie," Clang ordered from Abdul. Bhuta nodded greedily. "Twice," Clang said.

Abdul nodded. His turban was slightly askew, his memory barren of past events, but he was a trained headwaiter and would not be rattled.

"I'm sorry for the delay, sir," he said. "One of our cooks seems to be missing."

Far up the street and around a corner, the boys had come together and entered a carriage-trade jeweler's to beg assistance in removal of the ring. The jeweler's clock read three P.M.

The jeweler himself, professional in a tiny apron, accepted their assignment with alacrity.

"We have all sorts of little problems like this," he said. "Some of them matrimonial, sir." He examined the ring. "This ring is not stone," he said.

"Get it off," Ringo said. "I've only got three hours to live."

"Therefore," the jeweler said, swollen with his own logic, "it must be metal!"

"Did you see that Eastern girl winking at me?" George reminisced as the jeweler applied a hacksaw to the ring. The hacksaw blade broke without even making a scratch.

"This ring is not any metal within my sphere of experience," the jeweler said, balked but not discouraged. He tried a second hacksaw blade and broke it just as quickly.

"Jeweler?" John said. "You are getting nowhere, are you? Jeweler!"

The jeweler looked up unabashed.

"Day's early yet, sir," he said. "Therefore, this must be an alloy."

"There's a certain amount of hurry-up involved, jeweler," Ringo interjected. "Due to my life being in danger."

Paul picked up the theme and glanced at his watch.

"Three-ten," he said.

"The wheel," the jeweler said.

"Not the wheel?" John said. They had for so long been involved in situations of threat and near torture that all he could visualize was the giant rack on which *ancien régime* French broke down their criminals into small and manageable fragments.

"Even the Royal House of Hanover has had the wheel, sir," the jeweler said, bringing out a small emery wheel. John exhaled in relief.

The jeweler pushed Ringo's hand into a specially contrived holder and brought down on the ring the spinning emery wheel. There was a handsome Guy Fawkes Day display of multicolored sparks before the emery wheel, too, shattered.

"Jeweler, you've failed," John said.

"I've never seen anything like it." The honest artisan shook his head.

George raised his head from contemplation of a display case.

"Is it worthwhile putting by a few emeralds for a rainy day?" he asked. "What do they come at now?"

"I suggest you see a specialist," the jeweler said. He was not going to be drawn into any further commerce with these strange customers.

"He's broken all your tools," John observed. "What kind of specialist?" But the jeweler was shaking his head and cleaning up the remnants of his unsuccessful attempt on the Sacred Ring.

"The fire brigade got my head out of some railings once," Ringo remembered hopefully. "Perhaps they . . ."

"Did you want them to?" John asked.

"Not really," Ringo admitted. "I used to keep my head there much of the time. When I wasn't using it for schooling, you know. I was quite happy. You see a lot of the world from railings."

He paused to reflect on the uncomplicated life of his childhood, the carefree years before success and mysterious gifts from the East.

"We must do something constructive," George said. "It's three-fifteen."

The four of them huddled on the pavement outside the jeweler's, casting furtive glances up and down the street, on guard against Clang and his minions.

Paul suggested a dentist and was overruled at once.

"It has to be some specialist who can cope with the enigma of this rare and indeed unknown alloy," John said.

"But if a jeweler wouldn't know, who would?" Ringo reasoned.

"A really bang-up scientist would," George said.

"One of these nuclear chaps!" Paul said.

"I know a laboratory, the very place!" John said, grasping Ringo's arm.

"They wouldn't use The Bomb on my finger?" Ringo nattered.

THE LABORATORY WAS SPACIOUS, SPOTLESS AND BEAUTIFULLY equipped with batteries of machines that seemed to do little but sneer at each other in hums of different modulation. Professor Foot, the scientific wizard whose name John had recalled, wore a knee-length white smock as did his efficient assistant, Algernon. Both had listened with interest to the boys' story and risen to the challenge with commendable enthusiasm.

"The difficult we do easily," Professor Foot said. "The impossible takes a little longer. Yank saying. Right, Algernon?"

"Things we do here would have had us burned as wizards a hundred years ago," Algernon said. "The oscilloscope?"

"Correct," said the Professor.

It took a little time for the two of them to prepare and assemble their equipment. Special machines were dragged from distant corners of the lab. Thousands of tiny wires were looped about the Sacred Ring and each wire attached to a different terminal on the several machines.

"If Rutherford were only alive to see this!" Algernon sighed.

A large plaque, like an X-ray plate, was placed under Ringo's left hand. Professor Foot tightened a steel band around Ringo's head while Algernon fixed other bands around his ankles and wrists.

"Stand back, all of you," the Professor directed.

John, Paul and George joined the Professor and Algernon

at the far end of the room next to a complicated control box.

From where they stood, Ringo looked tiny and pitiful, the changing green lines of the oscilloscope forming lovely line patterns in pale green behind his clamped head.

"Fetch some sandbags," the Professor directed Algernon.

Algernon quickly built a waist-high barricade between them and Ringo, who watched tongue-tied.

"Will he ever walk again?" John asked.

"It's his violin I'm thinking of," Paul said. "He opens at the Albert Hall next week. Will he ever play again?"

"Will I get a shock?" Ringo called huskily from his end of the lab.

"Will you give me room?" Algernon shouldered John and Paul aside to arrange a fuse box. The Professor depressed a lever.

"Will you tell me how you feel?" the Professor called.

"I'm done on this side," Ringo called back, fidgeting as best he could with all his clamps. "Turn me over or you'll waste a perfectly good piece of bread."

Professor Foot switched another lever, pressed several buttons. The pattern on the oscilloscope went into a wild dance of jagged peaks.

"Tell me, Professor," John said, "it's not doing anything, is it?"

Professor Foot left the sandbagged bunker and walked down the length of the lab. John went with him. They both examined Ringo's hand. The Sacred Ring remained firmly in place.

"It won't work," Professor Foot stamped the lab floor in petulant anger. "I don't expect it to work. It could work, if the government would only spend some more money. . . . America, you see, America . . ." He stamped on.

"You're another failure, aren't you, scientist?" John asked without bitterness.

The others had joined them, the boys shaking their heads, Algernon stamping in emulation of his chief.

"The idea, as I see," Algernon said, between stamps,

"is to expand the molecules, and so make the ring bigger and drop off."

"What's your electricity bill like?" George asked.

"It's not dropping off," Ringo pointed out.

"Not even a tingle?" John asked.

"The voltage," Professor Foot ran back to spin a wheel.

"Up, up, up!"

"Up, up, up!" Paul encouraged.

"Are you sure I'm earthed?" Ringo asked. "Grounded? Whatever you call it?"

"What?" Algernon called. "No . . . hold on." He adjusted a wire. "Thank you."

"Most of the good stuff is American," Professor Foot said glumly. "That lot, Pentagon surplus. They were going to drop a bomb on it. Orbital garbage, so to speak. Streets ahead of anything we've got."

"Is the earth green in America?" Algernon asked wistfully.

"In some places it's brown, y'know," Paul said with the wisdom of a world traveler.

"You're still not earthed!" Algernon cried. He pulled out a plug and made strange assaults with the screwdriver. Professor Foot fumed with suppressed rage.

"It's the Brain Drain," he said. "He's an idiot. I can't get the assistants. All the best brains are in America. This damned government will not do anything. . . . He's a moron." He ruffled wildly through coils of wire and threw switches at random. "A degree in woodworking!" he snorted. "I ask you!"

"Done!" Algernon straightened up from his screwdriving with a loyal smile. "Five, four . . ."

"Come on!" Professor Foot scolded impatiently.

"Three, two, one . . . Go!" Algernon screwed the plug back in.

"I like to observe the correct procedure," he said. "He'll thank me for it later."

Professor Foot made more adjustments, spun more levers.

The oscilloscope pattern continued to change in startling jags and peaks. The ring stayed on Ringo's left index finger.

"Scientist," John said sharply. "You're getting nowhere are you? Scientist!"

"The main thing is the plugs," Algernon fretted.

"Up, up, up!" Professor Foot cried, turning new dials and pressing different buttons. "I can't guarantee anything. . . ."

"Good English plugs," Algernon mumbled. "All this American rig is the wrong voltage, of course. That's what foxes me."

"This equipment is in shocking nick," the Professor chided.

"How do you feel?" John called to Ringo, whose hair was standing not only on end but in every direction as well.

"Well, I used to use my hands," Ringo who looked a sight, called back faintly.

"His hands!" George came suddenly to life. "Will he still be able to drum, y'know?"

He pantomimed Ringo at the drums.

"Did he do a lot of it?" Algernon asked. To him, the Beatles were just four more nonscientists.

"Up, up, up!" Professor Foot shouted, finding new levers to turn, foot pedals to stomp on.

"This is outrageous!" John protested.

"Up, up, up!" Professor Foot skirled, unheeding.

"I'm no mean hand at the old stixman stuff myself," Algernon said, finding a pair of copper rods and demonstrating his own primitive concept of skin-beating.

"Up, up, up!" Professor Foot cried.

"He's calling you," Paul reminded Algernon. "Up, up, up!"

"Myself, you know," Algernon said, still twiddling his copper rods on the floor. "On the old skins?"

Professor Foot shouted, Algernon dropped his rods and fumbled ineptly at a control board. Paul and George moved



away in horror. Manacled, Ringo tried to gesture from his altar.

"Ah, then, Ring," Paul called in a reassuring, false good humor. He grinned painfully and tried to wink and look at his watch at the same time.

"Four o'clock, it so happens," he said.

"I can't watch anymore," George said.

"Up, up, up! Give it the gun, Algernon!" Professor Foot gibbered.

"Stop it!" John cried.

"Yes, stop it!" George added his voice.

"Up, up, up!" Professor Foot insisted grimly.

"More than my job's worth to stop it when he's like this," Algernon said, moving his fingers over his control board. "He's out to rule the world, you know, if he can get a government grant."

Paul and George huddled together, whispering rescue plans as Algernon continued to raise the voltage. Now Ringo was glowing pale pink, his electrified hair swirling in the breezeless air of the lab. Algernon thoughtfully switched on a loudspeaker outlet near Ringo's head so that the highly charged drummer might hear what was going on in the bunker.

"Everybody behind the sandbags!" Professor Foot ordered.

"No," John said. "This is outrageous. You're nothing but a trite, hackneyed, mad scientist."

Professor Foot dashed behind the protection of the bunker. He peered over the sandbags as Ringo glowed brighter and brighter.

". . . with no carriage or even bearing up," John upbraided.

Ringo was a shining ruby.

"I could take over on the drums for a bit, y'know," Paul said.

From glowing Ringo dropped ring after ring. All the rings from his right hand and from his left, all but the circlet sacred to Kaili.

"Well, there's heaps of knack-handed drummers," George said.

"No, no!" Ringo cried, whether from the transmission of his buddies' conversation or from the fact that the nuclear devices had let his trousers tumble a-heap to the lab floor.

Professor Foot stared over the sandbag barrier in beady-eyed fascination.

"Amazing!" he breathed to himself.

"Stop, you madman," John cried doughtily, "and let go his hand! Unloose him!"

"Amazing!" Algernon echoed his chief.

"Fantastic!" Foot said. "With a ring like that I could—dare I say it—rule the world! I must have that ring." He moved out of the bunker toward Ringo. "Algernon, the laser."

The assistant looked about him distractedly at various piles of wire, jumbles of transformers, generators, dissected bits of old cuckoo clocks.

". . . the laser . . . the laser," Algernon said, groping into the lab equipment, reaching for yet another plug, screwdriver at the ready in his hand.

"*And* your fiendish semihuman assistant!" John's wrath grew. "Drop Ringo's hand at once or I'll have the Metropolitan scuffers in."

"Don't stir things up," Ringo pleaded. "I'm still being handled. Mr. Scientist, sir . . ."

Professor Foot was down on his knees, minutely examining the ring, which had remained unbudgeable on Ringo's finger. The other Beatles halted, clustered uncertainly still near the bunker.

Algernon drew himself up to face John.

"Fiendish is going a bit far, isn't it?" he chided. "I mean, you know nothing of my background."

"Get him off me!" Ringo called. Foot was mauling at his ring hand, snuffling like a wild boar at a cache of truffles.

"I must have that ring," Foot vowed. "The scalpel."

Algernon ignored his order, but the Professor himself rummaged on a shelf and found a glittering, razor-sharp

surgical scalpel, seized it with a hungry moan and headed back to Ringo.

Paul, John and George rushed after him, but his head start made it impossible to close the gap. Only the appearance in the doorway of the ravishing Ahme preserved Ringo's finger this time.

She held a Luger firmly and with professional aim in one aristocratically delicate hand.

"Hold!" she commanded, eye and gun fixed on Professor Foot. "Release him or I shoot, and I am a dead-eye shot, shooting."

"Got it!" Algernon cried, picking up laser components at last from a pile of seeming debris.

"Switch off the machine!" Ahme directed. Her eyes flashed. She was a beneficent fury blending the best of East and West.

Algernon dropped his equipment and obeyed as John removed the braces from Ringo's head and limbs. Paul winked cheerfully at Ahme, who winked back. George assumed she was winking at him and smiled charmingly.

Professor Foot, grim but balked, stood still with his hands stiff above his head.

"The laser!" he whispered hoarsely to Algernon.

Algernon raised one hand above his head to placate Ahme.

"The laser . . . the laser," he mumbled through a mouthful of plugs and screws, talking aimlessly to himself. "I'm much more at home with animals. . . than plugs and grubby old transistors."

"M.I.T. were after me," Professor Foot mourned aloud. "*They* wanted me to rule the world for *them*."

"Daddy being the local Master of Hounds," Algernon mumbled on. "That's where I get it from, my love of animals. . . . They trust me. I should have been in vivisection."

Meanwhile, the Beatles were hurriedly conferring on this new development, Ahme and Luger. Lord knows, the beautiful Oriental maiden had become a familiar face and

figure to them by now, but was she an old friend or an old enemy?

"How do we know we can trust her?" John thought aloud. "She's had your fingers once, you know, Ringo."

"That was a mistake," Paul defended, remembering his strange dance with her in the restaurant. "I can vouch for her. We are very close." Even now, he could almost feel the warmth of Ahme in his arms and her peculiar but attractive wriggles as she played her role as belly-dancer.

"California Tech were after me, you know," Professor Foot declaimed defiantly. "And I'll go there, if I have to put up with any more of this rubbish."

The boys were at the doorway by now. Ahme held off Professor Foot and Algernon, her Luger unwavering in her hand. John and George made a successful exit. Ringo paused with Paul just at the door.

"You didn't mean that in there, did you?" Ringo asked. "About how close you were with her?"

"No," Paul confessed. "I've only had one dance with her. Why, do you fancy her? Here, Ring, can I borrow your drumsticks when I get home? Just a little practice." He looked at his watch. "It's four-twenty-five."

"The laser," Algernon announced with pride, fishing something like an electric torch from a bench.

"The laser!" Professor Foot crowed in ecstasy. He still held his hands aloft, but on his face there was now an expression of unholy triumph. "Get them!"

Algernon swung the laser at Ahme and switched it on.

The moment he switched there was a fusing and smoking of short circuits and the instrument blew out and fell from his hand. Ahme had already pushed Ringo and Paul through the door and followed them out.

Professor Foot slumped and rolled on the laboratory floor in a fetal curl of defeat.

Algernon stood puzzled, staring at the blown laser at his feet.

"Wrong plug," he said. "Give me five minutes, will you, and I'll have the whole thing shipshape." He removed new

plugs from his mouth and examined their labels and voltage denominations.

"It's no damned good," Foot groaned from the floor. "Your brain's draining. How this government can expect us to keep young people happy in their labs without the proper equipment, I don't know. That ring. I must have that ring, Algernon. I could rule . . ."

He pulled himself erect and clapped an arm over his assistant's shoulder.

"I'll apply for a grant," he said feverishly. "Apply for a grant, Algernon. We won't get it, but at least we'll shame them!"

THE BEATLES LOST NO TIME IN RETURNING TO THE comparative safety and security of their own house. Ahme went with them, at least partially accepted as a member of the team. She quickly made friends with the lawnmower and in every other way fitted most comfortably into the cheerful pattern of Beatle homelife. Only in explanation of the plot against Ringo and the Sacred Ring did she remain unsatisfactory. Her only answer to questions on this subject was the same "I can say no more" with which she had blocked Paul on the restaurant dance floor, although sometimes she pronounced: "I can say no more now, perhaps later. . . ."

They celebrated Ringo's narrow escape with a feast from the vending machine section, and the lawnmower rolled back carpets in the floored portion of the area for dancing. Ahme danced with each of the boys in turn, but continued to display what seemed to be a slight preference for Paul.

Despite the celebration, all tumbled into bed early, wearied by the exciting events of the day. Needless to say, all windows, doors, sleeping-pit grilles and other means of access to the house were thoroughly checked, and here Ahme was most helpful.

The next day dawned bright and pleasant, Ahme helped with breakfast, and all were in a rare good humor. No one noticed the lifting of a manhole cover in the street outside with Clang spying from it, the manhole lid above his head appearing to be a strange crown.

In the house, Paul played the organ, the other boys

joined in for a jam session as Ahme demonstrated more Oriental dances.

It would be hard to imagine a more satisfying picture of domestic bliss. Ringo, in between drumbeats, snatched a quick munch at a kipper. Paul ran the organ up and down on its elevator mechanism as he played, all the while winking at Ahme, who was winking at him. George winked at Ahme, who he thought was winking at him. Ahme herself undulated in the wholesome exercises of her belly button.

It was only after the music and dancing had finished and Ahme had brought from a corner of the room a mysterious black bag, that seriousness once more descended on the group.

"I have here . . ." Ahme said, and she reached into the bag and brought forth a large hypodermic needle filled with a lavender fluid.

George fainted straight away. Even for vaccinations he had always swooned. It was a habit that made foreign travel most difficult, but he had never been able to break it.

"Now see what you've done with your filthy Eastern ways," John admonished Ahme.

"No," Ahme said stoutly, although her figure remained as lithe and limber as ever. "It is Clang, the High Priest, who is filthy in his Eastern ways."

"How do we know," John asked, "that you're not just as filthy, and sent by him to nick the ring by being filthy when you've lulled us into delight in the night with your filthy ways?"

Ahme bridled in righteous indignation, her silken saffron cheeks showing a blush of pink.

"What ways are these?" Paul became alert.

"I have a clean bill of health," Ahme said indignantly.

"I'm glad to hear it," Paul said.

Ring held his left hand out.

"Off, off!" he said. "It's got to come off."

"I hold a Diploma of Midwifery," Ahme said. "Edinburgh University."

"You can't say fairer than that," John admitted.

Ahme held her hypodermic to the light, which caught its iridescent fluid and threw purplish patterns on the wall.

"Failed," Ahme said. "All attempts on the Sacred Ring."

"Only what do you want it for?" Paul asked.

"I can say no more," Ahme said. "Oh, hell! I might as well say more."

The boys clustered around her to hear the full story. Even the usually unemotional lawnmower ground to a halt beside them.

"My sister," Ahme said, "is chosen for sacrifice to Kaili. At the time, she has not the Sacred Ring and therefore cannot go. *I* intend to get the Ring and throw it into the Thames, and then all these centuries of bloodshed will be ended."

"Can I ask you to say that again?" Paul said.

"Don't need to," Ringo tapped his watch. "I've been safe since five o'clock yesterday. I'm saved." He beamed smugly.

"Come on, George," Paul said, "Ringo's saved."

"On the contrary," Ahme enforced attention with a wave of her needle.

"Put that spike away," Ringo begged. "I'm not having that."

"Until this moment you were safe," Ahme said, "because my sister was the chosen one and no other could be sacrificed to Kaili. Now her hour has passed. Now my sister is safe and rises up. Her period of sacrifice is past. She will be released now."

Far away on the other side of the world, in a smart bedroom suburb near Calcutta, a squad of Thugs released Ahme's sister. The young girl smiled at the sunlight, stretched her arms and murmured: "Ringo!"

"A new sacrificial period begins," Ahme explained to the boys. "A new victim is chosen. From this moment on, it is Death to him who wears the Sacred Ring!"

"Off!" Ringo barked, pulling the ring.



"How's that?" John queried. "I thought his time was up at five yesterday."

