NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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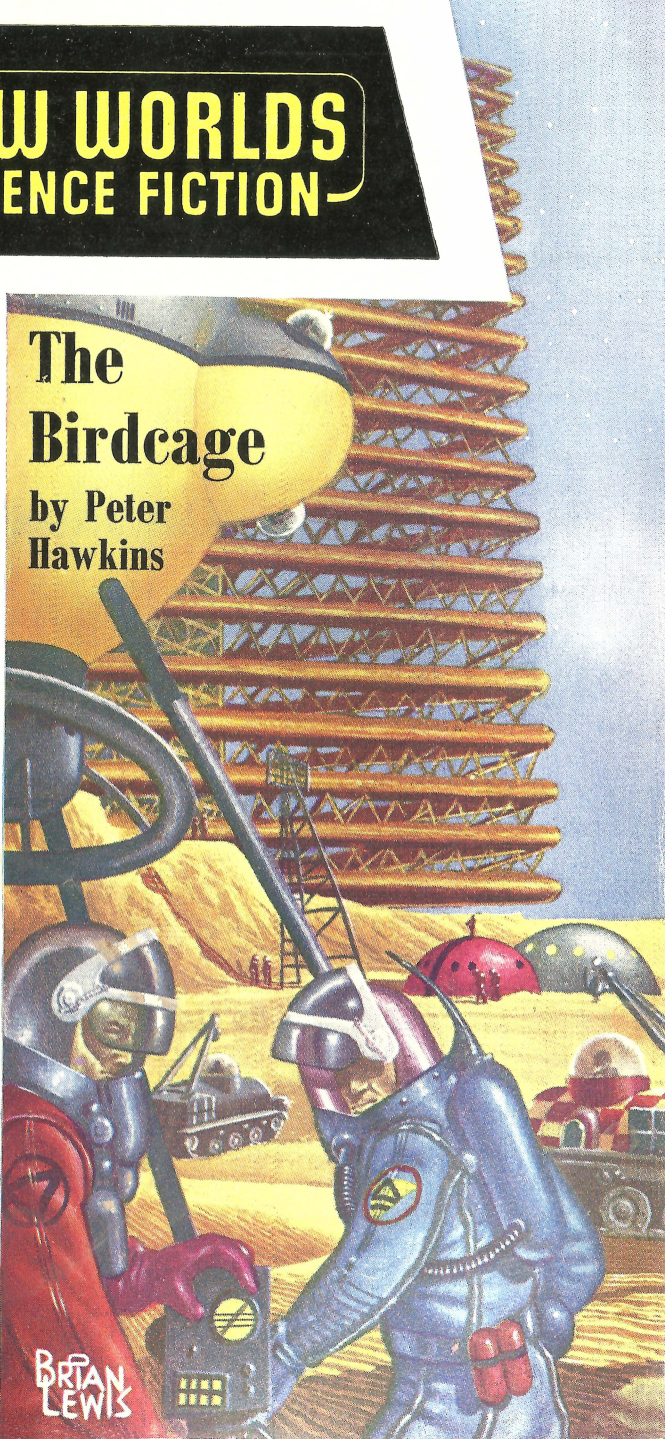

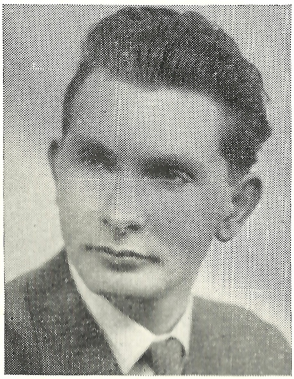

Peter Hawkins

Surrey

Despite the fact that science fiction stories by Peter Hawkins appear all too infrequently, his average over the years for top-flight ideas is extremely high—remember "The Tools of Orlas Boyn" in No. 57? This month he maintains his high standard but reminisces rather nostalgically when asked to comment upon his current story.

"On and off," he writes, "and more off than on, I've been reading science fiction for twenty years, and I still find I enjoy it immensely—enough, in fact, to set myself up in competition with others who probably feel the same way about themselves. They read it, they like it, and they try their hand at writing it. Some much more frequently than I have the opportunity. Perhaps they find it easier than I do!

"I can't really say where I got the idea for 'The Birdcage.' I'd had one of my off-periods from science fiction and while thinking about digging into the last six issues of *Astounding* still waiting to be read, I pondered a little on how simple things were in the days before John W. Campbell took over editing that magazine. From there it was but a few steps back to the really simple days of Edgar Rice Burroughs.

"By then Mars had lodged firmly in my mind; a more probable Mars than Burroughs's but one about which we still know very little. And for the next few years at least, we will not know, but I can't help thinking that soon science fiction writers will lose one of their favourite happy hunting grounds to adventure story writers and general novelists.

"At the rate I write stories, I have probably written my last one about Mars!"

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

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Apologies . . .

While British readers have been fully aware that we have been in the throes of a seven-week printing dispute between employers and labour, during which time the publishing industry was virtually brought to a standstill, overseas readers will hardly have had time to feel the effects or perhaps not realised that their regular British magazines have not been printed. Apart from a small number of periodicals (mostly non-fiction) printed mainly by non-union establishments, the only section not seriously affected was the London daily newspapers. Everything else has been off the market.

In this respect we tender our apologies to all of you, at home or abroad, for the fact that this issue of *New Worlds* is late, although through no fault of our own. It should have been published in July but had not been printed when work ceased on June 20th. We are therefore dating this issue August/September; the next issue, No. 87 will be dated October. This means that for the first time in nearly six years, *New Worlds* has missed a publication date—will, in fact, only appear 11 times during 1959. Subscription copies are not affected as they terminate on a numbered issue and not on a date.

Science Fantasy and *Science Fiction Adventures* were both held up—by an unfortunate piece of timing *Science Fantasy* No. 36 (which was eventually published last week) only had the covers to be printed when the Great Shutdown occurred and has had to wait until normal working conditions prevailed before being completed. To speed production we decided to drop 16 pages but even this measure failed to beat the ban. Both bi-monthlies, by the way, will catch up their production by the end of the year, appearing approximately every six weeks instead of every eight. This should then line all three magazines up for a normal schedule as from January 1960.

For this issue only, *New Worlds* has also dropped 16 pages, so that we can appear on our usual publishing day, but will return to normal size next month. Once again, our apologies.

This enforced "quiet period" has given me a good opportunity of catching up on manuscript reading and planning the

. . . and Plans

rest of the issues of all magazines for the remainder of the year—and even to put the skeleton together of some of the early 1960 issues. If I am somewhat elated at this early stage, there is every justification for it—stories look better than ever, although you will have to wait the appropriate intervals before being in the rather envious position that I am at present.

Recommended in next month's *New World's* are James White's "The High Road" and Colin Kapp's "The Railways Up On Cannis," the latter a really cracking story for which Brian Lewis has painted a fine cover illustration. This issue sees the conclusion of Kenneth Bulmer's serial "The Patient Dark," a story which is already receiving more-than-favourable comment and which will obviously fit into our long record of serialization successes.

November (dated) is a complete-story issue featuring "Grapeliner" the lead novelette by James White and this really *is* space travel with a difference. Treading on White's heels for first-place honours will be a most unusual story from Jim Ballard, "The Waiting Grounds," one of the best he has yet written.

December starts off with the first serialized part of one of the finest modern novels I have read in recent years—Philip K. Dick's "Time Out Of Joint," which has just been published in USA by Lippincott. Not only is the plot outstandingly *different* but the writing standard is magnificent. It is as revolutionary in its theme as *Wild Talent* and *Take-Off* in their day.

On the "waiting list" is a new Brian Aldiss serial just completed—"X For Exploitation"—about which more later; another "Sector General" story by James White, "O'Mara's Orphan,"; and a variety of short stories from old favourites as well as newcomers.

Taken by and large, the enforced delay has been more than frustrating, but as with most good things the waiting will eventually prove worthwhile.

John Carnell

The Martians—what was left of them—had no engineering technology. In fact, they were a race of philosophers. To what use could humanity, basically a race of engineers, put a philosophical tool which a race of natural philosophers couldn't use ?

THE BIRDCAGE

by Peter Hawkins

Beneath a sky of midnight blue, flecked with the icy points of the distant stars half a dozen pressure-suited men straggled across sandy red hummocks and depressions, away from a small, isolated concrete building with its single significant chimney towards Nubis Lacus, a cluster of interlinked domes sparkling with artificial light.

The six men were waiting for one of their number to break the silence, hoping that whoever it was would avoid the pit of bathos but fearing he would not ; the individual mental sweepstake each of them was conducting was as to what inanity would be uttered.

The silence continued. " Would it," thought Mike Henderson, be " *Mars-is-hell-why-didn't-we-choose-Venus* ? or *Johnny-Daysh-is-dead-let's-remember-him-as-he-was* or *We're-all-intelligent-men-we-ought-to-get-stinking-drunk-tonight* or . . . It would be on those lines, unless something untoward happened. Give them another half a minute and then start to worry when the out-of-step comment hadn't been made.

Mike Henderson looked back over his shoulder, past the crematorium and over the monotonously undulating Martian landscape to the Birdcage. That's what the irreverent and cynical had christened it and Mars could afford few of those. Hugo Deane was one ; his deputy, Ross Wellack, was another. Earthmen couldn't afford to ignore or laugh at something which made mincemeat of their engineering and science especially when a Martian, a member of a race normally totally ignorant of and completely without the desire to know anything of engineering, created the damned thing in a night and was then obscurely disposed of by his fellow tribesmen for doing it as being contrary to their religious beliefs.

" Where are you off to, Mike ?" bellowed Wellack's hail-fellow-well-met voice in the headset.

Mike started, relieved that whatever he'd done had broken the tension and prevented the anticipated stupid comment being made. He glanced about and saw that he had separated himself from the rest of the party by a hundred yards or so and was losing ground to the north-east, away from the Earth city at Nubis Lacus. He waved to show he had heard the message and walked towards the group, rejoining them.

" Nightmares about the Birdcage are bad enough without daydreams," stated Ross Wellack.

" You don't have to tell me that," said Mike, " but it's one of the things we've got to think about."

And, thought Mike, *I've managed to make the idiotic, commonplace observation.*

He blamed himself, in part, for Johnny Daysh's death. Johnny hadn't been quite like the majority of men on Mars ; he had not their high stability rating but standards were having to be lowered as more and more personnel were required for both Mars and Venus. Since Venus offered the happier hunting ground for everybody from archaeologists to zoologists she tended to receive the best ; also Venus had her youth while Mars was worn out and almost beyond the terraforming techniques available at the moment although there was a desperate hope, tantalising enough for men to try, that something might be done in the way of a facelift for the old, dying world.

Johnny Daysh had died the careless man's way. He'd forgotten about his air supply and about half-way home from seeing Siolem, the old Martian with whom he was working

on the tribe's history and philosophy, he'd started to run, neglecting the fact that violent exercise would use up oxygen faster. If he'd lain down and called for help he might have been reached in time ; as it was aid came too late—just ten minutes after he died, according to Joey Wills.

For the last few hundred yards of the walk to the airlock Mike deliberately straightened his back and held his head high, looking at the cluster of lights behind the plastic dome. They shone like candle flames, each lamp surrounded by a rainbow-hued nimbus, giving the returning traveller a feeling of Christmas-like welcome. Inside the dome they were just fluorescents, like any other, doing their ordinary, day-to-day job of lighting a project, so that men might fulfill a dream. From outside they were a dream themselves.

As soon as he had straightened himself up Mike saw Siolem waiting by the airlock. The old Martian had not entered the dome, even to go to one of the low-pressure rooms probably because he had been told that Mike was away. Siolem stood motionless, looking less than his five feet in height because his feathers were puffed out as protection against the cold. Despite his smallness he looked very dignified and in his grey, unfeathered and otherwise humanoid face his eyes flickered with sparrow brightness behind lids which constantly moved up and down, lubricating the surface of the eyes against airborne dust. He pulled Mike aside and waited until the others had entered the airlock. Then he pressed an envelope into Mike's hand and walked off, without making any other attempt at communication, in the direction of the tribal burrow. Mike stared after him for a few seconds and then buzzed the airlock for admission.

Still clasping the envelope he made his way along to his solitary room. When he reached it he dropped the envelope on his bunk and stripped off his pressure suit. He took a shower and followed it with a tot of Nubis Lacus home-brewed whisky. Only then, time being relatively unimportant to Martians, and knowing that Siolem would neither expect nor want a reply for two or three days, he opened the envelope. There was no need for an answer ; the proof of Siolem's written words would be found in Hugo Deane's workshop.

" *I killed Johnny Daysh*," stated the letter. " *I made a hole in the breathing tube on the fourth rib from the cylinder. Siolem.*"

A bracket of thoughts flashed through Mike's mind. Why had Siolem killed Johnny? *Had* Siolem killed Johnny or was this some hitherto unrevealed quirk of Martian psychology manifesting itself? Had Johnny transgressed some tribal taboo too strong for explanation? Might this be the start of a series of murders? If so, who would be next?

For a while there could be no answer. There had never been any trouble previously between Earthmen and Martians which was not straight-forward, honest and without malice. An Earthman had died because of a Martian's carelessness and vice-versa but there matters had ended, never with lasting bitterness. Never had there been any hint that any mishap had been other than an accident.

Mike locked the letter in a tin box in which he kept his few valuables and dialled a number on the phone. A cheerful voice the other end answered,

"Wills' pills."

"Mike's psychs," stated Mike.

"Pleased to hear from you. Everything—all right?"

"Yes, it went off without a hitch, thank goodness." Mike paused and then began afresh, "I'd like to chat a bit about Johnny . . ."

"We know each other's file on him pretty thoroughly, don't we?" asked Joey Wills.

"Yes. He'd no particular friends here; his boss is at Solis Lacus and we're waiting for someone to come out and pick up the threads he dropped." Again Mike hesitated. "I'm going to get permission to look through his effects and I'd like you to assist me."

Joey Wills hesitated in his turn. "It's funny, you know," he said, "I've no objection to performing a post-mortem but I hate like hell probing into what a fellow's left behind. I'll do it, though. Make it about seven, will you? I've got an appendix to hook out in half an hour. You were lucky to catch me."

They broke the connection and Mike called the Secretary's office to ask formal permission to go through Johnny's effects. Permission was granted and the key would be dropped on Mike sometime before six-thirty. Those arrangements made, Mike left his room and walked from the residential dome in which he lived, through a couple of connecting tunnels and another dome to the engineering shops where

Hugo Deane ran the pressure-suit maintenance group and store.

Deane was a big man physically, possibly the biggest Earthman on Mars. He had red hair and a nose to match from drinking far too much Martian distilled liquor, which made him morose and quarrelsome. Sober, which he was during working hours, he was an excellent mechanic, with a bloodhound capability for tracking down faults and an incredible ability for putting them right. He looked pleased at the interruption of his paper work and shoved a stack of files to one side.

" Hello, Mike. What is it ? Business or pleasure ?"

" Curiosity," replied Mike.

Hugo Deane selected a pin from a small box in front of him and started to pick his teeth.

" What would you like to know ?"

" Have you re-issued Johnny Daysh's suit yet ?"

Hugo Deane's mammoth figure seemed to shrink a little and he replaced his pin in the box.

" Not yet. We're modifying all that type of suit as and when. It's dismantled and in pieces in a box at the moment. Different sort of tube to be put in, gauge to be tinkered with, fabric tested, mark eight globe to be fitted. Practically a re-build."

Mike nodded. He remembered the paragraph ordering the job in one of the many reports and directives which came his way for information.