"He was never in danger of *sacrifice*," Ahme explained pedantically. "Death, yes. But never sacrifice, because he was not chosen. The Ring was important to the other victim. But as of now, he who wears the Ring is chosen by Kaili. Be brave. . . ." She looked encouragingly at Ringo, who had sunk into an upholstered chair and was gnawing at his fingernails as if this might eventually release the Ring.

"Don't look," John said.

"Alas," Ahme said, "if he were brave, all this would not be necessary. Check locks on all doors."

## ❧ END OF PART ONE ❧

## ❧ PART TWO ❧

Back in the primitive Orient, in a spankingly modern bathroom in a luxury apartment, Ahme's sister stood out red against the white tiling. She was seated in a sunken bath, being scrubbed by her mother.

"Where you been, eh?" the mother scolded, covering a stiff brush with Phisohex and applying it to the girl's scarlet back. "You've been at that Temple again, haven't you? You're as bad as your sister, coming home from work all hours and all colors of the rainbow."

The pretty red girl winced against the bristles of the brush, consoled herself by murmuring softly: "Ringo!"

## ❧ END OF PART TWO ❧

In London, the object of her admiration, the drummer boy himself, was being prepared for an injection from Ahme's hypodermic needle. George sat next to John nearby, both of them concentrating on not looking. Paul assisted Ahme, swabbing the index finger of Ringo's left hand with alcohol.

### ❧ PART THREE ❧

"There might be some insurance if anything went wrong," George said.

"Wouldn't think of such a thing," John said. "Where could we find out?"

"What is it?" Paul asked Ahme.

"This?" Ahme tilted the needle. "More than my certificate is worth to reveal such a medical secret. Now, please relax and think of your husband, er no . . . I mean . . . when I say, push."

"I'm sure there's no call for anything like this," Ringo tried a last appeal. "Anyroad, I'm allergic to penicillin and similar wonder drugs like H . . ." He held out a strip of chewing gum as a peace offering. "Gum?"

"You're sure it's not like mainlining," Paul asked Ahme. "Habit-forming so to speak."

George took a piece of gum and let the wrapper drop to the floor.

"No," he offered. "Not as long as you don't swallow it."

"I'm sure with patience and perseverance and some best butter most things are possible, y'know," Ringo pitched.

"I promise you," Ahme said, "the effect is purely transitory. It wears off very quickly."

She gave Ringo's finger one more dab and raised the needle to strike. Just as she started her downswing, the front doorbell pealed loud in the vast room. With a startled cry, Ahme let the needle fall.

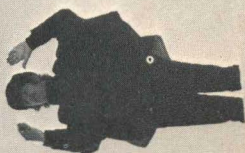
"Don't answer it!" she cried. "It can only be Clang."

She then looked down to where the needle had buried itself like a well-aimed dart in Paul's thigh. Paul's own reflex hand motion had depressed the plunger and the purple fluid was absorbed into his system.

"Perhaps it won't take, eh?" Paul trembled.

"This is a dreadful miscarriage," Ahme said, true to her midwife's training.

!JTEH



**“So who needs help?”**





**"Hey, look at me,  
I'm a hot-dog!"**



**"Now now Ringo,  
this is going to hurt  
you more than it's  
going to hurt me."**





**"Feelthy French  
Easter eggs?"**



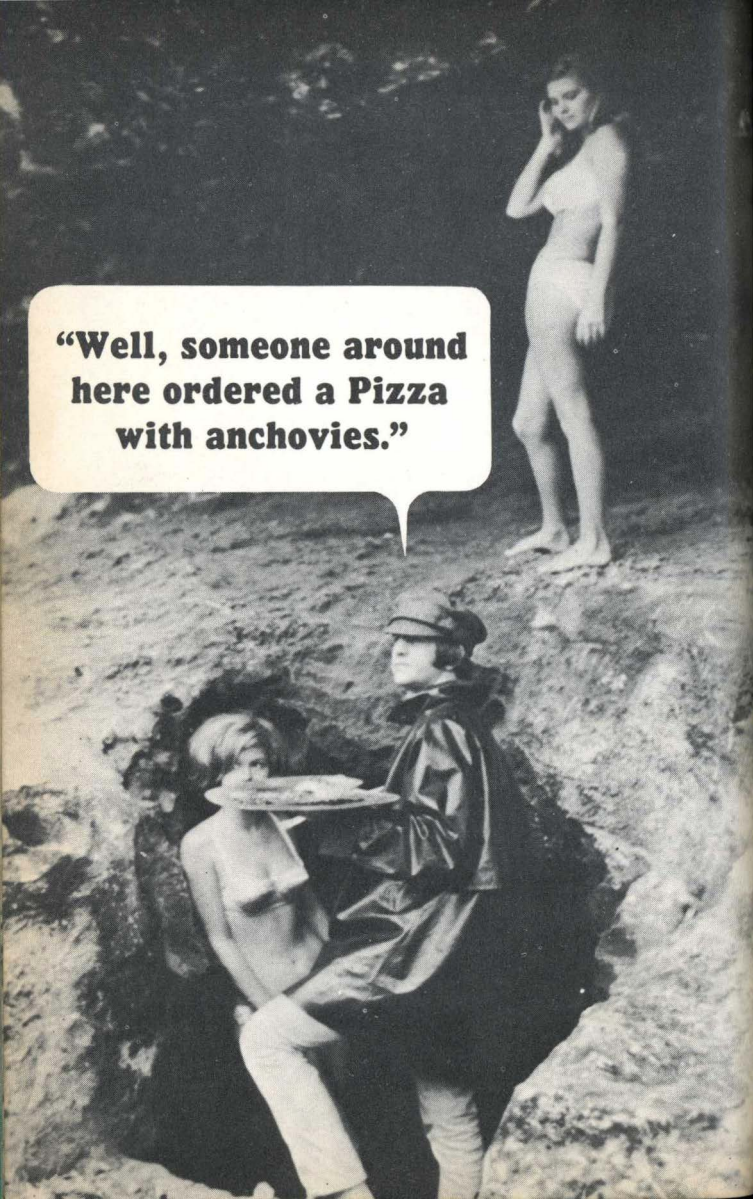
**"Now remember, if anyone asks,  
we're just good friends."**



**"Sure beats  
playing the  
guitar."**



**“Well, someone around  
here ordered a Pizza  
with anchovies.”**





**"Paul, isn't it about time  
you gave up that crash diet?"**



**"But who knew there was a season  
for THIS kind of hunting?"**



**"4-3-2-1...  
oops!"**



"Kaili!" Clang shouted lugubriously through the letter slot in the front door.

"Kaili!" Bhuta shouted, equally lugubriously down the chimney shaft.

Before their shouts had died on the air, Paul had vanished. A shriveled pile of his clothing lay draped on the chair he had been occupying.

"Come on!" Ringo urged with brave impatience. "My finger."

"Where's Paul?" John sounded an alarm, staring at the empty chair, the discarded garments. "Where's he gone?"

"The fluid is gone," Ahme mourned, holding up the emptied hypodermic needle. "There is nothing I can do. The ring will cling to your finger like the hunger of a child . . . unless . . ." She knit her brows in thought. "Unless . . . have you ever been blessed with Courage? Even Kaili has to bow before Courage."

"Paul's the brave, handsome type," Ringo admitted, lowering his head. "Me, I'm just a survivalist . . . of the worst type."

Now he, too, noticed the empty chair.

"What about Paul?" he asked.

"Where is he?" John reiterated.

## **THE EXCITING ADVENTURES OF** **PAUL ON THE FLOOR**

Paul, shrunk to a size tinier than Lilliputian, used both arms to pull himself up on the side of one of his shoes. He had to blink his eyes before he could properly take in the huge and lowering shapes of Ringo, John, George and Ahme hanging threatening and blindly above him.

"Where am I?" he asked in a tiny voice, inaudible to either his pals or to the Oriental charmer.

"Shrunk!" Ahme said to the three other boys. Her voice, as she went on to explain in detail, rang like mountain thunder in Paul's miniscule ears.

Naked and fearful, from top to bottom about the length of a discarded matchstick, Paul crept across the floor to a spot of safety under a bed. There was a shoe there with a sock folded into it that offered sanctuary.

Halfway across the carpet he stumbled on a chewing gum wrapper and clutched it quickly to form an improvised shield for his nudity. "WRIGLEY," in red letters, the odd garment read across his stern.

He stepped carefully but as quickly as he could. He had to lift his small feet high to get from the carpet to a newspaper lying on the floor. Walking across the newspaper, his tilted shadow was still shorter than the headline letters: "LENNOX CURATE IN CHOIR-LOFT SCANDAL."

He skirted an ashtray with a smoking cigarette on its edge. The wisps of smoke lay about him like a barrage of deadly gas. Coughing and trying to wave the smoke away, Paul stumbled past this barrier. He tried to shout between coughs, but his shrill "HELP!" was several registers above the most soundless of dog whistles. He gasped from bone weariness and smoke as he finally reached the empty shoe.

George, John and Ringo by now were on their knees, apprised by Ahme of the extent of the accident, looking hopefully for Paul, but without success.

"There he is." Ringo cried once, but it was only a two-E beetle, scurrying across the otherwise spic-and-span household floor.

"Even smaller, he should be," Ahme said gloomily.

In the middle of their search there came a fearful and fierce rattle at the front doorknob; the heavy shoulders of a Thug smashed against the blue door. The searching boys shouted automatic defiance. Tiny Paul smothered his head in the sock as his eardrums all but split.

He had just taken his head out when John's call: "Where are you, Paul?" sent him huddling back for protection. The syllables of John's cry were quite indecipherable to him; all he was conscious of was a horrible, sickening, painful roar. He shrank back into the shoe, too shook

up and afraid to reveal himself to his unrecognizable and ununderstandable buddies.

Meanwhile, in shadowed doorways, taking cover by trees and behind mailboxes and lampposts, were at least a score of combat-ready Thugs, communicating one to another orders passed on from Clang in the sibilant whispers of their native tongue. Lurking at the far end of the street were Algernon and Professor Foot.

"Rule the world!" Professor Foot hissed. "You brought extra ammunition?"

"Yes, chief," Algernon said. "And the knives, like you said."

Up with the forward element of Thugs, Bhuta superintended the meticulous trying of every window, every door, coal depository, garbage chute, whatever opening.

Inside the house, the boys had finally given up their search for Paul.

"The effect is not permanent," Ahme offered some hope. "Unless he comes to some harm while still so insignificant."

All put this unhappy possibility out of their minds as they switched off lights and betook themselves to their beds, oblivious to the tumult of whistled signals from Thug to shining Thug outside.

Quiet and darkness clothed the house. George snored gently and it was an earthquake sound to Paul. He raveled the sock and managed to adapt expediency earplugs. More weary himself than any of the others, he tried to ease himself into a comfortable position in the shoe.

He had just sunk his head on the sock when a huge set of horns lurched at him from the direction of the shoe-tongue. Paul leaped erect and braced his back against the side of the shoe. The beetle, which had been mistaken for him, was moving forward as if for combat.

Paul yelped inaudibly and balled his hands into mite-sized fists. The beetle advanced, waving its antennae and showing sharp tusks. Paul relaxed his fists and clambered over the back of the shoe. He ran and the beetle plodded

doggedly after him in the subfusc gloom under the bed.

On the street Clang, a walkie-talkie disguised as an umbrella held to his face, communicated with Bhuta and the advance Thug scouts.

"Reconnaissance should be complete," Clang said. "Scouts come out, through me. Out."

Bhuta hand-signaled the scouts, waving circularly above his head. They relayed his signals with gestures and whistles and began to move back in orderly fashion according to the precise training they had received from their British Military Mission.

As they filed past Bhuta, he spoke into his own umbrella.

"Last out," he informed. "And withdrawing. Out."

Clang's storming party and the withdrawing scouts passed each other with the precision of a marching band.

Close to the house, Clang halted his elite troops, four Thugs about to sacrifice their lives for their obscure beliefs. He crouched with them on the dark pavement, ministering and giving final inspiration.

"Kaili," Clang said in his Temple voice.

"This is so," said the lead Thug, touching his scarred forehead to the pavement stone.

"Kaili," Clang intoned again.

"I don't need Kaili," the second, agnostic Thug muttered through clenched teeth.

"My son," Clang said, pointing a finger in a recruiting-poster pose, "perhaps Kaili needs *you!*"

"I don't want to die," the third Thug whispered. "No. I can't go through with it. No!"

Clang ground his molars. The disintegrating effect of bringing decent young Thugs such as these into a corrupt Western civilization was always an unpredictable factor in a mission like this. But, at this critical stage, it could not be allowed to bring about failure. He racked his brain for texts and threats.

"Pull yourself together," he admonished. "Think of your faith. Think of the thousands at home who depend on you."

"He'll be all right," granted Thug Number Four, a grizzled veteran of a dozen "WANTED" placards in police stations. "I'll look out for him." There was threat as well as care in his rasp. The third Thug touched a sullen head to the pavement.

"Stout fella!" Clang clasped the fourth Thug's shoulder in gratitude.

There was a moment of complete silence in the street. Even Professor Foot and Algernon were hushed in their quite separate operation.

"Stand by!" Clang directed.

Bhuta repeated: "Stand by!"

Inside the house all slept save Paul. He had eluded the beetle, but only temporarily. As he peeked from behind a bed post the awesome insect spotted him again and charged.

"Go!" ordered Clang in the street.

"Go!" repeated Bhuta.

The four elite Thugs ran hard for the lower windows of the house. One Thug waved a sword, curved and sharpened to slice a hair floating on water. Another bore a can of red paint. Red paint? Yes, the sacrificial brand.

The two other Thugs hung back in reserve, waiting their turn.

The two lead Thugs crashed into and through their target windows with a wild shattering of glass and splitting of wood. Scratched and bloody, they had breached the Beatle stronghold!

Down the center of the street, ignorant of the Thugs' assault, Professor Foot and Algernon moved nearer to the house. Algernon pushed a hooded pram.

"Don't look to the left or right," Professor Foot hissed at Algernon. "Anyone'll take us for innocent bystanders."

Algernon reached into the pram and switched on a concealed gramophone. From it came the recorded sound of a crying baby.

John, Ringo and George had come fully awake out of their beds at the first crash from the windows. The two

Thugs beamed in on Ringo, but John deftly tripped the one with the sword as Ringo tried frantically to take off his Ring and offer it to the first taker.

George tackled the Thug with the paint can. The husky Thug swiveled and lurched so that George flew willy-nilly into a vending machine, which reeled from the shock and then began to squirt orange juice over him.

Far down on the floor, the stream of orange juice came just in time to cut Paul off from the pursuing horned beetle. The infinitesimal instrumentalist sighed as he tread water, or, rather orange juice. Because of the higher specific gravity of the pulpy fluid, he found swimming easier and more maneuverable than even in salt water.

Ringo scurried behind the apple-and-bun machine, clawing about for change. He deposited several coins and pulled the handle. Jackpot, three apples, came up. The splendidly loyal machine immediately loosed a barrage of free apples at the midriff of the Thug, who had recovered his sword and was about to bring it down on John's coccyx.

The paint-bearing Thug took advantage of the lull to move closer. Holding high his pail, he decanted red paint all over Ringo.

"Kaili!" he shrilled.

"Feet! Feet!" wailed George in new alarm. "We'll stomp Paul."

John, Ringo and George all retreated now, but with the delicate movement of a ballet troupe as they tried simultaneously to dodge Death and to avoid stepping on their shrunken mate.

Ringo, now blazing red, presented an easy target. The paint Thug, too late, had been counted out by a stomach butt from John, but the sword-bearer moved to Ringo, making erratic slices in the air before him.

Paul still swam manfully downstream from the beetle. A tidal wave from the falling paint Thug almost swamped him.

There was a new sound of splintering from the front door. Algernon's shoulder, prodded by Professor Foot,



slammed and crashed and slammed and crashed again until an entry was forced. Professor Foot pushed his way ahead of his assistant, holding his loaded Webley at the ready.

Facing the scene of muddled combat that greeted him, he took aim at the Thug with the sword and brought him down with one well-placed shot before he could follow through on his best attempt to decapitate Ringo. Stumbling from a flesh wound, the Thug fled.

Bhuta came in through a window to go to the aid of the now hard-pressed Thugs, but Clang had already made his own tactical analysis of the battlefield and was talking into his umbrella.

"Withdraw," Clang ordered.

"But they're my men in there," Bhuta cried into his own umbrella, lunging into the fray.

"Withdraw!" Clang barked.

Bhuta stumbled over the bent body of Thug Number Two.

"I believe in Kaili," the shattered Thug moaned. "I believe."

Bhuta glowed with relief and inspiration.

"Okay, I'm coming out," Bhuta said. He sleeked down his umbrella walkie-talkie and slung it casually over one arm as he strolled out innocently onto the pavement, a slight limp from the battle only increasing his distinction.

Paul was tiring in the orange-juice channel. He had escaped the beetle, but it looked like he would soon be going down for the third time in the vitamin-rich tide. He flailed his weary arms and managed to keep his head above juice level.

Professor Foot, his back cautiously against the wall, held his Webley leveled on the boys. Ahme had made one of her mysterious disappearances.

"Up, up, up!" Professor Foot said with scientific monotony.

"You," John spat accusingly.

"Which one has the Ring?" Professor Foot asked, unashamed and unmoved.

"This one, sir," Algernon said helpfully, pointing at Ringo. "The one with the large ned."

"Neb," Ringo corrected, touching his beak with pride. "And the Ring is yours, all yours." He reached to try to remove it.

"Keep your hands up," Professor Foot ordered.

"Typical!" Ringo snorted. "How can I get it off with my hands held up . . . high in the air."

"In the Sacred Name of Science, I want that Ring," Professor Foot declaimed.

"Yours, it's yours," Ringo repeated.

"Worth *something*, isn't it?" George asked. "I mean, a few bob . . . you know, on the exchange."

"He can't get it off!" John blurted.

"You see," Professor Foot said, a man never to let a possible audience go to waste, "I had to do this all myself. Backward Britain, they call us on Wall Street, and no wonder! A Ring like that—could I interest the military? I could not. Our government does not care one jot or one tittle about Science. Let's be having it." He kept the Webley aimed, but held out his other hand toward Ringo.

"I can't get it off," Ringo admitted. "I can't get it off."

He stamped his foot in rage and frustration and then remembered tiny Paul.

"Paul!" he cried, ignoring the pointed Webley and staring down at his shoe. There was a jam stain on one side. Ringo blanched and shuddered.

John was looking down, too, spying the splattered stain.

"You haven't!" John breathed and drew back a little in horror.

"Paul," George called. "Where are you?"

Paul, carried high by the orange juice wave of Ringo's last stomp, was nestled between shoe and sock in Ringo's other, unstained shoe, but he had no way of communicating.

"Where are you?" George called again.

"Look!" said Ringo, guilty and shaken, displaying the jam stain.

"Enough of that," Professor Foot said. "Algernon, my

little black bag. I shall have to operate. He reached inside the bag and removed a surgical kit. "We'll give you something for the pain, of course. I've only got this English rubbish, but it may work."

Algernon sprung open the surgical case to reveal a shining selection of nestled scalpels, tweezers and scissors, a needle and some threads of gut.

"I'd like a stab at it, sir," Algernon volunteered and turned his head sharply to stare at Paul, who had just in that twinkling of a moment appeared among them.

"Ugh," Paul said, "I'm all sticky." He looked at Ringo. "And you're all red," he said.

John pointed to the stain on Ringo's shoe.

"We thought that was you," he said.

"Oh, no," Paul said. "That's not me. I was attacked by a beetle. Two E's . . ."

"Your hand," Professor Foot, undistracted even by miracles, said sharply to Ringo.

"How did you get all red?" Paul asked.

John was silently moving his arm to reach the sword left behind by the Thug. He had almost got it within his grasp when Professor Foot espied the movement and fired his Webley at him. The trigger snapped ridiculously on an empty chamber.

"Get out!" John said, raising the sword.

"British, you see," Professor Foot said. "Useless. Lets me down at every turn. If I'd had a Luger, eh? I applied for a firearm, oh yes. Wouldn't give me a license. How can I compete on the international scene without a weapon, eh? Are your scientists properly equipped, eh? Think on it. The remedy is in your hands. You, the voters."

With a farewell wave of his hand he ushered Algernon with him from the house.

"Whew!" Ringo said and then: "Feh!" as he looked at Paul beside him, absently drumming on the tabletop with a pair of Ringo's sticks.

Paul, at Ringo's exclamation, stopped shyly and offered a halfhearted grin.

"Well, y'know," Paul said, putting down the sticks, "it helps my sense of timing, uh, rhythm, doesn't it? Keeps me hand in' . . ."

"Where's Ahme?" John changed the subject. Sometime during the night, before or after the Thug raid, the Eastern enchantress had disappeared.

All four boys looked wide-eyed about them.

The subject of their concern was at that moment in a neighborhood betting shop, the best place of concealment she had been able to think of.

At the first crash at the windows, Ahme had realized what was afoot. There was nothing she could do in these circumstances to help the boys and her discovery in their company by Clang would end whatever usefulness she might lend their cause. It would also mean sudden and certain Death by sword or strangulation.

Ahme had no affection either for blade or garrote. In one smooth motion she rolled to a place of concealment near the windows and, as soon as the battle was engaged, slipped out. Keeping close to the shadow of house walls, she escaped up the street, unperceived by either Clang or Bhuta.

She searched her mind for possible places of refuge. Corner shops were out since they were bound to be crowded with foreign students, impoverished Orientals, some of them quite possibly worshipers of Kaili and spies for Clang. A museum might be good, but at this hour of night most of them were closed or closing. Ahme was almost at her wit's end when she caught the light and the babble of sound from Honest Jake's, a comfortable bookmaker for neighborhood families. The ideal spot!

She ducked in from the street and spent the next hour unmolested among dozens of elderly housewives all arguing over their copies of *The Racing Form*, doping parlays and discussing the undependability of jockeys. For Ahme it was a strange and in an odd sense comforting atmosphere, one in which she could sort out her own warring thoughts and emotions.

"Is Kaili's the religion for me?" she asked herself. "Does it give me what I want most in the world? Am I the right person for the priesthood?" To every question she was forced to answer No. "I have failed miserably," she told herself. "But only temporarily, however miserably. The evil Clang still considers me his faithful follower. If he or his deadly male adherents were to suspect that I mean to give the Ladies of the East a faith to be proud of, based not on Death, but on Love, and singing and joyful holding of hands every Sunday, if he should suspect . . . I who fear nothing fear that."

A little shudder ran through her frame, and the old lady in octagonal glasses, sitting next to her, marking her bet chart, looked at her peculiarly.

"But I must not think of fiendish tortures," Ahme steeled herself. "I must think of the Ring, eight hands, and of the potentially beautiful eight-handed goddess, Kaili. What more can a priestess ask: eight hands? She can be beautiful again . . . if I destroy her Ring . . ." Unconsciously, Ahme was now speaking aloud. ". . . and rid her of the dread, male, deadly poison!"

The little old lady in octagonal glasses perked up.

As Ahme left the room, she stepped up boldly to the counter, ignoring the notations on her bet sheet. "Deadly Poison," she said. "Ten shillings on his neb."

Another old lady overheard her and scurried to get her household money down on Deadly Poison.

Clang and his Thug brigade were clustered in one of their many hideouts along the London sewer system. Thugs and every spare priest who happened to be in England lined up neatly to listen as Clang orated emotionally in Hindustani.

"The Ring!" he railed. "Think always of the Ring! Sacrificing this clod is no problem, but we must do more than just kill him. We must return the Sacred Ring to Kaili."

He paused as his hypnotized audience swayed before him.

"Kaili!" he cried.

"Kaili!" they chanted back.

Bhuta twiddled his thumbs unhappily through the discourse.

"I don't speak the language, you see," he whispered to a friendly Thug. "I was educated sunrise semester, channel 4. Luke vii. 37. Latin, yes. Hindustani, no. But the Ring! That I understand."

Far from the Thugs, Professor Foot and Algernon remained wakeful in their laboratory.

They wore intricately tubular plastic suits with sealed helmets. Their hands, inserted in long, glovelike controls, manipulated obedient metal arms that stretched to a chamber far below them, lined in lead. Every slightest movement of their fingers was transmitted to the delicate mechanism below. They spoke in hushed tones. Actually they were doing their laundry in a washing machine on the floor below, but so ingrained had become their scientific habits that they knew no other way to go about the task.

"The Ring," Professor Foot mused aloud. "Should I get that ring, twenty times harder than tungsten and will never drop off, eh?"

He smote his helmeted brow in emotion.

"The applications, Algernon!" he cried. "Should I fathom the secret . . . Smack in the eye for the government then, eh? Backward Britain couldn't refuse me a knighthood after I won the Nobel Prize, eh?"

"You'd refuse, of course," Algernon said.

Professor Foot hesitated.

"I'd be very caustic," he ventured.

"Sir Tiberius Foot," Algernon tried it out.

Professor Foot wiggled his hands in the gloves and removed a nightshirt from the washer. With further finger motions, he hung it neatly on a line below to dry from a jet of warm air erupting beneath it.

"Lord Foot of the Ring!" he savored.

"Sounds good," Algernon approved.

"Lord Foot of the Ring!" the professor said in trumpet tones.

He drew his hands out of the gloves and held them to his brow in serious thought.

"Algernon!" he said. "The following plan . . ."

They continued with their laundering as Professor Foot outlined his fell designs.

— [ MEANWHILE . . . ] —

A perfect travel poster of the Austrian alps: powdery white snow stretching to the horizon, covering peak after peak; tiny, brightly colorful figures of expensive tourists, skiing and tumbling into its soft embrace; background dotted with quaint chalets and handsome modern resort hotels.

And in the middle of all this . . . the Beatles!

The boys were leaping about up to their necks in the snow, cheerful, carefree, playful. They plunged and raced and burrowed as if there were no East. Ringo tried to make snowballs, but the dry snow refused to pack, and he satisfied himself by shoving George into a drift and then running for dear life. John tripped him and he tumbled headlong into a drift himself. Paul appeared like a white-flecked apparition after rolling down a slope of fresh-fallen snow.

It was sheer joy.

All four boys joined hands for a mad midwinter Maypole dance in the all-pervading whiteness. They spun madly in a snap-the-whip circle before breaking the chain, and all fell backwards leaving a leg-spraddled pattern, four Beatle forks in the virgin snow.

They pulled themselves up, dusted the white from their ski costumes, and repaired to a comfortable terrace of the swank lodge where they were staying, to order warming drinks and viands.



## [ BUT HOW DID THEY GET THERE? ]

How, you may ask, did they find themselves, after a long night battle with Thugs and scientists, in sunny, snowy Austria?

## [ FLASHBACK ]

No sooner had Professor Foot retired with his worthless Webley and faithful Algernon, than the boys called a council of war.

"London is no longer safe," Paul said gravely.

"If London isn't safe, what is?" Ringo asked.

"We must devise a plan to betake ourselves to the least Oriental spot possible," John said.

"The North Pole!" Ringo said. "But would Eskimos, so to speak, dig our style. There are considerations . . ."

George pressed one of the innumerable buttons in their modern dwelling and a large globe of the world slid out from behind an aspidistra plant, still flying.

"Do it scientifically," George said.

"Don't mention that word," Ringo shuddered. "Scientifically! I think that nuclear chap was worse than the wily Orientals."

"Worry not, Ring," Paul patted him on the shoulder. "We shall swiftly be shed of all of them." He spun the map and ran his finger over it.

"Somewhere conveniently near, but surely safe," John said.

"North Pole," Ringo said stubbornly. "Or possibly South Pole."

"You're on the right track," George said, "but too far along."

"Alps!" John said. "Last place they'd think of!"

"Alps!" George agreed.

"Alps!" Paul endorsed.

"Alps?" Ringo said. "No Orientals? No scientists?"

"None," John assured him. "Only pleasure-crazed members of the international jet set, devoted solely to the hedonistic pursuit of hedonism. Not a thought of Sacred Rings or Ruling the World or Sacrifice."

George was already calling the travel bureau. The lawnmower, clucking solicitously, was packing their bags.

Within the hour a crack train had carried them to the channel. Within another hour a steamer had ferried them across to another crack train. A horse-drawn sleigh met the train, transported them across the Austrian border, where they were met by a crack dog team with a sledge ornamented in peasant brightness. And then the hotel.

## **THAT'S HOW!**

They settled easily into the jolly life of the Alpine resort. With their usual manual dexterity, they were soon crashing into each other on skis, destroying bob sleds and breaking through thin ice with the most expert of the international jet set.

Ringo stood by the booth where they hired out toboggans and other sporting kit, waiting for George to collect the mail. Paul sauntered over, a sporting gleam in his eye.

"Come on then," Paul said, "if we're going sledging."

The sharp-eared concessionaire inside the booth busily switched price tickets to double the hire rate on toboggans and leaned back in a peasant-carved chair from Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.A., to await his reward.

"No, but Paul," Ringo found himself in a philosophical

mood, "wouldn't you say I'd contributed a goodly deal to the group like, y'know . . . with me being an enigma like . . . insecure."

"Did you sign for insurance?" John turned to ask George.

"Rates are high here," George said. "I got a lot of quotes."

"How much should he lose a hand?" John specified.

Ringo flinched although he well recognized the necessity for such precautionary inquiries.

"Oh, no, *you* don't get it, Ring," John expounded. "It's for us should you miss a gig, or us be minus a member come the crunch."

"Go on, Paul," George diverted. "You get the sledge."

"Besides," John said heartily, "You don't need to worry now. Not a fiendish Easterner in sight. Your Ring is safe and you're lovely."

Paul had selected a toboggan and shoved it under John's legs. John tumbled into position behind Paul. George followed him and Ringo, shouting free enthusiasm to the surrounding peaks, threw himself on top of the other three as the wintry vehicle gathered speed and headed down the Alpine slope.

From the ski lift across the valley, Professor Foot and Algernon, swathed in shoddy winter garb, kept an eye on the boys through high-powered binoculars. The moment the toboggan took off down the slope, the scientist and his loyal assistant jumped aboard the ski lift, ropes and other bulky equipment under their arms.

Professor Foot kept one eye on the tobogganing Beatles, the other on the stopwatch timing hand of his wrist chronometer.

"All on schedule," he said smugly.

The toboggan-load of Beatles came down under the ski lift and Professor Foot shouted: "Now!"

Algernon whipped out a length of rope and neatly lassoed Ringo's ankle, removing him from the sledge and holding him in midair, dangling from the ski lift.

The toboggan whizzed on, neither Paul nor George nor John, in the speedy excitement of the ride, noting the excision of Ringo.

Professor Foot and Algernon kept the rope taut as the lift made its way onward and upward. They tugged Ringo, now walking on his hands in the snow, toward the top of the crest and down the other side.

"What some people do for kicks!" a jet-set skier remarked with aristocratic disapproval.

As Algernon pulled on the rope, Professor Foot made ineffectual hacks at Ringo's hand with a common garden scythe.

"Tcah!" the jet-setter looked away in disdain.

"They'll listen to me once I have it," Professor Foot said, making another slice into the cold air. "All of them. Governments, universities, Backward Britain, Wall Street, the Nobel Committee."

"You could give me a vacation then," Algernon said between hauls on the rope. "Like to get back to my Da and the animals. Country life . . ."

"Pull him closer!" the Professor snarled. "I might as well be in another country." His scythe once again fell far short of its target.

Ringo moaned.

Algernon coiled part of the rope around his waist, braced himself against the side of the lift and gave a gigantic tug. Ringo soared several feet into the air, sparkling snow falling from his clawing hand. Professor Foot leaned over the side to make another swing with his scythe. The line parted with a fraying flutter. Ringo plummeted downward and fell into his top position on the toboggan, which had just rounded the lower turn on the run.

Professor Foot turned on Algernon in pale fury.

"English hemp!" he cried. "Might have known it wouldn't do the job. Cheap Boer War surplus, no doubt. Now with Nantucket Nylon, anything from the States! Wouldn't have

happened with old Nantucket Nylon, strong enough to haul in a whale."

"Good English Hemp," Algernon defended. "True, she was secondhand."

The lift carried them, squabbling, on.

At the end of the toboggan run, the sledge tipped up and the boys were thrown off, laughing, into the snow. All laughing, that is, save Ringo. And when he displayed to his friends the remnant of frayed rope around his ankle and its history, they, too, muffled their chuckles.

"Still," George said, "Ringo got off clear. We can keep our eyes peeled now for the scientists. And, at least, there's no congregation of Easterners about."

So the four lads continued, albeit with a wary eye for Professor Foot and Algernon, to enjoy the splendid sports facilities of the resort area.

A few hours later found them curling on a glass-smooth space of ice with four attractive girls who had winsomely added themselves to the group. None of them, pushing the heavy curling stones, sweeping clearance ahead of them, was in the least aware that the roly-poly snowman in the field opposite occasionally lifted field glasses to his eyes to observe them. Inside the snowman shell, shivering despite his suit of thermal underwear, was the unregenerate Clang!

"Ah . . . so!" he said to himself between chattering teeth, marking the position of his quarry.

John spun one stone down with Paul sweeping madly in front of it. Two of the girls cheered. Then George spun a stone with Ringo sweeping, and the other two girls cheered.

Behind the deserted boathouse next to them, Algernon, sweat freezing on his brow, followed Professor Foot's instructions and inserted a short fuse into a bomb indistinguishable from an ordinary curling stone. Algernon, with his usual insistence on correct procedure, wore an ear-phone set and a throat microphone.

"Gently, gently!" the professor said. "Be sure of actual contact between fuse and explosive. Don't press."

"I am now easing the fuse into the aperture," Algernon reported, his voice coming out low but crisp and mechanical through the mike.

"I know, you fool," the Professor said. "I'm here next to you. Steady."

"Steady," Algernon reported metallically. "I am steady."

"One turn to the right and it locks," Professor Foot directed.

Algernon twisted the fuse cautiously.

"I am turning it to the right," Algernon said, "and it is locking."

"This is what comes of teaching science by television." Professor Foot puffed white breath out in disgust.

"You'll thank me one day," Algernon assured him. "The Allen key." He inserted a metal contrivance and twisted again. "Tight. Good."

He picked up the stone-simulated plastic cover and clipped it on to make a complete curling stone.

"Putting the lid on carefully," he said to his mike.

Professor Foot fidgeted impatiently. When the lid was secure, he took the stone from Algernon's hands and sidled to the corner of the boathouse.

He began to walk toward the boys, carrying the bomb.

From an extra headset lying in the snow came a crackling voice.

"Bomb lifted up," Algernon's voice detailed. "Carrier stepping forward with right foot, now moving left foot."

Professor Foot swore ungenteelly and strode back of the boathouse.

When he next emerged, he had Algernon's arm secured in his own. He walked swiftly now, time running short, quite unaware that the fuse was giving off whiffs of bluish smoke. Algernon tripped on the frogman flippers he wore under his raincoat, but Professor Foot forced him forward to the edge of the curling rink.

"Here," the Professor said, handing the bomb-stone to George. "Of course it won't work," he muttered under his breath.

George took it with a thoughtless "Ta." He spun it down the ice and Ringo danced next to it, sweeping away with his broom.

George noticed only then the blue smoke streaming from the fuse.

"Ring!" he cried. "Stop! It's a thingy, a fiendish thingy!"

The blue smoke was puffing furiously now as the stone swirled to a halt. John and Paul stood thunderstruck at the edge of the rink. Ringo, broom in hand and heedless of George's warning cries, was mesmerized by the object.

"Get the birds away!" George shouted. "The thingy will blow us all up!"

John and Paul gallantly drew the girls to shelter.

George covered his ears.

Ringo remained next to the bomb-stone, watching it with the friendly expectation of a farmer awaiting an egg about to hatch.

Algernon, crouching behind a scraggly bush, donned his oxygen mask, ready to dive through the shattered ice and get the Ring. He picked up an outsize pair of wire clippers and held them in readiness.

Ringo was pointing at the stone, grinning, as George, John and Paul, all for one and one for all, slid across the rink to rescue him.

The bomb had stopped ticking when they reached Ringo and pulled him away and behind the boathouse where they had already cached the girls.

The bomb lay alone now on the rink. It was Professor Foot's turn to grab Algernon and hustle him away. The two of them raced across the snow, a hundred yards from the rink when the bomb went off. They were blown flat on their faces by the blast.

"Ex-British-Army rubbish!" Professor Foot said through a face full of snow. "That's all I can get. Useless. Last used in Palestine, and didn't work there either. I cannot get the equipment . . ."

The boys recovered from this latest assault with their usual aplomb. They added keeping away from possible

lurking places—like the deserted boathouse—to their precautionary measures and, by that same afternoon, were happily back in the swim of resort life.

In the swim literally, for the latest modern mechanisms had been applied to thaw and warm the mountain lake next to the hotel and it now offered enticing water for boating, if not for swimming, in titillating contrast to the snows all around it.

The boys, ever alert for any new curiosity or advance in gracious living, strolled along the lake bank fascinated.

They were even more surprised when, flopping and puffing at their feet, appeared the goggled, grease-covered body of an obvious Channel swimmer, the Union Jack sewn proudly across his swim suit.

He groped toward them victoriously, looking up at the sheer mountainside of snow.

"I thought I'd never make it," he gasped. "White Cliffs of Dover, right?"

"Wrong," George disillusioned him, pointing to the mountains on the other side.

"Drat!" the Channel swimmer said. "Must have made a wrong turn." He pulled his goggles back into place and dived back bravely into the chill water.

At prohibitive rentals, all four Beatles had accumulated the best and latest in ski equipment. They dressed in their jet-black suits and, carrying their skis, betook themselves to the top of the slope, where they affixed the waxed slats to their feet and joined the competition.

Swift as arrows, the boys shot down the mountain slope, dodging prepared barriers with near-professional skill. It was not until near the end of the run that they noticed anything peculiar. Hitherto, the obstacles had been plainly marked post and pylons, striped in bright colors, but now the path before the boys was almost littered with dozens of snowmen.

"Jolly concept, y'know!" George cried.

The snowman nearest to him, containing a freezing Thug, lunged with a shovel and nearly tripped him.



Close by, Clang, in another snowman, took a swipe at Ringo with his multipurpose umbrella. Below, the snow-shielded form of Bhuta, swung his umbrella at Paul. All, happily, missed.

"Hey!" shouted John. "Them's *Eastern* snowmen!"

The boys put renewed speed into their progress as the snowmen-Thugs abandoned their disguise to ski in pursuit.

All were going at a championship clip when a directional sign, an arrow in bright red, sprang up pointing to the left.

Beside it stood Ahme, smartly garbed in a parka and stretch pants.

"Flee!" she cried to the boys. "But turn quickly. A precipice gapes before you!"

With great presence of mind and professional skill the boys sheared off to the left.

Clang, close on their heels, had not seen the warning. Like a great bronzed bird of prey he soared over the cliff-side and came to a perfect landing in the cleared space below.

A huge cheer went up.

He had not braked before crowds were surrounding him, clapping him on the back and offering him hot buttered brandy.

A loudspeaker blared: "A new Olympic champion. Longest recorded jump." A reporter at Clang's side relayed his angry gasps. "Mr. Clang, from Kaili!"

An official, as others held the High Priest still, came forward to pin a gold medal on his chest. The local band, flipping frantically through their sheet music, were able to offer a fair approximation of the Kaili National Anthem. From somewhere, an official found a Kaili flag to raise.

Braked at the top of the cliff, Bhuta and the other Thugs were immobilized by patriotism and religious fervor; none of them could do aught but stand at strict attention while the anthem was being played.

Meanwhile the Beatles skied away for queen and country.

In the darkening valleys they skied on, aware now that the Thugs had been able to renew their chase.

The wily Bhuta had figured out a shortcut and skied down in front of the boys to entrap them. But Bhuta was but one. He stood with his arms outspread, and John and Paul skied neatly into him, one to each arm, and carried him before them into the nearest tree.

Bhuta's poor, bandaged, silly body slammed against the trunk and the boys let go. Ringo and George skimmed past him as he moaned.

"My blood group is very unusual," he said to the icy wastes. "My blood group is very unusual. My blood group is very . . ."

The boys were far past him entering a valley where two trails divided.

Ahme was there before them.