" Can I take a look at it, please ?"

For a second or two Deane seemed as if he were going to speak. When eventually he did it was only after Mike's prompting.

" Well, can I ?"

" Surely. Come this way." He lifted a flap to his counter and led Mike through his storehouse, past a couple of his men at work, past crates and piles of stores to a dimly lit alcove neatly stacked with boxes of uniform size on shelves.

" Fourth one along, fourth shelf up," informed Deane. " Can I leave you to it ?"

That was precisely what Mike wanted. He inspected various pieces of the dismantled suit before picking up the tube and going slowly along it, pulling and twisting it, seeking the hole on the fourth rib. He found it and continued his examination

a little less methodically and finally packed all the parts of the suit back into the box. Then he returned to Deane and sat beside him at his counter. Once again Deane pushed aside his paperwork. He looked enquiringly at Mike.

" Well ?" he asked.

Mike shrugged.

" It seemed more or less in order to me."

" It was in perfect order, Mike, apart from a hole on the fourth rib of the tube. You were looking for that and you found it. Now, how did you know it was there ?"

" Let's ignore that for a moment," suggested Mike, " and ask why that news hasn't been made public."

Deane pawed through his papers with hairy, blunt-fingered hands and produced his log.

" Here's my side of it. Johnny died because there was a hole in his air tube. Cause unknown but very likely it was made with a small nail. Frost and Webb examined the suit and decided they wanted the whole affair kept quiet, at least for a few days. Satisfied ?"

" Not altogether, Hugo. There's something a little peculiar going on and I don't quite know what it is, nor do people a lot higher in the scale than you and I. I've stumbled on it by sheer chance. Keep it under your hat and—please—don't tell anyone."

" I'm not likely to. Besides—I'm going back to Earth very shortly. I've done more than my time and I'm excercising my option to return, any ship any time. Admin are making sure I'm on the next ship." Deane's face widened into a smile. " I'm looking forward to it."

" Why are you going ? You're doing well here. There's nothing quite like this back on Earth." Seeing Deane hesitate Mike added,

" Imagine you're on my couch . . . "

" You'll never have me there. I don't need head doctors." Mike had to admit he was a hundred percent accurate in his statement. " I did ten years on the ships before I started this job. This was perfect until the Birdcage. I decided that I'd had enough then, Mike. So I'm going back home. Do you blame me ?"

" No." Remembering the tension the morning the Birdcage had been discovered Mike had to admit he could see Deane's point of view. Some of the Met section had gone to their lab on top of the highest dome in Nubis Lacus and from

there it was possible to see the rim of the highest grid of the Birdcage. Field glasses and telescopes can't overcome the curvature of any planet so the dull red framework on the horizon remained a mystery until three sandbirds packed with men armed to the teeth and carrying tv cameras beamed their astonishing pictures back to Nubis Lacus. Immediately a Mars-wide net was arranged to include all the other stations on the planet and the pictures broadcast live as the expedition approached the peculiar growth, some three hundred feet high, which had sprung overnight from a rocky outcrop often covered by red sand.

Birdcage was a misnomer ; it was more like a coral yet something like an oaktree the way its branches grew, except that it was bushy and tight, roughly cubic and with roughly straight bars, which gave it its nickname enclosing the branches It was red, like the Martian landscape, a dull monotonous red without variation throughout its great height and width. The engineers in the sandbirds declared it to be a structural miracle ; the way the branches grew said they could survive only by perfect construction in even the lesser gravity of Mars unless there was some form of internal bracing, which there wasn't and anyway, engineering, physics and just plain supply problems, how could something as large as that, on a planet which supported nothing else larger than a two-storey hut, spring up overnight.

There were theories in plenty ; all the specialists on Mars came to look at the Birdcage, to touch it, examine it and think about it. After a while, varying in time from a day to a month they relinquished the vastly overburdened hospitality of Nubis Lacus and returned to their own projects elsewhere on the planet. For a week or so there was speculation that it might vanish as mysteriously as it had appeared and a twenty-four hour watch was kept on it, to be superseded by an electronic hook-up that would warn of any change which took place.

The Earthmen began to sleep more easily after a week or ten days ; after all Mars was an old world and several civiliations had probably lived and died on its red dust. There were still a considerable number of Martians, not difficult to get on with but neither seeking out nor rejecting the invaders. For lack of common meeting grounds the two races tended to stay apart but generally the Martians seemed to favour the idea of rejuvenating their planet, although they expressed

doubts as to its possibility. Theirs had been a slow adaption to a changing planet, as they had never seemed to have developed any kind of mechanical civilisation.

" You day-dreaming, too, Mike ?"

" I'm afraid so," grinned Mike. " The Birdcage is a problem that's going to take a lot of solving. But thanks, Hugo. I'll let you know what transpires."

Mike walked more slowly back to his room, more preoccupied than on his outward journey. Without a doubt Siolem had murdered Johny Daysh and only a specialist on Martian psychology could work out why. Johnny had come nearest to filling that position at Nubis Lacus with his anthropological studies ; the work he was doing hadn't advanced far enough to have been divided into sub-sections. Could the matter wait until Johnny's successor came from Solis Lacus to carry on with his work and seek clues in it ? Not really ; it was too much like handing a bomb to someone and telling him it was likely to go off anytime. Mike intended to go through Johnny's notes with a fine comb, even if his successor objected violently later.

The phone was ringing as Mike entered his room. He flicked it on and said,

" Mike's psychs."

" Will's pills. Look Mike—some of the boys have just brought in Siolem. He's succeeded in committing suicide. He's not dead yet but he's past all we can do for him. He's asking for you to come very quickly. Will you ? We're at airlock eight."

" I'll be there as soon as possible."

Mike trotted through a couple of domes, mind turning over reasons why Siolem should kill himself. He bundled himself into a pressure suit and stepped into airlock eight, watched by half a dozen men. Joey Wills was the only occupant, apart from Siolem, who lay on the floor, a rolled-up coverall supporting his head and a blanket enveloping his small feathered body. For a brief moment recognition showed in his eyes and faded away as Mike knelt beside him. Siolem was alive, but only just.

" No chance ?" asked Mike.

" None." Joey Wills' voice, over the suit radio, was curious rather than sympathetic. " He's taken some of that moss-

extract nerve-poison the early arrivals discovered. He's going fast. It's painless and if anything rather pleasant."

"I wonder why?" asked Mike reflectively.

"Something to do with Johnny, possibly?" suggested Joey Wills.

"Possibly," agreed Mike. "The sooner we get among Johnny's reports the better."

"Mike—I want you to stay with Siolem until he dies. That appendix appointment is overdue. There'll be no trouble and I think Siolem would rather have you than me around. He knows you better."

Mike agreed unhappily despite Joey's assurance and his own knowledge of the effects of the drug used that Siolem's final minutes would be peaceful. He had known Siolem over two years now and had introduced Johnny Daysh to him as a helpful and co-operative source of information. Johnny Daysh had worked up the introduction into a very fruitful partnership; the exchange of knowledge, all on a metaphysical plane rather than any other, had proved most useful, increased vocabulary and general knowledge rapidly and destroyed much of the distrust between the two races—until the Birdcage appeared overnight out of barren desert and no material. From then on Siolem had been elusive and even when cornered had proved very different from the willing and open person he had been previously.

Suddenly Mike knew Siolem was dead. There was no change in his facial expression, no indication that life had left the feathered body. Siolem was dead, and the airlock held the same emptiness as any other room when there have been two people in it and then, without warning, one has gone for good, leaving behind only the shell he inhabited while he lived.

Mike pressed the warning indicator to tell the watchers beyond the airlock he was raising pressure to normal and started unfastening his suit as the gauge registered twelve pounds. He asked two men to take Siolem's body to the mortuary and hurried back to his own room. Tomorrow he had the grim job of going to the Martian township and seeking out Balteoth who, as far as he knew, was Siolem's closest friend. Possibly Balteoth could throw some light on Siolem's suicide—if tribal pressure would allow him.