Efficiently, she directed the boys to the left and stayed in her place to signal the following Thugs to the right. From the right, after the Thugs had passed, came a chorus of shrieks, echoing uncannily. Ahme had sent them head on into the path of a giant Alpine snowplow.

The boys now had a good lead, but Clang, working on his own, had avoided Ahme's pitfall, taken a few specialized shortcuts and now crouched in a clump of edelweiss and bushes clutching his lucky Kaili charm. The zero wind whistled through his inadequate garb, but he held firm to his post, peering through the shrubbery toward the open trail. No one.

He took advantage of the lull to test his umbrella, also a flame thrower, on a nearby tree, which burnt to a charred stump in seconds.

"So sad," he said to himself. "Perhaps if we were to give away free tickets to the youth-organization annual sacrifice and dinner dance . . . we could avoid all this. . . . It's a very real problem. . . ."

He cut short his monologue and all his senses became alert to the swish of skis on the trail.

The Beatles!

Clang sprang to his feet and aimed his umbrella.

His moment of wool-gathering had slowed his reflexes

ever so slightly. Ever so slightly, but just enough.

The flame-thrower demolished his own ski tips as he raised it and came only close enough to the boys to ignite their ski poles, sparing flesh, blood and Sacred Ring.

Clang burned his bushes in wrath. Unable to ski after the boys, he stumbled through drifts till he reached an abandoned snowplow, mounted it and churned after their drifting tracks, the great revolving fan tossing snow hillocks to either side of him. He passed Bhuta, staggering to his feet near his tree, but gave him not so much as a salaam; speeding on, he covered his unhappy disciple with freshly plowed snow.

The boys, with an almost safe lead now, skied into the tiny town nestled in the valley ahead and made for the lights of the nearest restaurant.

Without even doffing his skis, Ringo led the way into the cafe, nonchalantly switching his still-blazing ski pole for a flaming shish kebab borne by a fuddled waiter.

"We must have a council of war," George said as the four were together at a table.

"Austria is no longer salubrious," John said.

"The North Pole?" Ringo tried again.

Three heads shook in unison.

"Or the South?"

Again a blanket No.

"There's only one hope," Paul said.

"East, West, Home's best," George agreed.

Less than an hour later, four weary boys skied to a stop before the baroque local railway station.

John, clutching a handful of traveler's checks, entered and went to the ticket window.

"London," he said quietly. "Four."

THE WORLD-RENOWNED DETECTIVE AND PROTECTIVE MACHINERY of Scotland Yard turned very slowly indeed.

"Red?" Superintendent Gluck inquired. He was both tall and portly, with a shifty eye he had perhaps inherited from the thousands of criminals he had apprehended in his notable and long career. "Red?"

"They have to paint me red before they chop me," Ringo explained for the fourth time. "It's a somewhat different religion from ours, I think."

The boys had arrived, travel-worn and even a trifle grubby, in London the night before. On their journey they had been more interested in speed than in the deluxe first-class accommodations to which they were normally accustomed.

The lawnmower had greeted them at the doors of their manse with clatterings of concern and wheeled away to draw warm baths and set out fresh clothing. In their Austrian absence, carpenters and glaziers had repaired the damage of the memorable battle night and a protection service had seen to it that ornamental yet effective bars were placed about the ground-level windows. The boys slept deep and well, although Ringo, from time to time in his pit, interrupted the quiet of night with fleeting nightmares, cries of "Help!" and "I shan't play ring-around-the-rosy with any Oriental, so there!"

First thing in the morning they had called Scotland Yard and made arrangements for the interview that was still continuing in Superintendent Gluck's office.

"Red?" Gluck mused again. "But no political significance? Thank God for that. Our Yank friends get so sensitive . . ."

"Just their religion, sir," Ringo said.

"Good," Gluck said, holding out a hand to take Ringo's left hand in his own for inspection. "And this is the famous Ring?"

Ringo nodded.

"Only, I'm in fear of my life, y'know," he said. "That's why we're here."

The Superintendent let go his hand and leaned back spaciouly in his swivel chair.

"So this is the famous Beatles!" he said, a note of adult scorn and patronization in his voice.

"So this is the famous Scotland Yard?" John parried.

"How long do you think you'll last?" Gluck leaned forward.

"You can't say fairer than that," John said. "The Great Train Robbery, how's it going, Superintendent?"

The police official winced slightly and found some "WANTED" circulars to shuffle about on his desk top.

"You don't believe us, do you?" Paul asked.

Superintendent Gluck smiled an oily grimace of reassurance that would not have mollified a three-year-old and reached for his clanging telephone.

"Gluck here," he said, and then frowned.

He held the phone across the desk.

"It's for you, the famous Ringo," he said.

"That business on the curling pond," George said. "That was nuclear disaster, y'know. That bomb insurance, they wouldn't have paid off on it."

Ringo, paralyzed with suspicion, was holding the phone in one hand, hesitant to answer.

"Hold on," John advised. "It must be *them*. Nobody but me and Paul knows we're here."

"I know we're here," George said, aggrieved.

"Allow me," Gluck reached for the instrument. "I'm

rather a famous mimic in my own small way, you know. Do a ripping James Cagney. Benefit parties and so on . . ."

Ringo let him have the phone.

"Hullo," the superintendent said in a totally unconvincing jape of Beatlingo. "Ringo here. Gear fab. What can I do for you, as it were fab gear?"

"Sounds nothing like Cagney," George criticized.

"Hey!" John cried, picking up sounds from the receiver. "Fingers!"

He stuffed his own in his ears for an example as the strains of Sacred Sacrificial Music wafted from the phone and into the room. Superintendent Gluck alone ignored him as the rest of the boys covered their ears.

Behind the music was the insinuating, hypnotic voice of Clang.

"Go to the window," Clang chanted. "Go to the window."

Crowded into a telephone booth across the street like so many American collegians going for the record, were Clang, Bhuta and a small combo of Oriental musicians.

Superintendent Gluck, glassy-eyed and still holding the phone to his ear, wandered from his desk to the window. The phone clicked and went dead, but its message had been implanted.

Superintendent Gluck still stood bewildered at the window. Narrowly missing his shoulder, an arrow flew through the window and imbedded itself in the wall behind him. Attached to the arrow was a plastic pouch of crimson paint, which broke upon impact and flung its bright burden all about the office.

Superintendent Gluck gibbered and dodged under his desk.

From underneath, still squatting for safety, Superintendent Gluck reached out one groping hand and located his Civil Defence Warden's helmet. With it perched on his head, he felt even more secure.

"You know there is a strong case for arming the police,"

he said from his shelter. "They want it in Scotland Yard. Should have thought Scotland Yard . . ."

"Now?" John asked.

"Yes," Gluck said from the heart. "I believe you. Thousands wouldn't." He shuffled about in his cramped space and found a more comfortable, cross-legged position. "Let's get the ball rolling, show on the road, battle commence. I'll establish my own HQ right here. Pass me the phone, will you? The famous lifeline of the service." Cradling the phone in his lap he blurted: "Nine nine nine!" the emergency number of the regular London police force.

"We want protection," Ringo underlined. "We've got a number to record tomorrow. *I* want protection."

"And you shall have it," Superintendent Gluck promised. He jiggled his telephone. "Get me Protection."

When the boys left Scotland Yard for home, they were shadowed by six bowler-hatted members of Scotland Yard's finest, and they arrived at their doors to find a dozen members of the uniformed branch in various alert positions along the street.

"For the actual recording," a subinspector informed them, "we're laying on some of the military as well. I should say, me lads, that you've not a thing to worry about."

The lads did sleep a trifle more easily that night, although with preparation for the recording session and discussions about what had become of the mysterious Ahme, it was late to bed for them.

"One begins to get a feeling of being used to having that bird about the place," Paul confessed. "A peculiar and unprecedented sensation."

"Can't deny," George said, slipping into his pit, "that she was more than a bit of help in Austria. Yet there's an air of mystery about the whole business."

"Remember," George said, "close up to the mike on your solo bit. Otherwise, Ring drowns you out with the wood-blocks."

And so they slept.

They were up early and packing instruments. This recording, an acoustical experiment of sound in a natural amphitheatre, was to be held on Salisbury Plain. All equipment was bundled into a station wagon which followed the boys to their destination. The boys, naturally, relaxed in the comfort of the Rolls.

The purple plain of Salisbury was at its most beautiful and most purple in the early morning light as the boys arrived. Sound technicians had already set up their recording rig. The boys moved into place and began their number, playing their hearts out in the sylvan atmosphere beloved since time began by British poets, mystics and scenic postcard vendors.

Their improvised bandstand was situated in the middle of a stretch of scrub near Silk Hill. Radiating from it and forming an interesting geometrical pattern were the tracks of Royal Army tanks. Half the clumps of bushes surrounding the area were Centurian Tanks camouflaged with nets sparkling with the early morning dew.

Tank crews stood at the ready under the nets, their concealment reinforced by cut branches of trees. Tank commanders remained in their vehicles, peering out the turret tops. Tank gunners kept their ordnance trained for cross fire to sweep the entire plain.

Behind the tanks a section of infantry, veterans of Cyprus and numerous newsreels, marched at ease behind a young subaltern carrying a knobbly stick and a head full of half-remembered catches from Kipling. They moved with fixed bayonets and took up preplanned positions behind trees and real and fake bushes.

Behind them, split into tactical sections, advanced an entire company, marching with its vehicles, platoons split into smaller units for if-necessary guerilla mop-up operations. These veterans, too, took up positions on the perimeter of the fortified recording area.

Farther back, other field units were digging in, hacking



out trenches, dugouts and machine-gun nests. Machine-gunnery officers supervised the line of fire for their weapons, expertly triangulating sweeps that would avoid mowing down their own men in front yet annihilate any alien force that might venture into the designated terrain.

An airplane buzzed back and forth overhead, spotting ranges for the heavy artillery that had been dug in and camouflaged even farther back.

"Cut!" the recording technician shouted. "Wait till the plane gets out of mike range."

The boys lay down their instruments for a few minutes until the observation plane had completed its mission.

"Least they could have done," George said, "was use a balloon for artillery spotting. No sound interference there."

"Too old hat, son," the recordist said. "Okay, take it again. From the top."

The Beatles launched into another tune destined for immediate popularity from Rangoon to Newark, New Jersey.

Far down the road, still another military column made its way. To the untutored eye, it appeared as British as roast beef or Brussels sprouts. Only there was something a bit sinister about the emblem of Kaili flying on a pennon from the lead vehicle. Clang sat in the front seat, perfectly tricked out in the uniform of a combat chaplain. Behind him sat his radio operator, keeping him in constant communication with Ahme, who was handling another phase of the operation.

"Hullo, Holdfast," Clang said into the receiver held for him by the radio Thug. "Sunray to set. Over."

Yards below the purple plain, Ahme straw-bossed a squad of Thug sappers, digging as hard and fast as possible in a narrow tunnel.

"Sunray on set," she said into her own radio. "Over."

"Sitrep, please," Clang requested.

"Mission completed," Ahme said. "We should be directly under . . . listen." She held her mike to a tiny

portable tape recorder that was playing a year-old Beatle number. Musical appreciation had been the only course Clang had flunked at Seminary.

"Ah!" Clang breathed into his mike with supreme satisfaction.

From their bandstand, the boys played their new number. Technicians in the mobile sound studio parked on the spot registered satisfaction as the melodious tones split the morning air.

Up the road, Clang halted his column.

Clang listened to the tune relayed by Ahme and scribbled a note on an official Army (surplus) message pad. He handed it to a Thug runner who sped down the column.

"Roger," Clang said into the mike connected with Ahme. "Return your unit to base. I will complete mission. Out."

The runner reached Bhuta, in command of a battery of horse artillery at the end of the column, and handed him the paper. Bhuta bestrode his mule dejectedly. He was bandaged now almost over his entire body. His mounting misadventures, culminating with the tree collision in Austria, had left scarcely a square inch unbruised or uncut.

He read the note. It directed: "Forward."

With a muffled sigh Bhuta led his detachment into a nearby field.

In the tunnel, Ahme concealed her miniature tape recorder in a crevice and sent her platoon of Thug sappers packing. She did not leave herself till they were well out of sight. She gave a cheery wave to Clang as he entered the tunnel, staggering under a burden of high explosive.

Above ground, the boys continued to play their new number. Below, Clang listened, a shocking leer on his lips, to the old one coming from the tape recorder as he packed TNT against the tunnel wall. The last sack he nudged gently into place was starkly lettered: "Equal to exactly one millionth of all the high explosive detonated in one week of the Second World War."

Clang tittered with glee.

He put a match to the fuse and then whipped out of the tunnel on an imported Italian scooter.

"This is a take," the recording engineer announced from the mobile studio. "Repeat, this is a take."

"High time!" Ringo said, giving the opening beat. The boys were off and away.

At his command post, Clang exchanged a friendly wave with the British Army officer nearest before giving orders to two of his most specialized expert Thugs, stripped to their ceremonial loincloths for action.

The first Thug, from a classic Grecian pose, hurled a discus into the air in the direction of the recording quartet.

As the discus drifted silently through the air, the other Thug took aim with his blowpipe. Below ground, the fuse sputtered to its end. Clang kept close tabs on his stopwatch.

"Blow!" he directed the blowpipe Thug.

The Thug blew and his sharp needle pierced the air to penetrate the discus just as it reached a spot over the Beatles. The discus burst open and red paint showered down over Ringo, over John, over George, over Paul, over recording engineer and technicians and a few advance-guard soldiers.

As the paint settled, there came a tremendous explosion.

The mine went off scattering earth, debris, bushes and a soldier or two over an area of hundreds of yards. But hundreds of yards in the wrong field where Ahme had circuitously steered the sapper platoon.

Red-stained Beatles ran for their lives. Army officers barked contradictory orders. Machine guns peppered everything but Clang and his battalion.

The boys ran madly, but smack into a red-sprayed Centurion tank. Faced by the tank guns, they threw up their hands in surrender.

It was Ahme who popped from the turret to say quickly: "Get in."

"Good old Ahme," John said, and he spoke for all four.

"Quickly," Ahme said. There were times and places for sentiment, but this was not one of them.

The lads climbed aboard and Ahme shoved the Centurion into its fastest gear.

As the tank shot off to safety, a variety of combat had been joined on the plain. For by this time even the most myopic of the Army commanders had descried that all was not kosher with Clang's company and had opened fire on it.

The faithful Bhuta, at his post with his battery, tried to lay down a covering barrage to protect the High Priest. The net effect of his efforts was that every time his guns fired, his mule shied and threw him to the ground to multiply his bruises and abrasions.

Clang, himself in command of a heavily armored tank, looked everywhere for the missing Beatles, at the same time protecting himself from the vigorous assault of Her Majesty's Forces.

"Traverse right," he directed his gunner. "Steady on. One five hundred."

"One five hundred," the gunner recorded.

To himself Clang mused: "I regret losing a lieutenant as able as Ahme, but she was told the price of capture." And again to his gunner: "Enemy tank moving from right to left."

"Loaded," said the Thug at the gun.

"Fire!" Clang ordered.

"Now firing," the Thug answered.

The tank rocked with the recoil of its gun.

Ahme was steering her tank out of the thickest combat zone and into a comparatively deserted field. She held to a zig-zag course, evading the Thug infantry who were aiming bazooka fire in her direction.

The tank turret spun like a merry-go-round gone insane and inside Ahme and the boys spun with it. In the battle going on, neither side seemed to lay claim to the runaway tank, so both sides felt free to fire at it.

"Shot action traverse right!" Clang ordered from his tank.

"Fire!" Bhuta cried, pulling himself halfway to his feet by a mule stirrup.

"Fire!" ordered one of Her Majesty's sergeant majors.

Ahme gave up steering and concentrated purely on speed. With shells bursting over it and around it, the tank careened crazily across a field, into a haystack and out the other side, where it ground to a shuddering halt.

Bhuta had remounted his mule and taken over a brigade of Thug cavalry. Through the walkie-talkie umbrella, which he had kept incongruously at his side, he assured Clang: "They shall not pass."

The tank, stalled past the haystack, shone red with sacrificial paint.

"Fire!" Clang ordered again.

A shell from his tank in perfect trajectory made a direct hit on the red tank's turret. A congenial cheer rose from the throats of the Thug infantrymen.

Lolling half inside the haystack, Ahme and the boys shook their heads wearily.

"There must be somewhere in England," Ahme said wistfully, "where one can find sanctuary long enough to think."

"There is." John excitedly abandoned the straw with which he was tickling an ear. "One place that must be inviolable. If we can reach it . . . Follow me." Ahme alone shook her head and burrowed deeper into the hay.

Crawling and belly-squirming through the meadow grass in Indian (American) file, led by John, the four boys found shelter in the neighboring wood. From here progress was easier, and in less than an hour they had left all but the most explosive booms of battle behind them. On traveled roads, they found it easy to hitchhike the rest of the way.

Once inside Buckingham Palace, all four relaxed.

Ringo and George found an exquisite little Regency table and Ringo pulled out a deck of cards as John watched and criticized. Paul, trying his best to materialize himself

into Steve McQueen, bounced a baseball endlessly against a priceless paneled wall.

As John watched the card players, his busy mind was hatching a new scheme.

"How's . . ." he started, "uh, how's your equilibrium, Ring?"

"How's yours?" Ringo threw back. "You're light again, George."

"How do you know it's not you that's light?" George asked.

"'Cos I never am," Ringo said. "Am I, Paul?"

"Hey, dekkko," Paul called, making an intricate underhand throw at the wall and recovering the ball without even bending. "Cop this, one hand!"

John thought he saw an opening for his train of thought and steamed into it.

"Ugly, though, aren't they?" he said with almost a sneer.

"Hands?" Paul bit. "Some peoples' are."

"You're light in the kitty again," Ringo complained.

"Let's look at your hand, Ringo," John said. He knew his idea was logical, even helpful; it was just that there were so many sentimental taboos about . . .

"There," Ringo said, holding up two aces, two queens and a two of spades.

"You want to chuck one in," John said.

"Get on," Ringo said scornfully.

"Drumming though." Paul picked up John's thought with the ease won through close and constant professional association. "Had you thought?"

"Won't affect it a bit," John said with certainty.

"I don't know any," Paul said.

"It appears I want one card," Ringo said. "It appears I am chucking one card in . . ."

"Very lighthearted," Paul commented.

"Discarding it and all," John said.

"Like an old boot," Paul said.

"Without so much as a backward glance," John added.

"They're talking about your finger," George said. "The

Sacred Ring digit. One card, please. Dealer takes one."

"There," John said, "that didn't hurt, did it?"

"Just hold a drumstick for us, will you?" Paul asked.

"There's a good bloke in Manchester," George searched his memory. "Mostly does noses, but . . ."

Ringo finally caught the ugly surgical drift of thought and conversation.

"I don't just drum with it, do I?" he said in indignation.

"What else then?" John asked.

"Well," Ringo thought, "I *use* it, don't I?"

"I'll raise you," George said.

"You haven't used that finger in the last hour," John said. "I've been watching. It's us as are in danger, too, you know. Me and Paul, we've not seen you have any real use for that finger, have we, Paul?"

"And again." George shoved forward another chip.

"No doubt about it," John said. "We're risking all our lives to preserve a useless member."

"That Matlo, that bloke with Scott at the South Pole," Paul said. "I've always admired how he walked out into the snow, for his mates."

"And again," George raised.

"Get on," Ringo said, trembling a little as he met the raise. "You must be joking."

"Just hold a drumstick," John pleaded.

"Certainly," Ringo said. He was now making a concerted effort to keep using all his fingers, and his poker hand began to slip and tilt disastrously. He shoved forward his check to George's new raise, ostentatiously with the left index finger.

George, seeing his hand clearly, raised once more.

Ringo, wildly twiddling every finger of both hands, now noticed the respectable size to which the pot had been built.

"Hey!" he said, still twiddling. "You, you've pushed it up on the quiet, a little bundle, haven't you?"

"Here," John said, putting one of the palace carving knives down on the table at Ringo's place. "Just like a loose tooth."

Ringo kept his eyes purposefully averted from the blade. "Well," George said, "I've got a good hand."

"You must have, y'know," Ringo babbled. "I mean, you'd be laughing little cobs, no hands, wouldn't you? You, you never dip them into your pocket, d'you? I might as well jack it in—I mean, it appears as if you've got five aces. Only time you ever bet . . ."

"You going to see me?" George adopted the monotone of a Western film gambler.

John nudged the knife across the table, closer to Ringo.

"Take it," Ringo conceded to George.

"Well, I will, 'cos I've won it, ha hah," he scooped up the pot, brushing the knife still closer to the cringing drummer. "Ta. Cut?"

"No!" Ringo said. "No, no, no!"

Superintendent Gluck, who had been notified directly following the lads' escape, entered the room bearing a tray with an immense royal tea service. Strings from tea bags trailed out of the samovar like mystic Russian beard.

"I think tea," Superintendent Gluck said. "Don't you? Tea."

"They expect me to cut my finger off," Ringo wheeled in his chair and spoke woefully to the police official.

"The famous finger, eh?" the superintendent said. "Well, the police *are* somewhat extended, scores of us, giving the famous protection for which we are justly proud in the country . . . and all for one small finger, eh?"

The celebrated superintendent seemed more nervous than the boys. The tea set, as he placed it on a table, rattled uncannily like Ringo doing a muted solo on the skins. George riffled the deck of playing cards and Superintendent Gluck jumped a good two feet.

"What's that?!" he choked.

The tea service rattled as he backed into the table.

"It's haunted, this palace," he said, skittering away.

"Are you going to cut or aren't you?" George asked Ringo.

"No," Ringo said, still conscious of the carving knife.



"I'm not going to cut. And let that be an end to it . . . end to it."

"That accounts for it," John said.

"This wing of the palace," Gluck lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "Haunted."

"That accounts for it," John said again.

"For what?" the superintendent asked nervously.

"For her," John said.

He kicked Paul's baseball out of his way and tiptoed across the room. Superintendent Gluck paled and backed against the wall, reaching into his waistband for the pistol he wished he could carry but never did.

John held a finger to his mouth as he threw open the ornamented door to a tiny closet.

"Her," John said.

Inside the closet on a cane bottomed chair sat none other than Her Majesty Queen Victoria of blessed memory. Paying no attention to the opened door, she bent her head over her needlework.

"Whew!" gasped the superintendent.

"We're never going to leave the palace alive," Ringo glummed.

"Oh, come now," Superintendent Gluck rallied, remembering his rank and authority. "I should think the Queen will have something to say about that."

"What's that?" George asked, pointing at the Scotland Yard ace.

"I beg your pardon?" Gluck said.

"That whirly thing by your left earhole?" George specified.

Over the police official's left shoulder spun the sharp, helical end of a turning awl. As irreverent as a tourist, the awl was biting its way through an immense oil by Romney.

"Er!" said Superintendent Gluck.

In the hall outside the room a Guardsman wearing a gasmask operated the awl. Once satisfied that he had made a hole of sufficient diameter, he withdrew the awl and picked up a length of tublar hosing. He screwed an in-

tricate nozzle on the end of the hose and began to force it through the hole.

In the card room, Superintendent Gluck's knees knocked one against the other.

"It's my allergy," he said in a voice gone all hoarse with terror and asthma. "Only thing that affects me at all is danger, but then I choke all up. What is it? I daren't look."

"It's only a bitty bit of hose," John said, trying to bring the superintendent back to his normal blend of superiority and false efficiency. "Just hose."

The Guardsman outside pushed more and more hose through the hole. It touched the floor of the card room and began to coil like a cobra, almost with a life of its own.

Paul reached out to grab a length of it and the other lads joined his impromptu tug-of-war. All four strained on the flexible strand. Superintendent Gluck, immobilized by his unfortunate allergy, stood frozen in his original position. He had managed to fish in one pocket and produce a silver-plated, executive-model police whistle. But when he raised it to his trembling lips, the best blow he could produce was a thin and inaudible asthmatic wheeze.

The lads now had tugged six or eight yards of hose into the room and with their usual presence of mind had poked it out the window on the side opposite its point of entry.

A colorfully uniformed Master of the Horse walked down the adjacent corridor, perhaps looking for a horse. As he came even with the Guardsman, the Guardsman stood at stiff attention, but the moment the officer had taken a step past, the Guardsman whipped a spare length of hose around his neck and swiftly strangled him before hanging him—hose, uniform and all—still kicking feebly from a convenient wall fixture.

The classic pattern of the Thug!

The boys had looped their hose end around a statue of Eros being pursued by Charles I so that it dangled out the window without further supervision. The hose situation taken care of, they felt free to crane out the window them-

selves and watch the impressive ceremony of the Changing of the Guard, which was about to commence directly beneath the hose nozzle.

In the hallway, the imitation Guardsman, elbowing the ornamental Master of Horse to one side, attached a metal cylinder to his end of the hose and spun its switch to "ON."

The Changing of the Guard began with traditional precision. Rank marched and wheeled and then, as yellow gas bubbled from the hose, keeled over. The palace grounds were, in a twinkling, covered with comatose Guardsmen, a little as if an ill-trained child had overturned his box of lead soldiers on the manicured greensward.

"Hmm?" George said.

"Eh?" said John.

"Tsk!" Ringo said.

"Peculiar," pondered Paul.

They turned away from the window to face an opening door to their hideaway. A real Guardsman, the functionary set to monitor their door, backed into the room with his hands held high above his head. Following and directing him was a figure in the guise of a Gentleman at Arms, holding an ax in one hand and a Webley revolver in the other. A gasmask covered his face from chin to brow.

The statuary group of Eros and the King, made a creaking moan on its pedestal as the weight of the still struggling Master of the Horse in the hallway tugged the hose. The menacing Gentleman at Arms stared aghast at the hose discharging its yellow gas *outside* the window. He made a move to reel in the hose, and Eros and Charles I tumbled all the way, knocking him flat.

A quaking Superintendent Gluck picked up the Webley and squeezed off five shots in every direction.

Paul, George, John and Ringo, well-trained by now, fell flat to the floor and avoided accidental perforation. The dubious Gentleman at Arms was already out the door and away down the endless corridors of the palace. The false Guardsman joined him and both were pursued by the

furious Master of Horse, who had finally struggled loose from his noose.

The real Guardsman, conditioned by generations of training against any untoward reaction to the unusual, had taken up his position at the door of the room as though nothing abnormal had occurred.

Far down the corridor, safe from pursuit, the Gentleman at Arms and the false Guardsman stripped off their uniforms and gasmasks, stuffing them into a Chippendale cabinet's top drawer. Shorn of disguise, they revealed themselves to be none other than our old antagonists, Professor Tiberius Foot and his loyal assistant Algernon.

"Other measures," Professor Foot said. "Second line of offense."

"We are prepared, sir," Algernon said, standing at ease.

"I know we are," the Professor said, "so get on with it. Don't just stand there and gawk like a ninny."

"Yes, sir!" Algernon said. He pulled at the museum-piece example of Chippendale until it was twisted into the hall. From its false back he lifted, with grunts and groans of effort at its weight, a large crate. Stenciled on its side was the legend: "U.S. MARINE CORPS SURPLUS."

"The Relativity Cadenza!" Professor Foot hissed in glee. "Hurry up, man. Open it!"

Algernon fished a penknife from his trouser pocket and made ineffectual assaults on the sturdily nailed crate.

Impatiently, Professor Foot fumbled in the back of the fake Chippendale and found a jimmy, which he handed to Algernon.

Progress was swifter with the new tool. Algernon pried, wood snapped, nails flew helter-skelter. The handsome hall was littered liberally with excelsior, but at last the Relativity Cadenza emerged from its wood-and-packing womb.

"Little beauty!" Professor Foot cooed, almost ready to pat its metallic contours.

Algernon uncoiled its wire and tried to plug it into an outlet in a floorboard.

"Wrong plug," he announced. "Always these Yank plugs to give us trouble."

"Make a switch," Professor Foot said. "Quickly. Time is of the essence."

"Thought time was relative," Algernon grumbled. He pirated a plug from a hall lamp, found some electrical tape in the dummy cabinet, and made the substitution.

"Now!" the professor said.

Algernon plugged in the apparatus.

"Perfect!" Professor Foot beamed. He turned the infernal device gingerly so that it would point down the corridor.

"It should work," he said, joining Algernon in flight in the opposite direction. "It's straight from Harvard."

In another section of the palace, Clang, once again garbed in his ecclesiastical dog collar, waited in an ante-room with an Archbishop for admission to an audience with the Queen. The mixing of business with mayhem was proving a strain on the High Priest of Kaili. Rushing from high tea to terror and from terror back again to a television panel was taxing even Clang's considerable powers of dissimulation and adaptation, but he carried on for Kaili, a cause higher than anything purely personal.

Now he chatted urbanely with the Archbishop. They had covered rose miters, topless bathing suits, ritual versus informality and come back, as always, to Youth.

"Their music, now," Clang said in accents of complaint. "But they like it just because it is their own," the Archbishop said. "An expression of individuality."

"Oh, I know," Clang said. "I listen to the discs, uh, almost religiously. Hoping to find a clue to the mentality that admires them."

"Keep up with the times, eh, High Priest?" the archbishop said approvingly.

"Youth," Clang said as if the word were a threnody.

"Youth," the Archbishop agreed with equal sadness.

"Kill! Kill them!" Clang shouted, starting out of his seat

and whipping a sharp and gleaming sword from his perfectly pressed trousers.

He had caught a glimpse of the lads down the narrow corridor and was off in pursuit.

The Archbishop nibbled another dry biscuit and shook his head. "Instability," he told himself. "That's the barrier with the East." He sighed.

The lads had heard Clang's cry and doubled their speed. They took random turns in the palace's maze of hallways and paused to catch breath before making the next turn.

They made it and found themselves running into the power zone of the Relativity Cadenza.

Their knees pumped high, their arms swung, but in this zone everything became stalled, every motion took four times its normal time. It was like trying to race on foot under water or hemmed in by an atmosphere of cotton puffs.

They were four flies caught in a spider web, but the web was not only invisible but all-pervasive. The harder they ran, the more they stayed in one place. It was Alice-in-Wonderland come to life in modern nucleonics. They sobbed as they bounced slowly off walls and their tears took eons even to begin to trickle down their cheeks.

Clang peered around the corner of the Relatively Cadenza zone and held back cautiously.

At the other end of the zone, six marching Gentlemen at Arms turned the corner. Their smart pace became the slowest of funeral marches as they found themselves mixed up in the intricacies of the space-time continuum with the Beatles. Superintendent Gluck and the Master of Horse joined them and were similarly slowed. The superintendent continued to fire his borrowed Webley at anything and everything, but its discharged bullets took a Freudian, wilting curve as they left the barrel and drifted through the contaminated ether like great dark-gray locusts.

Nothing could save our heroes now but a miracle.  
Or an accident.

Some distance away, in the Battersea Power Station, a small grayish man kept watch over the electrical system. He dozed in his booth, looking up from his daydreams occasionally to check equipment. Directly opposite his chair gleamed a fuse box for Buckingham Palace, appropriately marked "On Her Majesty's Service."

The whole box blew in an eruption of smoke and the little man started to his feet. He reached for his Hot Line telephone and put through an immediate call for the palace and the Gentleman of the Fuses.

In the palace corridor the Relativity Cadenza blanked out. The lads, the Gentleman at Arms, Superintendent Gluck, the Master of Horse, all fell together in a jumbled heap. The boys had wriggled out and were running normally again sooner than one could say Jack Robinson.

"Jack Robin——" muttered the Master of Horse.

The boys were around the turn.

Clang entered the corridor and took off after them.

In the Battersea Power Station, the Gentleman of the Fuses arrived.

"Hair dryer again," he said. "She had one for Christmas. I've begged her on bended knee not to use it. This always happens."

He shook his head and screwed in new fuses.

Midway down the corridor, Clang's racing feet went into slow motion. He gnashed his teeth, but even the gnash was ponderous.

Professor Foot and Algernon peered from the far end of the hall.

"Caught the wrong fish," Algernon said.

Professor Foot snarled.

By the time they had disconnected the Relativity Cadenza, the lads and Superintendent Gluck were at home, accepting drinks from the lawnmower and complimenting each other on their bravery and coolness.

**BUT DURING THE FOLLOWING  
WEEK 3 MORE ATTEMPTS  
WERE MADE ON  
THE LIFE OF POOR RINGO**

This safe return did not mean an end to the boys' adventures, nor to their apprehension of other outrages, but it did give them—not to mention the asthmatic and allergic Superintendent Gluck—a welcome breathing spell in which to recuperate both physically and psychologically and to prepare defences for the future.

It took only a few hours of gracious living at the Beatle residence before Superintendent Gluck had lost his shortness of breath and his nervous ticks and regained his ability to snort into two telephones simultaneously giving orders to underlings.

The boys occupied themselves not only in rest but in checking over their precious musical instruments, which had, perforce, been deserted on Salisbury Plain. The surviving sound men had seen to it that they were delivered to the house. Still there were long hours ahead of restringing guitars, tuning them and, for Ringo, retensing his drum heads and scraping rust from his cymbals. Perhaps it was Ringo who worked hardest of all.

At any rate, it was Ringo who finally, wiping a shirt sleeve across a beaded brow, announced:

"I'm for a long trickle under the shower, lads. First come, first served. "

"Shower in good health," Superintendent Gluck said, looking up from the elaborate chart on which he was red-penciling positions of his guarding force. "Scotland Yard is on the job."

**( 1 )**

Ringo undressed, throwing his clothes down at random to be retrieved by the mower, and, holding an R-mono-



grammed terry-cloth towel about his midriff, repaired to his private bath.

It was a tiled room of simple good taste, mosaic murals in four colors from the Hefner Collection set into the walls, two sunken baths of varied depth, a paper dispenser that played "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning!" and a shower with only a few less controls—heat, pressure, direction, admixture of after-shave lotion and specific gravity of fluid—than an RAF bomber. Whistling blithely, Ringo set the knobs to the most comfortable mixture, added a dram or two of Russian Leather, whipped off his towel and stepped into the shower.

The first spray brought clean comfort to his tired sinews, but he emitted an alert yelp of alarm as the water in mid-flow changed to the evil red sacrificial paint of Kaili.

Remembering to clutch his red-stained towel about him—he was a well-brought-up lad—he sprang into the living room.

Superintendent Gluck's men, dispatched at once, discovered a tied and gagged plumber in a dim corner of the cellar and significant signs that the Thug sappers had penetrated to that spot through a tunnel.

"Tunnel's been filled in with scrap iron," the Superintendent reported. "Have no further fear, lads. The Yard is on its toes."

Nonetheless, Superintendent Gluck personally accompanied them the next day when they ventured out for a walk. Six burly policemen surrounded each Beatle and eight burlier policemen surrounded Superintendent Gluck. He kept continuous count on his fingers to assure that the original balance of protection was observed. There were, after all, four Beatles, but only one Superintendent Gluck.

Fresh air brought the boys back quickly to high spirits. The bagpipe skirl of a Highland band on parade cheered them even more.

"What *do* y' reckon they wear under those skirts?" Paul pondered aloud as he and his pals and Superintendent Gluck pushed a way to the curb to view the parade.

"The Ladies from Hell, the Huns called them in one of those world wars," John footnoted.

With a wild crescendo on "Blue Bonnets O'er the Border," the bagpipers turned into the street. Even from some yards away, the Beatles could see clearly that the kilted company consisted of Clang's Thugs. But the press of curious watchers behind them allowed no escape. Superintendent Gluck cowered into his octet of protectors. The Thug bagpipers moved inexorably forward.

## ( 2 )

As they drew abreast, the nearest piper let squirt the first flow of red from the liquid pouch of his fake bagpipe. Happily, this first squirt hit the police rather than the lads and caused enough crowd commotion so that a lane of egress was possible.

While further pipes rained red on further policemen, John, George, Paul and Ringo had slipped through the crowd and were boarding a bus.

Superintendent Gluck, streaming sacrificial paint, harangued his walkie-talkie.

The boys swung off the bus a few blocks down, happy at their escape, but hot and thirsty from their crowded exit.

"A pub!" cried John, pointing to the corner. "We've earned refreshment."

At the cozy bar the lads all ordered wholesome lager and lime, their attention distracted by new sounds from the street outside, this time of bugles. So casual and off guard were they that not one of the four recognized Clang behind the bar, ridiculous in an ill-fitting Edwardian barman's rig but nonetheless a living threat.

"Everything is relative, y'know," Ringo relaxed into small talk.

"You what?" John asked.

Paul had taken hold of Ringo's finger and was once more examining the Ring. John ducked his head toward

it and made a snapping click with his teeth as Ringo whipped it away.

"You've not missed your tonsils, have you?" Paul asked Ringo. "And think what a hullabaloo there was about them."

"How do *you* know I don't miss them?" Ringo defended. "Now how do you know, eh?"

"Chop it off, Ring," John said, as if he were asking for the loan of a necktie.

"I've some good times," Ringo said, regarding his finger fondly. "How do you know I'd not miss it?"

"You're a rat underneath," Paul said unkindly.

"You can have a fire and theft policy fit," George said. "Five pounds a week, and that's their last offer. They say it's because you're a Beatle . . . fingers aren't in it."

"Is there a cure for nail biting?" John asked.

"Yes," Paul said, making a chopping hand motion.

Ahme, of all people, had suddenly materialized in the bar crowd. Smartly turned out as ever, she winked at Paul. He, intent on his conversation, did not see her, but George, ever so happy, did and winked back.

"I'm always getting winked at these days, y'know," George said. "It used to be you, didn't it, Paul?"

Ringo made an effort to lift his lager and lime, but the glass seemed to stick to the bar. He grunted and made another effort.

The glass acted as a level and, as Ringo tugged, a small portion of the bar counter swung away and a trapdoor gaped open just wide enough to accommodate Ringo's falling body. A Thug came into the bar and backed against the section, closing it tight.

Ringo plummeted on down in total darkness.

### ( 3 )

The lads looked at the closing door, looked at the hole in the floor, looked at the space Ringo had occupied, and finally looked into the gloating eyes of the evil Clang.

One glance was sufficient for them. They dashed in a body from the pub, trampling on their way pitiful Bhuta, who had just drawn himself up to the bar door on crutches.

At long last Ringo landed. He felt himself over and could count no bones broken.

He seemed to be in an unnaturally deep cellar. He could hear the distant drip of water. Keeping to the wall, he edged around the area. There was a door—he felt it—but it was locked tight.

Past the door he touched something that fell to the floor. He knelt to examine it and found it was a ladder. With new heart, he hefted it up and found that it reached within arm's length of the trapdoor above.

Ringo took care that the ladder's base was planted firmly, and then, holding tight to the sides, he placed his foot on the first rung. It snapped in two. His grip kept him from stumbling, and he tried the second rung. It snapped on contact. And so did the third. All the rungs had been neatly sawn in the middle.

"All the rungs have been neatly sawn in the middle!" Ringo ejaculated.

He slumped to the dark floor and tried to stare through the darkness. There was the shape of a window on the wall opposite, a rectangle just a little lighter than the darkness around it. It might lead nowhere, but . . .

Ringo searched the floor and came upon a box, which he carried to under the window. By standing on the box, he could reach it easily!

He mounted the box carefully. This could be another fiendish Eastern trick, a box to collapse under his weight. But it held.

He caught his arms on the window and pulled his head to it. There was darkness there too and in the darkness the malign snuffling sound of some unseen great beast of prey . . .

Paul, John and George had dashed on down the street and found Superintendent Gluck, paint-flecked but sur-

rounded by his guard and advancing in good style against a remaining cordon of die-hard Thugs.

"Don't worry," Gluck shouted to them. "Your famous Ringo is safe as houses." He pointed behind him and then shook his head angrily as he discerned no Ringo.

"No!" John cried. "He's fallen through in there." He gestured to the pub and all, including police and Thugs, rushed after him.

In the cellar below, Ringo had retreated from the window and crouched against a far corner, trying to make himself as tiny as possible. The snuffling from the window grew louder and intermingled with growls. Ringo's eyes were becoming more accustomed to the dimness and he wished they weren't. Whatever was snuffling at the window, he was sure it was nothing he wanted to see.

He squinched his eyes shut, but a closer growl forced him to look.



Through the window sprang a magnificent Bengal tiger. It switched its tail ominously and growled again. The scent of Man was in its quivering nostrils. It moved on padded feet with lethal directness toward Ringo.