Meanwhile there was a meal to have and Johnny's effects to be searched. Time passed slowly and when Mike went down to

eat there was hardly a soul in the place and certainly not one in whom he felt he could confide the anxiety which was building up inside him. When he had eaten he wandered back to his room and found the key which one of the Admin staff had pushed through the letter box while he had been away.

Now Siolem was dead, and knowing Johnny Daysh and the dead Martian had been working together Hugo Deane would be keeping a close watch on all comings and goings, reporting them back to the inspectors, a check he was very well able to make from his position.

It was six-thirty when Joey Wills interrupted Mike's ruminations and Mike wasn't prepared either for him or for the news he brought.

" Are we ready for the job ?" he asked as he opened the door and peered around the edge.

Mike blinked his eyes into focus and looked a trifle owlishly at Joey Wills.

" Forgive me," he said. " I wasn't expecting you yet."

" Yes, I know," agreed Joey Wills, " but I've got something which might have some significance in view of what we know already."

" Seeing ghosts, Joey ?"

" No, not yet. Some of the boys took Siolem's body back . . ."

" But I was going to do that tomorrow . . ."

" I know, but somebody in Admin thought otherwise and detailed a squad to do the necessary. They handed over Siolem to Balteoth, who was in full ceremonial regalia and looked as if he was waiting for the event to happen. He said ' I'm happy it is so,' took the body and shooed the men away. What do you make of it ?"

" I've not the slightest idea," replied Mike as he rose from his chair. " Balteoth's knowledge of our language isn't as good as Siolem's was but . . ."

" Precisely," interrupted Joey softly. " It's not what he said, it's the fact that he was in full ceremonial regalia, and therefore awaiting a certain anticipated event. That's what's important, that he was expecting it."

" It's an interesting point," conceded Mike. " Let's get along to Johnny's room, shall we ?"

" Don't you think it might be important," persisted Joey.

" It might be," agreed Mike as they left his room, " if we knew what we were looking for. It's a pity Johnny is the one who died. He could have helped us a lot with this situation. As it is he probably hadn't got his notes right up to date . . ." He broke off, halted in mid-stride and grabbed Joey Wills' arm.

" How's this, Joey ? Suppose Siolem killed Johnny because he was Johnny ; for something he'd been told or had deduced, or could have deduced from information which had been given him . . ."

" Steady Mike, you're getting excited. It must be something on those lines and you've known it all along. What you're worrying about now is the magnitude of the discovery. Let Johnny's notes tell us, if he kept up to date with them. If not we'll have to do some work on them ourselves or persuade Solis Lacus to send Johnny's replacement quickly. In fact why not do that anyway ? It would save a lot of sore toes all round."

" No," snapped Mike. " I blame myself to some degree for Johnny's death. He couldn't take life on Mars and I knew that ; I should have sent him back to Earth at the earliest opportunity. If I'd done that he'd still be alive . . ."

" Cool down, Mike. I know I'd rather not do the job but I'm going to. Like one of my tranquilisers ?"

" No thanks. Would you like a session on my couch ?"

" Likewise, no thanks."

" Funny, you're the second person who's refused that honour today."

" Who was the other one ?"

While they walked the rest of the way to Johnny Daysh's room Mike told Joey of his talk with Hugo Deane.

Johnny Daysh's room was as it had been left, bed unmade, papers here, there and everywhere, books open and closed over furniture and floor, a recorder with an unused tape fitted and the mike dangling halfway between table and floor. Joey Wills shook his head.

" Just where do we start ?" he pleaded.

" I wish I knew. I hadn't realised Johnny was as untidy a person as this." He saw the sudden gleam of hope in Joey's eyes. " We're going to see what we can find, even so."

They placed all the books in piles, pinned sheets of paper together and Mike breathed a sigh of relief when he came across a series of tapes labelled consecutively from one to ten,

and two fat pink files with eleven and twelve scrawled on their respective frontispieces. He felt less pleased when he saw that the last date in twelve was nearly two months ago. Then he started going through Johnny's personal effects ; the regulation Martian clothing, the rather pitiful letters he wrote to lonely hearts clubs and the even more pitiful replies he received, some microfilms of technical abstracts but nowhere any personal letters. Johnny Daysh didn't seem to have any friends or relatives anywhere on Earth.

" Joey, do you know if Admin have a copy of Johnny's will ?"

" Sorry, I don't know."

" That leaves us with two small, locked plastic boxes to open and then we can go and try to make series and sense out of his notes. Care to watch to make sure I don't palm anything ?"

Joey came beside Mike as he produced a bunch of keys he had found in a drawer of miscellaneous junk. The first box yielded to the third key and inside it was half-a-dozen I.O.U's from different people on the staff.

" Hm," observed Joey, " that is interesting. I never heard it rumoured Johnny was a captain of finance."

" He kept that quiet from me, too," agreed Mike, " but lending is very much against regulations. It raises complications for Admin."

" Hard luck for them. Let's get the other box open and have it all finished with."

The second key opened the other box. As Mike threw back the lid a gasp of surprise issued from his lips and little tingles of terror skittered along his nerves.

" Oh, my god ! A miniature Birdcage."

For nearly a minute neither of them spoke yet there was tension between them like static electricity before a storm. Mike broke the silence. He said,

" Until the Birdcage appeared there was no indigenous manufactured article on Mars other than utilitarian objects. Schiaparelli's canali were geological faults and the few cooking pots and water-carrying vessels were not decorated or made ornamental in any way. The only ornamentation the Martians use is on themselves, and then sparingly, at what we call their prayer meetings, but which are not prayer meetings as we mean the words. A few weeks ago the Birdcage appeared ; now we have another one on our hands. What next ?"

" Suppose Johnny made a model of the Birdcage ?" suggested Joey.

" That small ? This one's a pup by comparison and look at the convolutions. It would take a long time to model those correctly." Mike looked around for a ruler he remembered seeing, located it and measured the Birdcage along its length, breadth and height. " Near enough two and half by two and a half by three inches and therefore proportionally the same as the original out there. Weight," he hefted the miniature Birdcage in his hand ruminatively, " somewhat under half a pound. Material is the same, I should think, as the one outside, a sort of opened-out lattice of Martian rock. The configuration behind the bars of the cage may or may not be the same but we can soon find out that from photographs and studies of the original. Let's get back to my room, Joey, and start reading through these notes."

Mike left Joey at the hospital on the way back to his room and dropped an inventory on Admin of the things he had taken from Johnny's room, together with the key, before making finally for his own. Once inside he settled himself into his chair and started working through the file marked twelve. The going was heavy ; Johnny's writing wasn't of the clearest, there were odd diagrams, sketches and doodles all over the pages with the writing itself in red, blue and even green ink, and there were paragraphs in pencil, cigarette burns where Johnny had presumably fallen asleep at his work and a sticky patch or two which looked like the remains of sweets.

After half an hour attempting to make sense and headway Mike gave up and satisfied himself by skimming through the folder with the intention of going through it again afterwards and making his own notes on the contents of the file. The work on tribal mores and customs, built up and modified over thousands of years had intrigued Johnny greatly and from his voluminous side-notes and cross-references he was obviously well on top of his work. Despite the untidy appearance of his notes there was no doubt as to Johnny's capabilities in his chosen field ; had he lived he might even have become a great man.

He recorded part of a conversation with Siolem.

Siolem : Our religion, way of life is growing, slowly, very slowly, towards it inevitable conclusion.

Myself : What's that ?

Siolem : We don't know. We cannot tell whether a tree will grow straight and tall or become stunted, twisted and withered.

Myself : Are you sure your tree is growing straight and tall ?