At this moment Ahme appeared framed in the window.

"Don't move," she cautioned.

"Don't move," Ringo whispered to the tiger. "You heard what she said."

"Do you know Beethoven's Ninth Symphony?" Ahme asked, deadly serious. "It goes like this." She whistled a phrase and the tiger purred.

"Eh?" Ringo said, concentrating on the melody as seriously as if it were pop.

Meanwhile, upstairs, a melee had almost blown the pub to splinters. Thug versus policeman, Gluck and three Beatles versus Clang. Chairs in the air, the tinkle of broken

bottles, fists on noses, billy clubs on shins. The forces of righteousness won out, but Clang himself had sneaked away through some secret passageway.

"There!" John pointed when the tumult had abated. "That's the spot he fell through. That trapdoor!"

"Careful, men," Superintendent Gluck said as two of his burly guards approached it. "May be booby-trapped."

They examined the area around and, once sure of no trickery, lifted the door. Superintendent Gluck and John, Paul and George looked down the hole.

It took a moment before they could make out Ringo, humming through chattering teeth, as a huge tiger prowled about his feet, licking its chops.

"You've got yourself a little furry friend, then," John said observantly.

"Good Lord!" Superintendent Gluck cried in recognition. "It's Raja, the famous maneater who disappeared from the London Zoo this morning!"

"Good Lord!" John said, celebrity to celebrity. "So it famous is!"

"Don't worry," Gluck said. "He's absolutely harmless. All you have to do is sing Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' from his famous Ninth Symphony in D Minor."

"Of course," John called to Ringo. "Why didn't you think of that, you twit?"

"Raja is a gift from the Berlin Zoo," Superintendent Gluck elaborated. "He was reared on the classics." The superintendent was so excited with his erudition that he slipped over the edge of the door and only the ready arm of one of his burly guards saved him from a three-point landing on the tiger.

"Good Lord!" John said to Gluck as he was hauled back from the trapdoor. "It's Raja, the maneater who disappeared from the London Zoo this morning. Don't fret. He's harmless. All you have to do is whistle famous Beethoven's famous Ninth Symphony . . ."

"Come on, come on!" said Superintendent Gluck, back

in balance. He raised his voice, a not unpleasing although uneven baritone:

"Freude schöner Götterfunken  
Tochter aus Elysium . . ."

Below in the gloom Raja prowled restlessly, looking up at them, then over at Ringo.

George and Paul joined their voices, humming along with the superintendent. Paul tapped the rhythm on the side of the trapdoor. John fished a harmonica from his jacket and added his own melodious strains. As the harmony blended and built the tiger lay down on its side, purring.

An official Daimler drew up at the pub door and deposited the London Police Choir, all in evening dress.

As they mingled their trained voices with the gang at the trapdoor, another crew of uniformed and tone-deaf policemen lowered a heavy rope down the trapdoor within reach of Ringo.

Outside, other officers roped off the area as bystanders began to crowd in. The swelling, noble and famous "Ode to Joy" welled all up and down the block.

John mimed directions, playing his harmonica with one hand, to Ringo as the rope reached him.

Ringo, stepping softly to avoid Raja, arranged the rope under his shoulders and around his waist. He lifted a hand and signaled.

Superintendent Gluck, without missing a note or an umlaut, passed on the signal.

To the triumphant strains of the great German's famous "Ode," Ringo was hoisted to safety.

When the chorus died away, Raja roared angrily from the cellar, a duped feline balked of both meat and culture.

Superintendent Gluck ushered the lads into a closed van for optimum security and sped them home.

LATE THAT NIGHT, IN KEEPING WITH A METICULOUSLY preconceived plan not even revealed to Superintendent Gluck and other government officials, the four lads could be seen making their surreptitious way to the airport.

One at a time they slunk down streets, crept in and out of doorways, dodged through alleys, took cover behind bushes to avoid the numerous lurking Thugs who now dotted the whole of Greater London like an Eastern pox. A journey that could have been minutes in the Rolls, stretched into hours, but the boys did not complain. Safety and freedom from Clang and his cohorts, from Professor Foot and Algernon would be well worth any sacrifice of time. It was sacrifice of blood that preyed upon their sensitive psyches.

At the airport, they came together at a reservations desk. With an exhalation of relief, Paul picked up a colorful folder advertising the delights of the Bahamas. He had no sooner begun to flip its bikini-illustrated pages than he caught a glimpse of an obvious Thug killing time at the left luggage counter.

"Down!" Paul said in a low yet penetrating voice.

The four lads all ducked under the ornamental shrubbery and rubber plants that decorated this port of aerial embarkation. From their hidden vantage point, looking ahead, they could see two elegant nylon pylons, the shapely legs of the girl at the reservation counter. She, in her turn, cast down a look of curiosity and they beckoned to her.

An agreeable lass who took seriously her corporation's motto of Service, she left her desk and crawled into the bushes beside the Beatles.



"Secrets, see," John told her.

"Can we trust you?" Paul asked.

"Hold on a mo," said the obliging young woman, "I've got a friend."

She crawled out a little way and came back with another attractive girl.

"Four for the Bahamas," George said. "First flight out."

The first girl filled in proper forms while her friend fixed her hair.

In the main concourse of the airport, various Thugs stared at every passing tourist. Superintendent Gluck and his men, spread out over the area, questioned innocent bystanders with decisive authority.

The second girl, finally satisfied with her hair, made out tickets and took the lads' money, ignoring the lengthening queue that was forming at the first girl's deserted desk.

"You may proceed directly to the plane," the first girl said. "Now loading at A14-D."

"Thank you, sir," the second girl said, and automatically: "Next."

As the boys scurried out of the bushes, a little man left his place in the queue and squatted eagerly beside the girls.

"I'd like to know about nonstop to Hamburg," he said, displaying his passport and a roll of pound notes.

The lads quickly boarded the giant jet and strapped themselves in. A solicitous hostess hovered at their seats.

"The famous Beatles . . . ?" she inquired.

"No," John said firmly. "We're a new combo, the Wash-rags, the Barbarians, the Ostrogoths."

"Oh," said the hostess, and left them alone for the rest of the journey.

## **AND SO THE LADS FOUND THEMSELVES IN THE BAHAMAS**

It was bright, tropical daylight when the plane touched down at Nassau. The lads had managed some sleep, so

they were wakeful and alert as they came down the ramp from the plane and made their way as quickly and secretly as possible to the shelter of the airport administration building. They had no inkling of the vast number of other familiar passengers disembarking after them.

**↳ BUT SO DID . . . ↳**

A whole company of Thug soldiers came down the ramp from tourist class, marching in good formation and giving a hearty thumbs-up sign to newspaper photographers.

**↳ DITTO . . . ↳**

Clang, descending by rope ladder from his own blimp as a nubile stewardess held the swaying contrivance to make his passage easier. Bhuta followed him, bandaged in slings and miscellaneous casts, a bit less gracefully.

An airfield bat man, guider of planes once landed, waved his bat at the swarthy captain of Clang's blimp and asked if he desired permanent parking. The lighter-than-air officer shook his head and the bat man sauntered away to finish his ping-pong game with another bat man. Various planes, mistaking the flash of ping-pong play for directional signals, plowed into each other on the apron of the field.

**↳ LIKEWISE . . . ↳**

A British government plane landed in its own reserved space and Gluck emerged with a handful of his best bodyguards. The Nassau Police Force, all spit-and-polish for the special occasion, lined up for review by Gluck.

At the same moment, the Archbishop of Nassau was piloting his golf cart to offer an official welcome to High Priest Clang.

## ❧ **AND OF COURSE . . .** ❧

Half a mile away, on a deserted stretch of beach, Professor Foot and his loyal assistant, Algernon, rowed a dinghy ashore from their sleek yacht anchored just offshore. Lettered on the yacht bow was its name: *Sceptre*.

"Useless," Professor Foot was still complaining. "British. Never won a race yet. It'll sink like a lead balloon."

## ❧ **TO BE CONTINUED** ❧

Perhaps this is a good moment to recapitulate some of our story, not only for the benefit of readers who may thoughtlessly have opened the book to the middle and begun there, but for other, more normal readers who still may be slightly ajar from the swift succession of dangerous and exciting, though not necessarily clear-cut, developments.

Follow this closely and you will know as much as the author and considerably more than the Beatles, Superintendent Gluck, Professor Foot and Algernon, or even Clang himself.

## ❧ **THE STORY THUS FAR . . .** ❧

*An Eastern girl, chosen to be sacrificed to the abominable blood goddess Kaili, sent Ringo Starr a fan letter containing the Sacred Ring of Kaili, her love and a book that shall be nameless.*

*Clang, the vicious High Priest of the Kaili cult, accompanied by a merciless Thug army, sped to England to try to regain possession of the Sacred Ring. The Ring, in this brief interim, had become so firmly stuck on Ringo's left index finger that no known force could dislodge it.*

*During the course of his own futile efforts to remove the Ring, Ringo and his boon companions, John, Paul and George, met Professor Tiberius Foot and his devoted idiot assistant of good family, Algernon, who also developed an unsavory interest in the Ring since Professor Foot's ambition is to rule the world for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or himself.*

*Happily, our heroes found an unexpected ally in the lovely and mysterious person of Ahme, a beautiful priestess of Kaili and sister to the girl who was originally about to be sacrificed. (Remember?)*

*Other allies proved to be the timid and indeed yellow Superintendent Gluck of Scotland Yard and, accidentally, Bhuta, an associate of Clang's, who is of more help to the boys than to himself or his High Priest master.*

*Also involved in the adventures are the Master of Horse, Her Majesty the Queen's Household, various Gentlemen at Arms, the Scot's Guards, the 17/21st Lancers, the Connaught Rangers, the Royal Marine Artillery, the London Police Choir, Raja (a tiger) and the famous composer of the famous "Ode to Joy," famous Ludwig van Beethoven.*

*Not to mention the boys' devoted lawnmower, a number of innocent passers-by, old ladies in a bet shop, tourists in Austria, etc., etc.*

**But, at this moment in our story, Ringo, Paul, John and George are safe in Nassau.**

They were, in fact, happily frolicking on a beach of *Holiday* magazine beauty, looking for shells and otherwise enjoying to the full life on the salubrious Caribbean resort island.

"Here's one looks just like a finger!" George cried to Ringo.

Ringo plodded his own way down the sand, ignoring George.

There was everything to do in Nassau. Ocean swimming, pool swimming and a cheerful, catch-as-catch-can nightlife. Not to mention numerous birds from all over the civilized and not so civilized world, generally wearing bikinis, short shorts or other jolly garb.

For the first time in many a day, the lads felt free and fully relaxed. They savored the pleasures of Paradise Island and Balmoral Island, the splendid isolation of beautiful Cat Island. From willing rental agencies they accumulated enough skin-diving equipment to turn Captain Jacques Cousteau sea-green with envy. They no longer felt the keen necessity for hanging close together and walking close to the nearest wall. They could swim, dive, bicycle or just hack around as though Kaili and her minions had never exploded into their lives.

"We ought to do more of this!" George shouted to John down the beach.

"Almost as good as the adverts," John said, disappearing under water after some multicolored tropical fish.

"Beats working," Ringo agreed.

Paul, busily teaching a bird how to swim, said nothing, but hardly needed to.

{ UNTIL . . . }

The whole thing was a dream that shattered seconds later when Ringo looked up from the surf to see, heading toward the beach from a clump of palm trees and followed

by a platoon of Thugs, the familiar, repulsive figure of Clang.

He shouted. The other three lads turned.

There could be no doubt. It was their evil Eastern adversary, Clang!

Frantically, they turned toward the sea side. Coming toward them in an inflatable dinghy powered by an out-board motor were Professor Foot and Algernon. The dinghy bristled with armament.

From behind a rock at the other end of the beach from Clang a lissome arm beckoned.

"Hey!" Paul cried.

Behind the arm, coming out a little farther, was Ahme. Her motions were urgent. Paul pulled Ringo out and the boys ran splashing toward her through the shallow surf.

"Here!" Ahme said. A door opened in the rock behind her and she led the way inside. The door eased shut.

It was a long, dark, twisting passageway and Ahme said not a word.

"Where are we going?" Ringo chattered.

"Hush!" Ahme said. "I can say no more."

Soon the sea dampness of the passage gave way to dryness. It widened into a more comfortable lane and the darkness began to lighten.

"We grow near," Ahme said. "Quietly!"

The boys tiptoed now, following her trustingly.

"Here," she said.

A wide door was set in the end wall of the passage. Ahme pressed and it opened. The lads followed her through into the Temple of Kaili.

At the end of the center aisle stood the representation of the goddess, bathed in blood-red light. Her eight arms seemed to move by some trick of the shadows. Her cruel mouth curved in a smile that was avid for fresh sacrifice.

Ringo jumped back a little at the sight.

"Safe here," Ahme soothed him. "For now."

"Is that it?" John gaped at the goddess. "I should keep your finger well away, Ring."

The cautionary advice was unnecessary. Ringo already had his left hand jammed behind him and wrapped in a handkerchief.

"Clang had the whole Temple transported here from the East," Ahme turned to Ringo. "Just for your sacrifice."

"He needn't have bothered," Ringo said sincerely.

"Nice of him, though, wasn't it?" John said. "All that trouble."

"Not to mention the expense," George added.

They walked along the marble floor of the temple, embedded with various inscriptions from the book of Kaili, inspirational mottoes like: "Die!" and "Bleed!" and "Suffer!", Ahme translating fluently as they went.

At the far end they arrived at a raised rectangle between two pulpit-like constructions.

"What's this?" Ringo asked.

"This is where you will be disembowelled," Ahme said. "The little gutters in the marble, sloping down to the trough here, carry the blood right off to the goddess. Neat, eh?"

"You don't go for all that, though, do you?" Paul asked.

Ahme shook her head gravely.

Behind the sacrificial altar, an aged woman scrubbed the floor, moving on her knees as she had finished one spot to another.

"This Rh-negative is hell to get out!" she muttered to herself.

"Hullo," John said. "Keep you bustling, don't they?"

The woman answered with a morose nod.

"Do you know," Paul cleared his throat, "Clang?"

"I'm his mother," the elderly charlady said. "And he's a good boy."

She bent back to her scrubbing, muttering incoherent complaints about the quality of blood Kaili got nowadays, not like when she was a girl. . . .

There was an ominous shout from the distant corner of the Temple. Ahme slipped behind a slab of stone and beckoned.

"I'm not going to knock anybody else's religion," George was saying, "but, y'know . . ."

"Flee!" Ahme ordered urgently.

The boys followed her behind the slab and into still another passageway.

This new passageway led steeply down and then curved up again.

"Hold your breath!" Ahme directed before a sharp turn. "Prepare to swim under water."

The boys, fortunately in training from the antics of the previous few Nassau days, followed Ahme into a solid wall of liquid. They swam blindly ahead and in only seconds were surfacing in the pool of the Nassau Beach Hotel, a scene of Western leisure and opulence centuries removed from the grim Temple they had just left.

Ahme was nowhere in sight.

"Probably swam back," George said.

"If she knows the passage here, odds are Clang does, too," Paul reasoned.

It took no further word to send the lads scrambling out of the pool and away.

At the side of the hotel they found their rental bicycles, mounted them and quickly headed down the highway toward the airport.

"I've got enough travelers' checks," Paul said. "We can be in New York in hours. Have everything else sent home from the hotel."

Ahead of them the airport was in sight, sleek, huge jets being serviced to accommodate a quick flight anywhere. But, as they neared, the lads found their pedaling growing less enthusiastic.

"No!" John said, wheeling to one side and stopping. "Let's face 'em and ram 'em, eh?"

Paul parked his bike alongside.

"I'm game," he said.

"Duff 'em up," George said, his handsome face shining with memories of Liverpoolian brawls long past.



"There comes a time . . ." John said.

"A man's got to do what he's got to do, y'know, when he's got to, y'know . . . do it," Paul summarized.

"I don't reckon all this running away," George said. "Gets tiresome and repetitious."

"Right!" John said. "Let's get and lace 'em."

Ringo, several yards ahead and still pedaling, looked back and saw his pals turning around.

"Here!" he cried. "No! They'll disembowel you."

"Not if I get my boot in first," John said.

"They won't," Paul spoke from a grim face.

"They won't disembowel us," George said. "You see, that's all gab, disembowelling and all. There'll be none of that. All windy they are, Thugs, dead windy at heart."

Half of the talk was to convince themselves, but their basic decision to stand and fight had been made.

"About time somebody put the block on that lot," John said. "Very nasty they are, especially that Clang chap."

Ringo was pumping to keep up with them.

"No, lads, no!" he wheezed. "I'll cut it off, lads."

The others paid him no attention.

"Anyroad, see here," Ringo shouted, letting go his handlebars. "I can still ride a bike. Look, no hands! What's one finger? Rest assured, lads, I'll cut it off."

Facing the boys down the highway was a hastily constructed road block, saw horses and four-by-fours strung across the road, the whole manned by Superintendent Gluck and his allies in the Nassau police department.

Paul, George and John ground to an obedient halt and waved at the Superintendent. Ringo, still orating, rode through a gap in the timbers and straight at the Scotland Yard man.

"I'll cut it off," he was saying. "Just somebody give me a knife."

"Good show!" Superintendent Gluck approved his decision. "Famous!"

The Superintendent reached into the back of his limousine, found a knife and tossed it to Ringo.

Ringo caught the knife as he dismounted from his bike.

With a set face he walked a little way from the crowd to a tree and fixed his left hand firmly against its sun-warmed trunk. He turned his face away from the tree as he snapped the knife open.

Superintendent Gluck, visions of a swift return to London crowding his fat head, had got out of his car and come over to be of any assistance required.

"Who needs a finger?" Ringo asked, bracing himself to chop.

"Allow me," Superintendent Gluck said, reaching for the knife. "Be home in no time at all at this rate. Slippers on the hearth, telly turned on . . ."

"No, Ringo!" John crowed from behind the police barrier. "Don't!"

Superintendent Gluck took Ringo's left hand in his own and Ringo handed him the knife, still looking away.

"This will hurt you, more than . . ." Superintendent Gluck started jovially and paused. "Eh! It's off!"

The Sacred Ring nestled in the palm of the superintendent's beefy hand!

"No?" Ringo cried. "Hey, did you just pull it off?" He spun happily around to face John, George and Paul. "He just pulled it off, all the time, he did!"

Ringo was capering with joy and relief. He picked the Sacred Ring from the superintendent's hand.

"Like this!" he cried, putting the ring back on his finger and tugging.

And tugging.

And tugging . . .

The Sacred Ring was once again adhering as firmly as ever.

Long before, Ahme had hinted that Courage could conquer Kaili. In the moment of his decision, Ringo had had the Courage, and the Ring had slipped off easily. Now, in the moment of relief, his old and human fears had returned and the Ring was as tight as if it had been welded to him.

"Yes," Ringo said, still tugging but without hope. "Well . . ."

"To the Temple," John picked up the forgotten battle-cry. "We'll do them in!"

"Never mind," Superintendent Gluck said. "Let's have another go with the knife, eh?"

He brandished the shining blade in the air, but Ringo was back on his bike, following the other lads and shouting: "To the Temple!"

"Which way?" Paul asked, pedaling behind.

Directly ahead of the lads, moving silently, wafted Clang's blimp.

It was an awkward and dated-appearing contrivance from the outside, but inside its cabin were all the resources of modern science that Clang might call upon for aid in his perilous quest. Calculating machines banked one wall, across the other were teletypes, closed-circuit television hookups, short- and long-wave radio and a pop-up toaster.

In the center of the cabin lay the faithful Bhuta, trussed up in a canvas harness with two heavy-gauge wires attached to his shoulder blades and running down to anchor again at his bare feet. Clang was adjusting the harness precisely.

"A-okay now?" he asked. "Not touching too many old wounds?"

Bhuta moaned a little and said: "A-okay."

Clang surveyed his disciple with satisfaction and then turned to the equipment stacked nearby and began to hand it to Bhuta, checking off items on a printed form as Bhuta acknowledged their receipt.

"Signpost?" Clang said, handing Bhuta a signpost.

"Signpost," Bhuta said. Clang checked it off.

"Guidebook?" Clang said, handing Bhuta a small pamphlet.

"Guidebook," Bhuta moaned. Clang checked it off.