Siolem : I understand you mean no heresy by that question. All I can say is that the gap between our mental attitudes is such that we have not yet the means to bridge it. Remember, from as far back as the earliest misty legend we have been a race of philosophers which has studiously kept the approach of what you term the engineer away from our civilisation. Only Khalil, Lord of Darkness and the Light, may create. At times he permits us to alter, as when we make pots from clay, or preserve our harvest for the winter. Khalil granted us those rights because he omitted to make provision for them in the first instance . . .

Here the extract of the conversation finished, with Johnny's comment :

" As you see, the tree has grown so crooked it's practically in the fourth dimension. I can only suggest that some tinkering with natural forces in the distant past has forced the Martians to take up this deadly ostrich attitude. We can only be certain that the forces weren't nuclear as there is no trace of artificial radioactivity on the planet except where our ships touch down."

Mike turned over the page.

" Siolem let a cat out of the bag today, which I'm sure he didn't mean to. He was talking about rights and wrongs and says that if any member of the tribe commits a crime for which death is the punishment the person who administers the punishment must die by his own hand for killing a fellow being. Normally, however, the criminal is made to see the error of his ways and commits suicide of his own accord. This is most interesting as we all know the Birdcage was created (in defiance of Khalil) by Schoyarlee, the village potter, with whom I'd had several interesting discussions about which (I think) Siolem knew nothing, before he committed suicide. I suggest that Schoyarlee was made to see his error and put himself out of the way. Well, why not ? The philosophy and psychology of these damned Martians is so twisted I could cry."

A rap on the door interrupted Mike's study of Johnny's notes.

" Come in," he called, quite surprised when Hugo Deane's red-headed features appeared.

" Hello, Hugo. Sit down." He waved to the chair. " Care for a NubLac special ? Afraid it's all I have at the moment."

" Thanks, I will. It's practically all there is at the moment on Mars, anyway, according to my informants."

" And they know pretty well what's available, I suppose," grinned Mike as he handed the glass to Hugo.

" To Earth," toasted Hugo and after Mike's response said, " I'd like to have a little chat about one or two things with you —off the record."

" Looks as if I've got you on my couch after all," suggested Mike.

Hugo Deane shook his head, then stared at the floor. " Nothing like that. Johnny Daysh is dead and it's partly because of me he died."

You're not alone in your guilt, thought Mike.

" It's like this. As you know, I'm a heavy drinker and that costs money. I used to let Johnny have a suit to go outside unofficially now and again. He used to slip me a bribe," Hugo Deane gazed up defiantly from the floor, " because that's what it was and I'd let him have the suit. The way he reasoned it was that my hobby was a little drinking and his was more anthropology than he was allowed and we both would benefit by the arrangement. He went to see Schoyarlee by a fancy back way without Siolem knowing. Anyway all three of them are dead and they were all mixed up somehow with the Birdcage ; thought you might like to have the information."

Johnny Daysh might have been a solitary person but he was certainly not unresourceful. Since his death several new facets of his character had come to light, most of them not as pleasant and innocent as the face he presented to the world at large but all were part of a pattern to present himself as an accomplished dealer with his fellow humans. The loans, the bribery and the anthropological cloak-and-dagger work—perhaps more would come to light later on.

" Hugo," Mike went to a drawer and produced the miniature Birdcage he had found in Johnny's room, " did you or anybody you know try and make anything like that for Johnny ?"

For a While Hugo turned over the Birdcage in his big blunt-fingered hands.

" There have been plenty of models made and quite a lot of them have gone back to Earth but I think the majority were of plaster. This seems to be made of rock, just like the Birdcage out there." He gestured vaguely with his free hand, then looked up, startled, at Mike.

" Where did you get it ?"

Mike told him.

" I don't like it, Mike," said Hugo. " I think Johnny Daysh grew that himself, the same way as that one out there, but how —that's not my division."

" Without anything to go on that was the impression I formed, too," said Mike. " Did Johnny ever talk to you after he'd been to see Schoyarlee ?"

" Yes—nineteen to the dozen. He seemed to think a lecture was part of the price of having out the suit illegally. But what he talked about half the time I couldn't tell you."

" Couldn't you recall . . .?

" Mainly he was on about the Martian lack of engineering in any shape or form. Said their philosophers had sought ahead and saw nothing to be gained by physical and material exploitation and had concentrated on the spiritual approach and that having closed one avenue to themselves they hadn't travelled very far along the one they had decided was worthwhile." Hugo glanced at his watch. " Sorry, Mike, I've got a session lined up but don't you worry—I shan't tell anyone about this."

When he left, Mike lowered himself into his chair again. Hugo Deane had cleared up how Johnny had visited Schoyarlee. There the matter rested ; everything ended with Schoyarlee and the Birdcage, not physically but what it was to the Martian mind. First, of course, one had to understand the Martian mind. Something about it was certain ; it didn't work as the human mind did and the Birdcage was a symbol, or a fact, which the Martian mind either chose to ignore or which its philosophy couldn't encompass. Suppose, according to Khalil that creation was his prerogative, and his alone ; suppose that eventually, having come far along the road of non-physical and non-material things the Martians had eventually come up against a problem which could only be solved by creating, by engineering, what then ?

The Birdcage ?

But what did it mean, or represent ?

Mike took a heavy sedative, and slept on his problems like a hibernating squirrel on his nuts until lunch next day.

After he had eaten his meal and passed the time of day over the phone with Joey Wills, Mike sought out Hugo Deane, whom he found sitting behind the counter in his store, blood-shot eyes brooding over the charts and life size pin-ups on the wall before him.

" Feeling a bit rough, Hugo ?" greeted Mike.

" A little," Hugo admitted adding, " I've taken a hangover dose and it's beginning to work. I'll be as good as new in ten minutes."

" Fine. Would you do me a favour ?"

" I'll try." Hugo seemed suspicious.

" Come over to the Martian settlement with me and have a talk with Balteoth ?"

" Sorry, just had a weather check and there's the grandfather of all storms coming up. Everybody to come back in and no one to go out."

" That's a pity. Come when it's over ?"

" Mike—sure you feel quite well ?"

Come to think of it, Mike did feel tired. Lethargic rather than tired, at peace with the world, somewhat depressed yet very clear-headed, like the time he had wandered too deep into the Martian burrows . . .

" Mike ! Mike !" He felt Hugo Deane haul him roughly upright and fling his limp body from side to side. He didn't remember falling to the ground but suddenly a heavy weight fell on to his chest. Then out of the noise and confusion Joey Wills' face swam into his field of vision for a fraction of a second before everything faded away into absolute silence and blackness.

Mike recovered consciousness in the hospital, easily and without any ill-effects, as if he were awakening from a deep, satisfying sleep. He felt refreshed, relaxed and at ease ; all he needed now was to find out why he had collapsed so igno-miniously in Hugo's store. Admittedly, recalling that he had felt as he had when he had descended too deeply into the Martian caves and a sandstorm could be compared with caves in their effect, his symptoms on both occasions were not of claustrophobia but much more of the order of cave-sickness.

He eased himself up in his bed and pressed the call button for attention.

Sister McQueen poked her head round the door in reply a couple of seconds later.

" How do you feel, Mike ?" she asked. " Joey's on his way to you now. He won't be a minute."

Almost before she had gone Joey Wills entered the room, an anxious smile on his face.

" Feeling all right, Mike ?" he asked as he sat on the chair beside the bed.

" Perfectly. Mind if I try standing ?"

" You know most of the answers, Mike. If you think you can, try it."

Mike pushed back the covers of the bed and stepped out.

" A little funny round the ankles but otherwise excellent, I think. How long have I been out."

" Two days — my orders," said Joey grimly. " Any questions ?"

" Just one. Why ?" demanded Mike.

" You've been worrying yourself about Johnny Daysh and the Birdcage. I gave you some time to recover, because you're in for a little shock."

" Tell me."

" I will. That storm which hit us as you collapsed was a most peculiar affair." Joey paused.

" I'm still waiting," prompted Mike.

" Well, I think you're fit enough. I'll drop some poison on you during the day which will tone up the system. Make you eat like a horse. Now—the storm. The Met boys and communications have been working solid on it since it happened. That storm was a colossal electrical disturbance, shaped like the Birdcage. Now don't let it worry you. We're due to have half the specialists on Mars along within days for a fresh inspection of the Birdcage. I'll drop along to your room later. 'Bye."

Mike was still standing by the bedside when Sister McQueen entered with his clothes. She put them on the bed.

" Are you quite sure you're fit, Mike ?" she demanded, a little touch of anxiety in her voice.

" Yes, yes. Quite all right. I was just thinking of something Joey told me."

" In your pyjamas," she laughed. " Get your clothes on and away with you to your room."

Mike dressed slowly and walked, a little uncertainly, to his room his mind occupied with the one fact that the storm had been the same shape as the Birdcage. His thoughts progressed no further, although his mind accepted the statement. All his thoughts were of that one thing, he could neither think of anything else nor bring himself to build new theories around it or attempt to fit it into the theory which was slowly developing in his mind. It was a fact, something at which to marvel, something at which to wonder, like the Rosetta stone or the Krakatoa eruption.

In his room, still preoccupied with the fact rather than its meaning or interpretations Mike wandered aimlessly, sitting in his chair for a few moments and then walking restlessly, hands clasped behind his back, the few steps in either direction his cramped quarters permitted. After a few turns he took to looking over his few personal effects which like anybody's on Mars were limited to things of Mars ; there was no room on ships for bringing surplus weight. There were specimens of sand and rock, a couple of the shallow cups which the Martians used for drinking and some pebbles from the bottom of one of the dead seas, together with a few fossils which occurred in their thousands and as such had no value except as souvenirs.

He picked up a piece of rock, hefted it in his hand and tossed it in the air. It hit the low ceiling and fell to the floor. Mike picked it up, and looked closely at it. It felt warm to the touch and seemed to prickle slightly, as if weak electric currents were issuing from it. This could have been the piece of rock from which Schoyarlee had made the Birdcage, or Johnny Daysh had produced his miniature. The not unpleasant prickling increased, becoming more like pins and needles than a weak electric current and it seemed to be flowing to the piece of rock rather than from it.

Mike put the stone on his table, surprised and a little frightened when the sensation continued, as if something were being drawn from his body and into the rock. Just how long he stayed there, his hand hovering a couple of inches above the stone in what to an observer would have appeared to be a catatonic trance he didn't know, but the ring of the doorbell broke the spell and Joey Wills walked in, a bottle of pills in his hand. He spoke no word for a long time, staring in stupefaction at the miniature Birdcage which rested by Mike's hand.

Mike broke the silence.

" Joey, I just did that. If you hadn't come in I should have kept on, I think. I wonder how I did it." Mike dropped into his chair and stared at the Birdcage he had created. It was in no way different from Johnny Daysh's one, except that it was a little smaller, so presumably he had not been left as long undisturbed as Johnny.

Joey placed the bottle of pills beside the Birdcage Mike had just made and said,

" Both you and Johnny made one so between you there must be some common factors. Before Johnny came here you were doubling as anthropologist. Somehow, somewhere . . ."

" Where ?" asked Mike hopelessly.

" Well, it's no wild talent, otherwise you wouldn't have had three of them popping up out of nowhere in a few weeks."

" Four, counting the storm," corrected Mike.

" Ah, yes. The storm."

Conversation lapsed, Mike fingering his Birdcage and Joey staring into the corner of the room. For perhaps ten minutes neither of them spoke, then Joey said,

" The experts will start rolling up tomorrow, Mike."

" They won't. There's only one expert on the Birdcage and that's me."

" You're right, there, I suppose," admitted Joey. " Wonder what they'll find out ?"

" Like to hear a theory ?" asked Mike.

" Of course. The wilder the better."

" It's not all that wild. As far as I know the only common factor between Johnny and myself is that we've both spent quite an amount of time in the Martian caves." Mike paused, a distant look coming into his eyes. " I had been down the caves, often, before Johnny came and what I saw, the directions I took, the movements I made are all registered somewhere in my head. I've been down, and along, North, South, East and West carrying high pressure cylinders for staying away a long time. The locations are there, stored, locked in, just as they must have been with Johnny. Then, when the Birdcage storm passed over I felt the same as I did when I nearly passed out in the burrow. Cave-sickness, or so I thought. I suggest now that it was some adjustment brought about by sensing such a pattern, which gave me me the power to reproduce it . . ."

" Mike," interrupted Joey, " you've got 'em bad. Just let me . . ."

" Oh, shut up !" Mike got to his feet and selected a piece of rock. He tossed it from hand to hand a few times, then placed it on the table, feeling little wriggles of sensation gather force throughout his body and direct themselves down his arm to the stone.

The phone rang, breaking through Mike's concentration. Joey Wills flicked it on while Mike looked closely at the piece of rock. It possessed lumps and projections which hadn't been there previously.

" Mike . . ." said the speaker.

" Joey Wills speaking but Mike's here."

" Good. This is airlock eight. Balteoth would like to see Mike here as soon as possible. 'Bye."

" Good-bye," said Joey Wills and flicked off the phone. " Any significance, do you reckon ?" he asked.

" Schoyarlee, Johnny, Siolem, possibly the storm, this lot," Mike indicated the two pieces of rock on the table. " It can't be coincidence. Let's get down there."

Mike nodded and together they sped towards Hugo Deane's store. Hugo was in attendance, Ross Wellack looking over his shoulder at an airfeed diagram.

" Hugo," said Joey, " two suits, please, urgent." He pulled a pad towards him and started scribbling the requisition on it.

" Get 'em, Ross, will you ?"

" Of course."

" How are you Mike ?" asked Hugo.

" Quite fit, now, thanks," replied Mike. " Hugo, try a little experiment for me, would you ?"

Hugo looked suspicious then agreed. Mike tipped the pins from Hugo's pinbowl and set it upside down on his desk. " Look at that and think of the configuration of the Birdcage. Put your hand over it, fingers pointing towards it."

Hugo obeyed and after a couple of seconds Ross Wellack appeared, a suit draped over each arm. Mike made elaborate gestures for silence and, happily, Ross obeyed. Hugo's eyes became a little glazed, as if he were thinking deeply about a problem and had lost contact with the immediate present. After ten minutes of frozen silence two little projections appeared on the pinbowl ; after another ten the original two had grown considerably and three more had appeared.

" Hugo," said Mike.

He blinked and looked up from the inverted pinbowl with the little projections. Then he looked down at it again.

" Congratulations, Hugo. Now you have joined the select company of people who can create Birdcages. Also you're the first to do it out of a piece of genuine Terran polythene instead of Martian rock. Ross, would you get another suit—for Hugo please. Let's go and see Balteoth ; I reckon we can meet him on equal terms, now we're not fumbling in the dark any longer.

" Whose not fumbling in the dark ?" demanded Hugo.

" I'm not," stated Mike.

They suited up, walked rapidly to airlock eight and studied Balteoth on the screen. He wore no clothing or ornamentation and his feathers were close against his body, protecting it from what to him was an exceedingly high temperature.

" Looks safe enough," observed Joey Wills.

He told the airlock operator to warn Balteoth they were coming in and clamped down his air supply.

By the time the three of them were in the middle chamber the temperature was comfortable for Balteoth and he had picked up a communicator. The four of them sat on the floor, Balteoth's grey, leathery legs folded up beneath his feathered body. Balteoth spoke first.

" Misfortune has once again made the Birdcage common knowledge," he stated, adding, " we are sensitive to their production."

" Not misfortune, Balteoth, chance," said Mike. " I think it most fortunate. I cannot say more than I think it will be of immense value to Terrans in all their workings wherever they are and it is something I don't think would have otherwise been discovered for several centuries, if ever.