"Feet?" Clang said, handing Bhuta two long poles with dummy feet on their ends.

"Feet," Bhuta groaned. Clang checked them off.

"Red light?" Clang tested.

"Kaili!" Bhuta replied between pain and ecstasy.

Clang dipped the feet at the ends of the poles in fresh red sacrifice paint. Bhuta held them out in front of him. A red light blinked on on the cabin wall over the open hatch.

As Clang and Bhuta stared intently it changed to green.

"Green light," Clang said. "Go!"

He gave Bhuta a helpful shove and Bhuta winced toward the hatch.

"Kaili!" Bhuta yelped feebly, plummeting through the door into the air. Clang watched approvingly as the wires whipped out after him and collected his own wits just in time to grab and secure them to the proper stanchion before Bhuta was lost for keeps. The wires pulled Clang almost across to the hatchway before he could fasten them. Outside, Bhuta hung head down from the wires, brandishing his dummy feet like helicopter vanes.

Far below and a few moments later, the lads on their trusty bikes came to a fork in the road. They stopped and puzzled over which route led to the Temple. Paul got off his bike and scouted about. It was in the middle of the right-hand road that he found a large, still moist, red footprint. He examined it.

"Easterner with greasy feet speak with forked tongue," he improvised.

"Isn't that the next film?" John asked.

". . . passing this way hot foot many moons to Temple, twice," Paul said.

"Don't encourage him, John," George said.

"It's this way," Paul said impatiently, starting to wheel.

"Dare we ask how you know?" John dared ask.

"How, eh?" Ringo said.

"I saw that sign," Paul said, and pointed to the side of the road where Bhuta had implanted a large sign reading: "To the Temple."

The lads biked now at a more cautious pace, following the red footprints along the center of the road. Several footprints along, Paul picked up a beautifully printed

guidebook with the location of the Temple of Kaili carefully ringed on the map of local places of worship.

"The sign," Paul said, "and these footprints. And this guidebook which points out local places of worship, see?"

Ringo looked down at the wet footprints and back at the sign.

"I . . . uh," he said and turned his bike to go back.

"Ring!" John called after him.

But Ringo had not far to go. Superintendent Gluck's car was pulling up at the crossroads and starting down the marked way. Seeing Ringo, the doughty official clambered from the car, waving his knife merrily.

Ringo turned his bike again and pedaled to reach his mates.

"Come on!" John yelled to Ringo, to Superintendent Gluck and his police. "Come on!"

The four lads, together again, wheeled after the red footprints.

"After them," Superintendent Gluck said, getting back into his car. "Slowly."

Far across the way where the sea curved into the land at Cabbage Beach, Professor Foot and Algernon, once more aboard their yacht, watched by telescope the cavalcade of police vehicles preceeded by the biking boys.

Far ahead, Clang steered the blimp and Bhuta, dangling painfully below, continued to mark out the trail, sinking new signposts, stenciling further footprints.

In his chauffeured police car, Superintendent Gluck was giving way to the strain. Each new sign with the esoteric device of Kaili under its printing made him more uneasy.

Ten minutes down the road he turned to his second-in-command close to collapse.

"I can't go on, Sergeant," the Superintendent wailed. "They're everywhere . . . the little brown devils are everywhere. It's more than I can compass, more than flesh and white blood can stand, tigers and arrows and red everywhere, eh?"

The sergeant attempted to calm him, but unsuccessfully.

"Spiders!" the Superintendent spat. "It's more than I can famous take. Spiders, that's next. I know how these things work out, seen a film or two, I have. Spiders that go through the netting, on the go under the net all night . . . and the drums!" The Superintendent had to be restrained from leaping from the car. "Can you hear the drums?"

The Sergeant stopped twiddling his fingers on the car window and drew his hand to his lap.

"He who hears *them* is lost!" Superintendent Gluck sobbed. "*And* doomed. The Great Train Robbery. The Great Train Robbery. The Great Train Robbery. The Great . . ."

The roadway wound to a terminus in a set of deserted army barracks, but the red, moist footprints continued.

The red-footed trail led from the end of the road into the camp complex, up the side of a building and down the other side, across a drill ground, up another building and on until they vanished into a large structure that could have been anything from an auditorium to a gymnasium or both.

The boys stood close together by their bikes, oppressed by the unnatural quiet and greenness of the scene.

"Not it, is it?" John voiced the unspoken thought of all four.

"On the map," Paul puzzled. "Where it was . . . y'know, the Temple . . . uh . . . swimming pool . . . uh . . ."

"Never saw . . ." Ringo said.

"Should be . . ." George said.

The police cortege drew up as the lads were muttering their bewilderment. Superintendent Gluck, with massive effort, pulled himself together.

"Pull yourself together, sir," his sergeant whispered. "Our local constables . . ."

"I just did, idiot!" Superintendent Gluck said, getting out of the car and strolling with assumed nonchalance to the boys.

"So, eh," he said. "This is your famous Temple, eh?"

"*Should* be," John said.

"It's gone," George said frankly.

"Of course," Superintendent Gluck chuckled heartily. "Eh, Sergeant, come here."

"Great," Ringo said, staring at the empty barracks. "I hope that disembowel thingy's taken its hook also, too."

"Sergeant," Superintendent Gluck said. "No Temple here, eh?"

"Never in a million years, sir," the Sergeant said with certainty. "This here's an old army camp. Empty for years, sir. Well-known place of retreat for jaded courting couples who like the echo of the bugles as they court. That's my own guarded theory."

"Right," said John. "Are we going in . . . ?"

There was something about the look of the place, some sense of threat, that put the boys off no matter how sure Superintendent Gluck seemed to be of its innocence. He had regained full confidence and was almost strutting as he stepped off toward the deserted camp.

"No . . ." Ringo said.

"Then don't let's," John said.

"Come along, lads," Superintendent Gluck called tauntingly. "Don't be windy. Where's that famous pluck?"

"I don't know," John said. "You got any, George?"

"I *did* have," George said.

"I *have* had," Paul said.

"I *will* have," Ringo said boldly. "Lead on!"

The little group still hesitated for a moment at the verge of the camp area, but when Superintendent Gluck forged boldly ahead all followed, including the lads.

The Superintendent, as if he had been familiar with the camp from his childhood, marched blithely past barracks and up to the door of the vast building to which the red footsteps led.

"Carry on!" he cried, throwing open the door and entering.

The door creaked on its uncoiled hinges with an ominous

and eerie sound. The lads and the other police followed the gallant Gluck.

The building seemed to have been some sort of warehouse. Its interior stretched vast and deserted beyond the door, dwarfing the newly entered group. Even Superintendent Gluck had lost a bit of his bonhomie, but he strode ahead after the slightest of pauses. The others followed, wary but shamed. When the brave little group reached the center of the floor area, heads snapped upward at a sudden rumbling noise. Expressions of curiosity changed to sheer horror as they saw, plunging down from above, a giant steel cage.

There was no time for escape. It came down to imprison everyone but George, who, only by happy accident, had been on the extreme edge of the group.

George ran like the wind toward the door, for freedom and for aid.

Inside the cage, Superintendent Gluck fell apart even more swiftly than he had previously pulled himself together. His sergeant kept him propped erect as the other police alertly formed a defensive square around Ringo, John and Paul.

Thugs swarmed over the building, dropping from rafters, appearing from closets, popping out of hidden trapdoors. Two of them took off after George, but excellent marksmanship from the caged police dropped them in their tracks.

Two more Thugs took up the chase and were dropped in their turn. George was out the door and free of the building at least.

"After him!" Clang ordered another pair of Thugs.

"But, Swami," a limping Bhuta pleaded, "this is murder."

"Yes," Clang agreed, smiling ferociously with bared teeth. "Follow him. More. More!"

Of fifteen Thugs dispatched after George, six did contrive to elude the bullets of the police. But George cleverly circled the building as they chased him and led them in



again by the rear door to where the Bahamanian sharpshooters picked them off like clay pigeons while George jumped out a window before Clang could put more Thugs on his heels.

"Do you think George has *satisfied* them?" John asked. "He's got a lot to give."

Superintendent Gluck's trusty sergeant paced the cage.

"They're up to something," he said wisely, "the half-naked fiends. Oh, heaven preserve me from a religious fanatic because they are without doubt the worst of all that one has to face day by day on the beat of life. It's not just the bigotry; it's the nakedness I find quite nasty . . ."

He sighed and paused in his pacing.

"Don't you find that in all walks of life?" Gluck asked pessimistically. He had recovered somewhat, although he was still far from the dashing self-confidence with which he had entered the trap.

They were distracted by a loud scream from John.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

A Thug lasso, thrown from the roof, had looped around John's leg. Two husky Thugs were now pulling him up through the open top of the cage to the roof of the building. Once there, they dropped him down again over the side of the cage and held him suspended there a few feet from the ground. A lucky shot from one of the imprisoned constabulary severed the rope. In the fraction of a second while he fell, John relived his entire life.

## **IN A FRACTION OF AN INSTANT JOHN RELIVED HIS ENTIRE LIFE**

*He was dressed in nothing and a redfaced midwife was slapping his bottom. It would have been a painful recollection at any time, but it was the worse for John's memory keeping him still full adult size. He wriggled and squawled and drew his first (presumably) breath.*

*John was playing in a public recreation yard at five years old. Tag and London Bridge. The children he played with were all five-year-old size, but John, in a Lord Fauntleroy suit, continued to hang on to his adult dimensions. Humiliating!*

*Aged ten, he was set in the corner for a dunce. The largest child in the room, the added height of the dunce cap almost touched the classroom ceiling. And he needed a shave. Ugh!*

*At fifteen he was trading girlie magazines with mates who continued to be smaller than himself. If they didn't understand what the magazines were about, it wasn't his job to tell them. His voice piped out in a reedy falsetto.*

*He was twenty now. Only a few more years to go, thank heavens! He practiced at an off-key toy piano with an ear-aching lack of success. Then he played a harp and the result was even worse. Now there was a guitar in his hands. He picked at it and a smile of near content began to form on his face.*

*He saw himself with his mates, shining slick on half a dozen record album covers. Beautiful birds were winking at Paul, who stood next to him.*

*By a bookstore counter piled high with copies of In His Own Write. He signed his name in copy after copy, and eager customers deluged the bookstore clerk with pounds and guineas.*

*There was a kaleidoscope of newspaper headlines: "BEATLES ARRIVE IN NEW YORK." "BEATLES WAX BOFFO." "ARE BEATLES PART OF A RED PLOT?"*

*Then a gala press preview of A Hard Day's Night.*

**John was applauding vigorously when he hit the floor. He returned to the real and present world in a trice. He**

unloosed the rope from his ankle and bewilderedly ran toward the cage. A prison moments before, now it seemed like a sanctuary.

Paul shouted at him.

"Don't touch the bars!" Paul cried.

He pointed to the Sergeant, squatting next to him and gibbering as he nursed his abraded hands.

"The fiends!" Superintendent Gluck explained. "They've painted the bars with concentrated sulphuric acid."

"The fiends!" Ringo endorsed. "They . . ."

In midsentence, Ringo dropped from view. A trapdoor had been sprung beneath him. As he fell, almost by conditioned reflex he began to hum famous Beethoven's famous "Ode to Joy."

The others rushed to the trapdoor as Ringo fell through, but it closed immediately after him and there was the sound of a bolt slamming to from underneath.

In the basement of the warehouse, Professor Foot and Algernon clutched at Ringo and rolled him swiftly into an old army blanket. Shouldering their burden, like moving men with a carpet, they clambered out of the basement and dashed for their car parked nearby.

Ringo squirmed his head out one end of his wrapping and gave a muffled cry: "Help!"

George, crouched behind a clump of flowering Bahamian bushes, witnessed the abduction.

As did Ahme.

As did Clang and Bhuta, spying from their observation post on the warehouse roof.

But George was closest to the car. Between the turn of ignition key and stepping on the gas, George had bounded to the rear of the vehicle and clawed his way to an uneasy perch thereon.

"We've done it!" Professor Foot crowed, steering the car onto the roadway. "Once aboard the yacht . . ."

"Nice going, sir," Algernon said from the back seat where he guarded the blanket-swaddled Ringo.

Professor Foot twisted the car into a series of spiraling

near-accidents as he caught sight of an image in his rear-view mirror.

"But that's not him!" he cried in rage.

Algernon craned his head around.

"Eh?" he said. "There's one on the back. *Another* one."

"Gnah!" Professor Foot gnashed his teeth. "We'll take care of that!"

He braked the car to a screeching stop and George clamped his grip tighter. Professor Foot recklessly shifted into reverse and backed the automobile rudely into a stone wall bordering the roadway.

George was braced and prepared. Instead of being squashed or brushed off, he slid gracefully over the top of the car and onto the hood where he wedged himself firmly between hood and front bumper.

"Gnah!" Professor Foot gnashed again. He slammed his foot down on the accelerator and the car reared forward and into a telephone pole. George leaped off before the impact.

This last maneuver stalled the motor. With scientific know-how, Professor Foot quickly flooded the carburetor.

While Algernon offered advice and Professor Foot fiddled with choke, starter and ignition, George had opened the car trunk and removed a jack. Working at high speed, he raised the two nearside wheels and removed their nuts before Professor Foot had sorted out his driving technique.

On Professor Foot's twentieth try, the car did start. That is to say it lurched forward several yards before the two loosened wheels fell off. As the wheels dropped, the nearside doors sprung open and Professor Foot and Algernon were catapulted into a ditch with the blanketed Ringo deposited on top of them.

George speedily unwrapped Ringo and they were off and running before the Professor and Algernon had come to their feet.

Professor Foot gazed after the diminishing figures of the two fleeing Beatles and shook his head.

"So near," he said. "We nearly . . . Say what you will about England—I know you're very critical of the dear old country, Algernon—but she would not have let us down like this. It's the filthy, sticky heat. They sleep all afternoon here, you know. Saps vitality. Give me a good, clean, brisk chase on a sharp Friday afternoon in Merrie England, and we'd have had them, eh?"

"Yes, sir," Algernon said.

They both sat at the edge of the roadside ditch, hot and shagged and temporarily out of the running.

Meanwhile, back at the warehouse, action had been lively. \*

Superintendent Gluck had taken hold of himself and under his professional direction the superb marksmanship of the Bahamian police took debilitating toll of the blundering Thugs.

Shot after shot rang out from the cage and almost every one found its Thuggish target. The Eastern interlopers were the more disordered since they had no supervision of command; Clang and Bhuta, on the escape of George and John, had followed after the two liberated Beatles, leaving their followers on their own.

Under these conditions, it was not long before the building was cleared entirely of Thugs, but John, Paul, Superintendent Gluck and the police were still encaged.

It was John, already outside, who suggested that the muscular police officers form a series of human pyramids that would allow, in each case, for the topmost participants to leap over the sides of the cage. Soon, enough able-bodied men were mustered on the free side to haul on the governing rope and lift the cage from their companions. When all were assembled a good distance from the center of the floor, the rope gang let the cage fall abandoned to the ground with a shuddering clatter and clank.

From this point, it was simple for them to recover their cars, motorcycles and vans outside and to return to the road.

They passed Algernon and Professor Foot, still ditched, with no more attention to them than had the dangerous pair been picnickers.

Shortly after, on the roadway leading to Paradise Beach, they made reunion with George and Ringo.

"You've bagged Clang?" Ringo asked.

"And Bhuta?" George added.

"They've vanished," Superintendent Gluck admitted. "Into thin air."

George and Ringo clambered into the back of the police car.

"But times are young yet," the superintendent said. "Just wait . . ."

"He's got a plan," John said.

"A very famous plan," Paul said.

"You do have a plan, Superintendent," John said. "Haven't you?"

The man from Scotland Yard nodded, a wide, catlike smile covering his wide, catlike face.

## **THE PLAN IS A SIMPLE ONE . . .**

"The plan is a simple one," he said. "Listen while I unfold it."

He spoke at length as the lads listened and the sergeant painfully took down details in shorthand with his acid-burned hands.

Later that afternoon, in the clear, bright sunlight of a Bahamian afternoon, Ringo could be seen perched on the end of a pier, surrounded by a pile of conch shells, fishing industriously. He kept to this pursuit for better than an hour with no untoward results. He frowned and went on to his second alternative position.

## — FIRST TO BAIT A TRAP . . . —

"First, we must bait a trap," the superintendent said.

So Ringo now repaired to the even more solitary area of deserted caves with a willing and able-bodied young lady who had been commandeered at the hotel.

He arranged the girl in a conventional but picturesque pose at the entrance to one of the caves. Then he set up an easel with a bare canvas and began to paint. The police sergeant had enlisted a local artist to help on this phase of the operation, and the canvas was covered with lightly outlined color areas, each one numbered to match a tube of paint. Ringo finished quite a charming little chromo, but nothing untoward happened.

## — THEN TO LURE CLANG INTO IT . . . —

"Bait the trap and lure Clang into it," the Superintendent said. Ringo packed up canvas, easel and girl and went back into town to stroll alone (yet watched by a score of official eyes) through the crowded, cosmopolitan streets.

It was in town that a Thug spotted Ringo.

A tall and muscular member of Clang's entourage, the Thug was leaning innocently against a statue of Queen Victoria. As Ringo passed, he pulled a polaroid snapshot from his loincloth and compared it with the strolling Beatle. Satisfied, he turned back to the statue. He depressed Queen Victoria's left great toe, a concealed telegraph key, and tapped out a message to Clang at Kaili HQ.

## — SO THE FISH BITES . . . —

"Eventually, the fish will bite," the Superintendent said. And truly.

Ringo strolled on, through Rawson Square and on down to the beach.

On the beach he looked aloft with admiration at the lush growth of majestic palm trees. From the fronds of one tree a Thug spied silently. From another tree another Thug spied silently. One Thug threw a coconut that caught Ringo in the back and tumbled him.

Two Thugs were down from trees and upon the drummer, but the second Thug pulled a thin rubber mask from Ringo's face and beheld that Ringo was none other than John!

Before the two Thugs had laid a hand on John, police officers had handcuffed them and led them away.

Gluck sat behind an immense desk in his temporary field headquarters in Oakes Field Swamp and beamed as the two prisoners were led in.

"Anything you say may be used in evidence against you," he said. "On the other hand, should you be co-operative . . ."

The two Thugs jabbered incomprehensibly. Neither could understand a word of English. Nor was there, anywhere on the island, a known translator of Kaili.

"Keep the plan going," Superintendent Gluck snarled. "We'll catch a civilized one yet."

In the town softball stadium, Ringo was indulging in solitary practice with a soccer ball. He tried a few kicks and dribbles, got off a good return from the knee, bounced the ball against the stadium wall and caught it on the rebound for a splendid head-shot down the field.

As he dallied thus, ten Thugs, all uniformed as a softball team, appeared on the field. They pegged their softball back and forth and, as Ringo charged into their midst, threw a pally pass in his direction.

Ringo snapped out a hand for a quick catch. As the ball met his hand it exploded in a violent flash of smoke and gas and Ringo fell limply to the grass. The Thugs picked him up deftly and prepared to carry him from the field. One, more curious than his fellows, touched Ringo's face



which hung lolling between his legs. A rubber mask came off revealing—Paul!

A dozen policemen hurried down from the stands and took the Thugs into custody.

"More like it," Superintendent Gluck said as this latest covey was ushered into his Oakes Swamp office. He barked his warning and his incentive at the new group. The only response was a babble of Kailinese.

"Try them in French," the sergeant suggested.

"*Je vous avertis . . .*" Superintendent Gluck went through his formula with no greater success.

"Keep at it," he said, returning to English. "It's a good plan. It's a famous plan. It must work."

The ten Thugs were led away to join earlier captives. The swamp was beginning to take on the complexion of a concentration camp.

Outside the Royal Victoria Tree House, Ringo dozed in a wicker rocking chair. The chair tipped back and forth, the noted drummer snuffled through half-closed lips.

From the end of the porch, Bhuta watched warily. When he was certain that Ringo was really asleep, he made a sharp signal to two Thugs in the shrubbery and to two other Thugs in trees.

The bush Thugs crept forward holding cudgels. The tree Thugs dropped to the porch clasping shillelaghs. They rained blows on the napping Ringo.