" Martians are a race of philosophers ; you discovered the Birdcage many hundreds of thousands of years ago and to you it seemed the ultimate truth, proving that the doctrine of Khalil—who created all things, but forgot to make cooking pots—was perfect. In the Birdcage you found all the great discoveries we have made without developing them—fire, the wheel, electricity $e = mc^2$ and then the Birdcage, as a discovery in itself, the first step to understanding exactly what a creative mind is. There's a catch, though. To hold an image of the Birdcage in one's mind, as distinct from merely thinking about it, automatically produces a Birdcage from any inanimate object on which visual attention is focussed.

" So one automatically makes a Birdcage ; the religion of Khalil, which says only he can create, does not permit the creation of Birdcages or anything else except cooking pots.

" So your race dwindled with your dying world, paralysed by a viewpoint which refused to permit its own work to proceed. The problem of the Birdcage is no problem to be solved ; it is merely a tool to be used just the same as fire, or the wheel, or electricity or $e = mc^2$. It is the first step in understanding why a mind works at all."

There was silence for a while. Then Balteoth spoke, very quietly.

" In some things you are right. We have trained ourselves and are by inclination a race of philosophers whereas Earthmen as a breed are engineers. If the mind cannot accept something it rejects it, invents reasons for ignoring it and proceeds with another course of action."

The Ostrich approach, thought Mike.

" Why did Siolem kill Johnny ?" he asked.

" Siolem was our leader and unfortunately told Johnny about our tribal custom of persuading the breaker of a major law to commit suicide. He worried a great deal as he was certain Johnny had deduced Schoyarlee died because of creating the Birdcage and decided to kill Johnny and himself to wipe out the knowledge. Unfortunately we were unable to prevent Johnny's death. Thereafter it was only a matter of time before Siolem took his own life as murder is punishable by death."

Balteoth paused, marshalling his thoughts. Apparently irrelevantly he re-commenced, " Schoyarlee was the nearest thing to an engineer in our village ; now he is dead we shall have no one to make cooking pots. He is dead now, and we think for the best because although his tendencies could produce a Birdcage, once it was started he could not control it. So he had to die, not as you believed, for what he had done but for what might happen if he couldn't stop.

" I couldn't produce a Birdcage because my mind is not of the sort which will but perhaps many Earthmen will be able to do it, although I don't think they all will. Do remember, please, the storm which swept across here the other day and gave you Mike, and you Hugo, the final unconscious pattern to create a Birdcage is the residue of something that happened in the depths of antiquity I cannot tell you how long ago, when

the first and until recently, the only Birdcage ever created was produced. It devastated and ruined our world. As you realise all you need is the unconsciously implanted pattern of the Birdcage to be able to create it for yourself. To us it brought destruction ; I hope, to you, it will bring great things. Meanwhile we give it to you without prejudice as the mental tool you think it is. We will continue with our way, trying to solve a problem to which we cannot find the answer at present with the means and methods at our disposal. Goodbye."

None of the three Earthmen spoke for a long while after Balteoth had risen on his leathery legs and gone out into the biting cold of the Martian atmosphere. The inner doors of the airlock slid back and a puzzled technician who had been listening asked,

" What was all that about ?"

" Full report and statement in the NubLac *Times* in a couple of days," said Mike, " meanwhile just think what's happened."

" Well, what ?" demanded Joey Wills.

" Passed to humanity, which is basically a race of engineers, a philosophical tool which a race of natural philosophers couldn't use. It could be just like giving a lunatic child a machine gun."

Peter Hawkins

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

We shall be back to normal paging next month with something of a superb issue to make up for the delays due to the printing dispute. James White has the lead novelette, "The High Road," a completely 'different' type of story dealing with the first spaceship to leave Earth. This is backed up by another outstanding long story by Colin Kapp—"The Railways Up On Cannis,"—both White and Kapp present fine ideas skilfully written. You are going to enjoy them.

Plus short stories, an article, and the final surprise climax to Kenneth Bulmer's serial "The Patient Dark." And we *mean* surprise!

Ratings for No. 82 will have to be held over until the following issue owing to lack of space.

Perhaps humanity's war-like tendency is nothing more or less than a complex. If it is, how would we make out if the rest of the races in the Galaxy did not suffer from it. In short, if we had no-one to fight.

COMPLEX

by Donald Malcolm

The colourful magnificence of the sky of Marella, had a soothing effect on Gerdun Roos' tired eyes and work-weary brain. And the air would sharpen his wits ; Elis A'Kren was due soon—he would need them. He was hard put to it to remember that, in his six months stay, he had turned up only one significant clue in his search for the answer to Earth's question. There were no famous people on Marella.

Marella lay a little way out from the centre of the globular cluster, Omega Centauri, an aggregation of 100,000 suns.

Roos was from Earth where one familiar star ruled the days and the nights were sable and velvet, speckled by many pin point suns. It was small wonder that he found the ever-changing kaleidoscope of lasting interest.

True nightfall was unknown on most of the planets in the Cluster. Marella was one of eighteen worlds in a five-star system. The nearest primary to the planet was 104 million miles distant while the farthest was only four light-hours away.

The view from the 200th level of the capital's plushiest tourist hotel was one of splendour. It was four in the arbitrary morning when the sky was at its darkest. This happened, on

the average, every five days. Even then, the heavens were half as bright again as the full moonlit skies of Earth.

The most distant body, a giant yellow star, had already set along with a smaller puce companion. From the 200th level, Roos was seeing apparent sunsets and sunrises, not actual ones. Several degrees above the eastern horizon was a largish dull blue star while the horizon itself was a blaze of ashen green and pale reddish pink, heralding the imminent rising of a close, slightly distorted double pair.

In the west, great flares of yellow gas flamed, scrabbling at the hills like the clutching fingers of a giant who had stumbled into a pit.

There were numerous stars, of all sizes and colours, dotted round the sky within a quarter of a light-year or less. Marella's 1000-mile satellite, 150,000 miles off, sailed in technicolour across the heavens.

Only directly overhead did the sky approach the blackness seen from Earth.

The double star seemed to pop above the horizon as if it had sprung from a closed box. The long axes of the slightly elliptical suns pointed towards each other.

The city below looked like a city that had sunk under the sea. With only the blue sun above the true horizon, it was drowned in a twilight-blue ocean with the reflected and diffused light of the other suns lending the merest touches of relief here and there.

Roos sighed. His stay in this colourful wonderland was almost over. His tourist visa was due to expire. He doubted if he could find the answer before then. And yet, something told him that what he sought was right under his nose . . .

When Earth had invented a faster-than-light drive, she had sent her star-ships, armed to the teeth, ranging far and wide into the Galaxy.

And everywhere, among the myriad races, they had found peace. It was a real peace, founded on respect for beings of all kinds among the stars.

The Earthmen had been accepted everywhere, if not always openly welcomed. Their weapons and ships, the pride of Earth's experts in mass murder and wholesale destruction, were looked upon as oddities. In fact, some systems had politely requested examples of them to exhibit in their museums. The

High Admiral had an apoplectic fit for a week when he heard that one.

When the all-over pattern of life and government in the Galaxy had been scientifically examined and analysed, socio-dynamicists on Earth could hardly credit what they saw. But facts were facts and, as scientists, they had to accept them.

Human beings, with the tradition of thousands of years of local, civil, national, racial and interplanetary war behind them, couldn't swallow the bitter pill of truth.

War and conflict, all that these terms implied, were virtually unknown in the Galaxy. At least one million Earth-years had passed since the void had flared silently with raw energy, since planets, even whole systems, had been reduced to dancing, purposeless motes of cosmic dust.

It gradually dawned on every member of the Solar Space Force, from the High Admiral to the lowest galley boy, that he was redundant. There was no one to fight. The psychiatric profession enjoyed its greatest boom for centuries. Eventually things settled down and the men found an amazing diversity of occupations once they discovered that there was nothing else for it but the bleak prospect of hard work. Some units spent their time giving military tattoos, unheard of in the Galaxy.