But not a thud reached him. All were taken upon the super-transparent canopy of famous glass that covered his chair like a clock dome. Beneath the canopy, George removed his Ringo mask and blew a police whistle. Uniformed constabulary led away the four Thugs and silly, bandaged, limping Bhuta.

Superintendent Gluck, his desk heavy with requisitioned dictionaries of every language but Kaili, started off his interrogation of the four new Thugs and Bhuta in French. With no results there, he switched to Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, German, Italian, Hindi and Sanskrit.

The prisoners, manacled and sizzling in the hot sun, continued to shake their heads.

Superintendent Gluck went on to Basque, Danish, Aztec, Yiddish and Hungarian.

At Hungarian, Bhuta broke down.

"Please, sir," he cried, holding out his bruised and bandaged limbs. "Water!"

"I knew we'd get one!" Superintendent Gluck cheered. "Now . . . anything you say may be used in evidence against you, however . . ."

At the entrance to the Martinique Club, Ringo descended from a buggy and started up the clubhouse steps.

Before he had mounted three steps, the cold steel of a rifle was pressed against the back of his neck. His unseen assailant led him away toward a more private and shadowy area before ripping at his face. The ripping pulled nothing but famous Ringo's skin. Alas, there was no mask!

Ringo's captor uttered no word, but a smile curved beneath the silk handkerchief that muffled his face. With expert motions he bound Ringo's hands behind him and led him down a back alley to a waiting car. In the car, a similarly handkerchief-shrouded confederate helped bundle Ringo into the back seat and tied his ankles.

The captors' car sped into unblinking sunlight that had seldom, ere this, shone down on such a carnival of crime and abduction.

Superintendent Gluck had arranged for Ringo to call in quarter-hourly reports of his whereabouts and well being. When the first of such calls failed to come through, there was a stir of activity from the Oakes Swamp headquarters. Walkie-talkies were passed out like popcorn and Beatles, Scotland Yard men and local police fanned out over the islands.

John cycled around the library building on Shirley Street, pedaling about the upper porch with a telescope.

"Might have lost himself in Proust," John said to himself, and aloud: "Ringo! Ringo!"

Paul plodded on foot in and out of an immense limestone

quarry, looking into every shadowed cleft of rock.

"Was it geology or theology he said he was interested in as a little nipper?" he asked himself. And shouted: "Ringo! Ringo!"

George went methodically from cabana to cabana at various hotel pools, peering at privacy-preferring couples and dodging fists in the face. From time to time he paused in his snooping and simply called: "Ringo! Ringo! Here, boy!"

All over Balmoral Island the searchers combed. Policemen with mournful bloodhounds that had been permitted to sniff at Ringo's drum kit slogged through wooded areas.

Even an Army detachment joined the hunt, stalwart men in suntans trampling all possible clues into the turf as they transmitted the latest barracks-room humor through their loud hailing.

All the Bahamas rang with the forlorn cry, wafted on warm Caribbean breezes: "Ringo! Ringo!"

## **LITTLE DO THEY KNOW** **HE'S A PRISONER**

"If they weren't so stuffy about thumbscrews," Superintendent Gluck fretted at his desk in the swamp.

"Rubber hoses?" the Sergeant suggested.

"No, we'd have some delegation picketing before night-fall," the Superintendent deplored. He swiveled his chair to face Bhuta, more miserable than ever, held by two policemen and with a reflector shining the sunlight into his eyes.

"All right, you," the Superintendent said. He *did* sound like James Cagney. "Talk. We know he's a prisoner. . . ."

Bhuta cringed and his supporting officers pulled him erect.

## **LITTLE DO THEY** **KNOW WHERE . . . ?**

"But where?" Gluck asked.

"The olden army camp," Bhuta said. "In a great cage . . ."

"Nonsense!" Superintendent Gluck snapped. "We've been through the place with a fine-tooth comb." He smoothed his balding scalp a little self-consciously. "You'll have to do better than that, son."

"Where is he?" the sergeant thundered.

The telephone on the Superintendent's desk rang. Everyone jumped and the Superintendent whipped it between his shoulder and chin.

"Gluck here," he said. "No, this is *not* the William Morris office." He put the phone down. "Bloody Yanks with their direct dialing," he muttered.

"I don't know where," Bhuta groaned.

"We'll see about that," said the Sergeant.

But what *could* Bhuta tell them when Ringo was on the yacht *Sceptre*, back in the scientific clutches of Professor Foot and Algernon?

"I've never operated in the open air before," Professor Foot confessed.

For all his apologetics, it was a neat little operating theater for a yacht. Algernon had arranged racks of all possible equipment against the cabin wall. There was saline solution, oxygen, ether, sodium pentothol, Band-Aids, plasma, cotton balls, mercurochrome, sugar pills, codeine, aspirin and chicken soup.

A chrome and leatherette operating table was securely bolted to the deck a few feet from the cabinets and racks. Ringo was securely strapped to the top of the operating table.

Algernon, leaning over the side of the yacht, was pulling up a bucket of fresh seawater with a nylon line.

Professor Foot, smoking a filter tip in a holder stuck through his gauze mask, stood drumming his fingers on a spanking new sterilizer. Algernon brought the bucket of seawater over and stood it on the sterilizer. Professor Foot, holding his hands elbow down in approved television technique, scrubbed up for surgery.

"I'm a perfect surgeon, actually," he said, flicking a

strand of seaweed from one arm. "Aren't I a perfect surgeon, Algernon?"

"You were asked to take it up, eh?" Algernon said.

"Bellevue," Professor Foot said. Satisfied with his scrub-up, he began to sharpen a scalpel on a handy electric knife sharpener.

"Could have had a dozen careers," he said.

Below deck, a slim, bronzed hand turned off the master fuse switch for the yacht's electrical system.

The knife grinder ground to a stop.

"Sand!" Professor Foot protested. "Sand in the grinder. It's everywhere. Is it any wonder I never get anything done? The emergency generator, Algernon."

As Algernon left for the hold, Professor Foot turned to Ringo.

"You wouldn't want me to go on with a blunt scalpel?" he said. "Now, would you?"

"Fix it, Algernon," he shouted after his loyal assistant.

The Professor paced the deck until the lights came on again and the knife-grinder wheel was once more a-spin.

"There!" he said, and bent to complete the sharpening of the scalpel.

He had scarcely put the blade to the wheel than the machine stopped again and the lights blinked out.

"Blazes!" Professor Foot said. "Algernon!"

There was no answer.

"Mucking about down there," the Professor said. "Amusing himself. I'm a decent employer and he takes advantage of me. It's the heat. It's these tropics that's made him sloppy."

He went down through the hatch to admonish Algernon.

Ringo craned his neck from his bound position on the operating table. He could just make out the hatchway and from it someone coming up.

It was Ahme.

She slammed the hatch shut after her, locking Professor Foot and Algernon below decks. She cut Ringo free with the

very scalpel with which Professor Foot had planned to amputate his finger. Even in her skin-diver's suit she had a haunting attractiveness.

"That suit sort of wobbles when you walk, y'know," Ringo greeted her.

"Silly boy," Ahme said. "I've got some juice. For the ring."

Ringo pulled himself to a sitting position on the table and stretched his cramped muscles.

"It so happens," he explained to Ahme, "that it came off. Once. And then I put it back on again and it *wouldn't* come off."

"Because you showed a spark of Courage," Ahme said, brandishing a small, sealed test tube of purplish liquid, vaguely familiar from the failed experiment that had turned Paul into a mite.

"What's that?" Ringo pointed a finger.

"It is distilled from the essence of certain rare orchids," Ahme said, letting the sun glint through the liquid. "I managed to get some more from a friend. It just came through by registered mail this morning."

"The Sacred Ring slipped off so easy that time, you know," Ringo said. "I don't want to get jabbed with that spike, no matter how many orchids, Ahme . . ."

"It slipped off then because you showed Courage," Ahme repeated. "I told you once, drummer, Kaili is not proof against Courage. A brave man need not fear the grip of the Ring."

"Oh, well," Ringo said, "Sting me then. I'm rapidly becoming a Sunday popper. If that stuff will work . . ."

"It is unique," Ahme said. "Alone in the world it will shrink human tissues up to ninety-eight percent without harm."

She borrowed a rubber tube from the collection of equipment and tightened it around Ringo's upper arm.

"Make a fist," she said.

Ringo, shuddering slightly, was intent upon his arm.

Ahme, professionally calm, was intent upon finding a syringe for her fluid.

Neither heard Professor Foot come through the unlocked forward hatch.

"Sol!" the Professor said, leveling his Webley at them. "Hands up!"

Ringo gave a disgusted "Tchah!" and raised his hands above his head. Ahme pursed her lips but also obeyed, holding the syringe high in one hand, the test tube in the other.

"What is that?" Professor Foot motioned with his gun at the miraculous fluid.

"It is a special liquid," Ahme said in monotone, "distilled from . . ."

"Not distilled from the essence of certain rare orchids found only in certain deep, dark, dim recesses of . . . ?" the professor said.

"The same," Ahme admitted.

"At last!" the professor said, still keeping his Webley fixed on Ahme and Ringo. "They cannot deny me my just reward now. "Give it to me . . . Sir Tiberius Foot Juice!"

"But the Ring!" Ahme said.

"I don't need the Ring when I have this," the Professor grasped the test tube with his non-pistol hand. "This, Algernon, is Nobel Prize juice. Think, my boy, of the applications—a James Bond no bigger than my thumbnail, creeping under embassy doors, garage mechanics small enough to get *inside* a carburetor and sweep it out, atom-size astronauts shot to the moon on rockets of easily manageable size!" He shook the tube in the sunlight and its myriad reflected sparkles each promised a different variation on fame and fortune.

"Set sail for home, Algernon," he cried. "For Merrie England, green isle set in a silver sea. I'm going to analyze this distillation of certain orchids. The government in the palm of my hands! What's it say?" He tried to decipher the tiny print on the tube label. Algernon looked over his shoulder.

"It's in some kind of Eastern," Algernon said. "And so small you'd have to be shrunk to read it."

Professor Foot waved objections aside and took a magnifying glass from a medicine cabinet.

"I'll solve it," he said.

Neither he nor Algernon noticed Ringo and Ahme diving over the side of the yacht. Neither he nor Algernon at this moment cared.

Ahme, in her skin-diver suit, swam with swift ease. Once in the water, the suit no longer wobbled. Ringo, in good training, kept up with her. What neither had reckoned on was the school of twenty or more sharks that circled them direly. They tried to slip under the sharks, to break their imprisoning formation and head for the shore, but at every move two or more sharks cut them off, yet never bit or moved in for the kill.

The drummer and the Eastern enchantress were gasping for breath, forced to float on the surface of the sea, when the sharks at last revealed themselves as rubber-suited, fanged and oxygen-equipped Thugs.

There was no possible strategy of escape. The swimming Thugs herded Ringo and Ahme, like a pair of waterlogged sheep, through the water and to shore at Cabbage Beach, where Clang and other members of the visiting Kaili delegation were awaiting them.

After routine social greetings had been dispensed with, an assistant Thug carefully painted Ringo red all over for the sacrifice. Two military-police Thugs held Ahme in a firm grip.

"Your defection explains much," Clang told her. "I have been a besotted fool, Ahme, but all that is over now." Turning to his assistant, he directed: "Don't forget to paint between the toes."

The assistant Thug followed instructions. There was no spot on Ringo that was not scarlet save the wildly rolling whites of his anguished eyes.

An engineer division of the Thug army put finishing touches on a crude but adequate sacrificial altar made from



logs chopped in the woods behind the beach. A secondary priest, behind Clang, honed the sacrificial knife on an oiled whetstone, whistling the sacrificial music as he worked.

All other Thugs lined up in good order along the beach, taking their proper places as if they were indeed inside their conventional Temple.

Clang raised his hands to the glorious sky.

"Treacherous woman," he intoned, glaring at Ahme, "tremble!"

She stood in her captors' grip unflinching.

"Tremble!" a thousand Thug voices responded.

"And shake!" Clang intoned.

If Ahme shook at all it was to test the strength of her guards.

"And shake!" the thousand voices rang out. A visiting bishop nodded his head ecumenically in appreciation of the smooth pace of the ritual.

"In the name of Preverti," Clang continued, "daughter of the mountains, whose embrace with Rani made the whole world tremble . . ."

"You wait till my mates . . ." Ringo interrupted in a high, yet hoarse voice.

A thousand voices spoke as one: "I don't think so. We've got two battalions of the Third Rifles keeping the ground. They're merciless, see? Had them flown out specially."

Ringo craned as he was strapped to the improvised altar. It was quite true. He could see members of the Third Rifles dug into the sand, rifles, carbines and machine guns pointed out from the perimeter of their half-circle surrounding the beach, alertly on guard.

Clang walked into the shallow surf with his hand still raised.

"Whose name is Baleful," he chanted. "Whose name is the Terrible . . ."

There was a sigh from the thousand throats as Kaili, eight-armed and awesome, rose from the sea, slowly and awfully.

"Whose name is the Inaccessible," Clang boomed.

"Whose name is the Black Mother, Mother of Darkness . . ."

"Kaili!" the thousand voices wailed in greeting and obeisance.

"Charming!" the visiting bishop murmured into the sleeve of his habit. "*Most* awesome. We've lost so much in the West . . ."

Ringo craned for another look at the Third Rifles. A smartly turned out officer was sharpening his lethal kukri and his men nursed their varied weapons in their concealed dugouts and trenches. Ringo craned to the other side. It was no better. Ahme was pleading silently with her huge dark eyes to a gigantic Thug who cracked a bullwhip.

He reocraned halfway between the two visions and, far down the beach, he could catch a glimpse of Paul, George and John running toward the Kailinese mob. Their shouts of protest and defiance were borne wispily on the sea breeze.

The men of the Third Rifles were grinning from ear to ear. Those without fingers on triggers, a minority, flashed Thumbs-Up signals of certain victory.

There was only one thing to do.

Ringo squirmed and twisted on the altar. The lads were coming closer.

With a super-Beatle, superhuman effort, he broke free of his bonds and pulled the Sacred Ring from his finger.

"No, lads!" he cried. "No!"

He thrust the Sacred Ring onto the finger of a totally amazed Clang.

"*You* get sacrificed," Ringo said. "I don't even subscribe to your religion." He turned to glare at the visiting bishop. "Or yours," he added.

He rolled off the altar and raced to meet his mates.

Clang stood, still staring dazedly at the Sacred Ring as the two painting Thugs began to splotch him with red.

Ahme twisted free of her fuddled captors and shouted to the congregation: "He who wears the Ring!"

A thousand voices answered her: "He who has accepted the Glory!"

"Unworthy," Clang stalled. "I mean, I'm not fit . . ."

Down the beach, Ringo reunited with Paul, George and John. Superintendent Gluck and his men, still a good distance behind, were huffing and puffing toward them.

Clang wrung his hands and tugged at the Ring while Ahme, taking over her position as High Priestess, stood in the curling surf before the statue of Kaili.

"Kaili must be gorged," Ahme preached. "Gorged on this blood." She pointed to Clang, who was talking to the benign visiting bishop.

"This your first sacrifice?" Clang asked, still trying to get the Ring off. "Accidents can always happen. Only thing to do is put a brave face on it." He kept his face brave, but his right hand still clawed at his beringed left.

"The Ring's off," Ringo explained to the other lads. "Happen I showed this Courage, see."

"Come on," John said doubtfully. "Let's count your fingers."

"You're all red again," George wondered.

"I know," Ringo said shyly. "I'm beginning to like it."

Paul stood a little to one side, winking at Ahme and being winked back at. Even over the distance that separated them and Ahme's ritual duties, it was a successful winking bout. The other lads followed it with interest, staring from Ahme to Paul and back like spectators at a Wimbledon tennis match.

"Do you think they'll get married and live in Edinburgh?" John asked nobody in particular.

"There is a place for a religion of Love in the East," Ahme argued with her congregation, switching from the original sacrifice theme, but not letting Clang out of sight.

"We've tried everything," Clang told her, shaking his red-painted head. "Jazz, rock and roll, sacrificing motorbikes, but no, they've got to have their blood."

"Will they give you something?" asked the visiting bishop, still at Clang's elbow. "You know, anesthetic?"

"Oh, no," Clang said calmly. "Cold steel. But she's very skilled, and Kaili loves me. If I should happen to get out of this alive, I'm thinking of Moral Disarmament . . ."

Into the sacrificial picture stumbled Professor Foot, still holding tight to the test tube. He went directly to Clang.

"Excuse me," Professor Foot said. "Could you translate this label?"

Clang took up the tube and examined it.

"Ten cc's twice a day for maximum bliss," he read off.

"How very cooperative," Professor Foot said. "Thank you." And proceeded down the sandy beach.

"A place for a religion that will interest young and old alike," Ahme harangued, casting a quick wink at Paul. The lads, fearless with Ringo ringless, had now formed almost part of the Kaili congregation.

Superintendent Gluck, at last making the scene, tried to drag them out of the crowd, but Ringo proudly showed him his unadorned finger.

"A religion of humor and sympathy, based on kindness and gentleness," Ahme orated with another wink.

Bhuta broke away from his police guard and shouldered his way past the lads, pushing through the crowd and aiming at the statue.

"I'm going to miss a sacrifice," he babbled. "I'm going to miss a sacrifice." He bent over to retie a bandage on one lacerated leg and then shoved on.

"See the knife," Gluck nudged George. "Quite charming artifact. I find violence quite a charming psychological release. In its proper place, of course."

"And I shall unveil this religion," Ahme promised the crowd with a wink for Paul. "But first, we must finish with the old." She turned and her eyes and curled lips made her look like a fury from some Grecian freize. "Clang!" she summoned.

Two Thugs ushered the High Priest forward.

Ahme raised the sacrificial knife high and started to plunge it into Clang, but he held up a cautioning hand and smiled a smug smile.

The cautioning hand was ringless. So was the noncautioning hand.

"The Ring?" Ahme cried, too distraught even to throw a wink. "The Ring!?"

As they passed the lads, Professor Foot passed the Sacred Ring to Algernon.

"You've worked hard, son," the Professor said. "You have it."

"I don't want to be that sort of scientist," Algernon replied. "I want . . . well, something I can find a friend with . . ."

"You're lonely?" the Professor said.

"Yes, sir."

"Why, Algernon!" Professor Foot said. He clapped a manly hand on Algernon's shoulder and the two linked arms before continuing their way back to the yacht. The Sacred Ring was let fall at the large feet of Superintendent Gluck.

The Superintendent looked down and backed away, babbling in fear as he recognized the ill-omened talisman.

"Don't touch it," John said. "Flee!"

Superintendent Gluck fled before an approaching Thug could do more than speckle him with red.

Ahme wailed frustration. No time or mind now for winks.

"Find the Ring!" she cried. "Kaili must have her final drink of blood."

Paul pursed his lips in unhappy resignation as he and the other lads moved away.

"Well," he said, "I never did believe in mixed winking, mind."

As they left behind them the frenzied Kaili congregation a sudden bursting in the surf attracted their eyes. A begoggled swimmer was emerging from the sea. The lads paused.

Behind them, the Third Rifles, no longer needed for protection, had joined the crowd baying for blood. On the outskirts of the milling mob stood Bhuta, tugging at one of his fingers and attempting to be as unobtrusive as possible.

"The Ring, the Ring, the Ring, the Ring!" the crowd chanted.

Bhuta broke into a cold sweat. The Sacred Ring was more than he could handle. He ducked down and started to lope away.

Clang, chatting casually with the bishop, saw him.

"Remember me to your archbishop," he said politely before rushing after Bhuta. Then, pointing at his fleeing aide-de-camp: "The Ring! Kill him!"

All the Easterners, Ahme, too, converged on the limping, bandaged figure, and sensibilities are better spared by describing their actions no further.

Where the lads stood, the swimmer had reached the shore. Now they could see the grease covering his body and the Union Jack sewn to his suit.

"White Cliffs of Dover?" the swimmer asked.

The Four lads shook their heads No.

The game stroker turned to plunge back into the ocean.

"Could have sworn I heard the heady roar of the crowd," he said, and pluckily dove into a rolling wave.

At last, the nerve-racking adventures that had engaged them for so many days were ended and the good times were about to roll again. Almost by conditioned reflex, the famous Beatles began to sing famous Beethoven's famous "Ode To Joy" from his famous Ninth Symphony.

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