The Terrans thought that the Galactics, being totally unwarlike, would be easy meat in the harsh circles of trade and commerce. They learned many hard lessons and lost a lot of profit before they realised the calibre of their opponents. The Galactics had a respectful but very firm way with them, which, in turn, commanded respect and fair dealing. The petty criminals, parasites and sharks received short thrift.

Earth brooded. Not one teeny-weeny war in progress anywhere. Nobody wanted to stand up and indulge in a good-going fight. It was unnatural. It was only the thought of censure from the Galactics and the damage to trade connections that prevented a frustrated flare-up within the Solar System itself.

Earth continued to brood. The egg of suspicion was laid. Was it *possible*, they asked, that all those countless billions of beings out there in the starry wastes actually lived without the safety-valve of war ?

Something stank. Inevitably, the alien way of life was construed as a threat to Earth. It mattered nothing that among

all the stars was immense wealth, technological brilliance, labour-saving devices by the thousand, a high standard of living and no one wanting for anything.

The aliens must want Earth.

The egg hatched.

Earth decided to ferret out what the Galactics were up to. They planned to send out highly-trained psycho-socio dynamicists into the Galaxy to study social and cultural trends. General Haymire was co-ordinator.

Something just had to be cooking *somewhere*.

That was how Roos came to find himself on a planetary paradise. Marella was about the same size as Earth. The temperature, higher on the average, varied in a regular cycle superimposed on smaller fluctuations.

On the face of things, the Marellan social structure was normal by Earth standards. Planetary Government was in operation, holding sway over the twelve habitable worlds in the system. The remaining six were either too hot or too frigid to support life without artificial aids.

Each planet had its own Commission. Trade and commerce were in the hands of both State and private enterprise in a firmly-based balance. System ships ranged far and wide beyond the confines of the Cluster. They carried cargoes of heavy metals, precious stones, exquisite filigree jewellery, and a variety of succulent delicacies and rare wines.

When he had come to examine details of the Marellan culture more minutely, he discovered just how completely alien it was. The most curious point was simple, easily overlooked.

None of the twelve worlds had any personalities, no famous or eminent people.

The implications behind his discovery made Roos feel uneasy.

On Earth, every field of endeavour and achievement had its great names, the discoverers, the pioneers, the people with that extra *something* that set them above the mass of ordinary people. Art, music, literature, poetry, drama, science, technology, medicine, great names sprang to mind.

Every achievement in any field he cared to choose had, on the Marellan worlds, been conceived and carried to fruition as a group project. Elis A'Kren had tried to explain but Roos couldn't grasp the concept. To his way of thinking, there

had to be someone with that touch of genius to spark the ideas off.

Here, apparently, everyone was a genius.

Soft footsteps sounded behind him.

He turned.

" How did— ?"

Elis A'Kren smiled disarmingly. " Between friends, there are no doors," he answered the half-spoken question.

He was a magnificent specimen, as were all Marellans, male and female. Six feet six inches tall, he towered over Roos by at least five inches. His tanned, angular features were deeply etched with lines of determination and confidence. In fact, this latter trait oozed out of him as with all his race. His hair was short and silver-grey ; his eyes were a kind but penetrative and shrewd blue. The nose and mouth were strong.

He was the complete antithesis of Roos who was sallow, black-haired, brown-eyed, and inclined to be lanky.

A'Kren was dressed in a one-piece bottle-green suit and a black, silver-lined cloak thrown over his left shoulder with carefully studied nonchalance.

His big white teeth flashed. " Come, Gerdun, let us take a walk. Your time here is drawing to a close. And you haven't yet solved your problem, have you ?"

Roos stood stock still at the statement. " What problem ?" he heard a strange voice ask. He realised it was his own.

" Why," Elis laughed innocently, taking his arm, " the problem of how we can always live at peace."

" How did you know my purpose here ?" Roos' voice was very quiet, conceding the victory.

" I know many things," the Marellan evaded mysteriously, guiding him towards the door.

The anti-grav lift whisked them to ground level, they left the hotel and walked along the slightly resilient pavement.

" Where are we going, Elis ?"

" You'll see."

They passed through the magnificent City Square where the electronically controlled fountains played in a transient rainbow of shifting hues. That had been a group achievement like the awe-inspiring six-spired church on the west side of the Square and the delicate beauty and flowing architectural elegance of the Commission-building on the east side.

A'Kren watched him. At length, he commented, " You cannot understand why there are no great men or women on the Marellan worlds or in the Galaxy."

Roos sighed. So his companion knew that he had been in touch with other Terrans in other sectors to check if this phenomenon was isolated or Galaxy wide. He was beginning to feel quite small in A'Kren's eyes. How the tall Marellan must be laughing.

" You have discovered that curious—to you, that is—fact."

They left the Square and walked along the gloriously landscaped Avenue of the Five Suns which led to the spaceport.

" I have studied intensively the histories of most of your famous people of Earth. I saw the common factor that you, and all of your kind, have missed, probably because you were too close to take an objective view, and analyse what you saw without emotional colouring of some sort or another. What would you say—the doctor cannot cure himself or the writer cannot criticise his own work ?"

Roos supplied broodingly. " We call it not being able to see the wood for the trees."

" Ah, yes ! One cannot see the stars for the dust."

The Terran grunted. He found his mind was ticking over at a brisk, clear rate. The trees were beginning to thin out in this problem. The wood was coming into view.

Elis A'Kren went on. " Let us take one or two examples. Abraham Lincoln was a tall, extremely ugly man of scant education. But he taught himself by hard work and discipline, became a lawyer and eventually the President of the old United States of America."

" I'm with you," Roos nodded, thinking it over. What was the basic drive behind Lincoln's achievements ?

" Then there was the Polish composer, Chopin, forced to leave his country at the age of twenty, never to return. He was too frail to fight the Russian invaders. He had to endure many snubs and painful experiences during his exile in Paris. The disdain of high-born women, the envy of fellow composers, the sacking of his beloved Warsaw by the enemy—yet something inspired him to write some of his greatest music at these soul-wracking times. He met George Sands and watched her flit from amour to amour. He gave recitals in Britain whose people received him coldly. Finally, only thirty-nine, he died of tuberculosis."

For a few minutes they walked in silence.

What was the common factor ?

" I could give you many examples—"

" Wait a minute !" Roos halted. " I can see the common factor ! Inferiority complex ! Am I right ?" He turned to face A'Kren, realisation lighting his eyes.

He smote his brow with the heel of a hand. " I'm a fool, we're *all* fools !"

They began to walk again.

A'Kren told him. " Inferiority inspires greatness, through deformity, ugliness, failure, lack of stature, a thousand causes !"

They approached the spaceport buildings which blended into the landscape with flowing lines and curves. All ships operated on anti-grav while in atmosphere, hence the proximity of the field to the city. A variety of alien craft were cradled on the vast launching apron. An ovoid ship rose noiselessly and accelerating smoothly, soon disappeared from sight. The hustle and bustle of people and the sounds of many tongues sussurated around them.

" Inferiority inspires greatness—but only when the people concerned have the strength, talent, determination and will-power to rise above their drawbacks, to fight and to conquer seemingly impossible odds." His angular face became hard and his eyes held a flinty glint as he continued grimly.

" Inferiority also *breeds* many things, fear, hate, resentment, avarice, suspicion, lust—" he broke off as he showed a disc at a small gate and they passed through and headed for a trim little gold and black flitter. Roos sensed that A'Kren was really angry about this inferiority business.

" These emotions are the miserable lot of the mass of people who vent their frustrated spleen on each other. In turn, these things cause war, death, destruction and famine. Witness the inferiority complexes of two men, both small, Napoleon and Adolf Hitler. Their complexes led to the deaths of millions. Such is the powerful energy of this complex for good, or, sad to say, more often for evil."

Roos put in comprehendingly, " That is why Marella and the rest of the known Galaxy boasts no famous people—or notorious people, for that matter. Galactics have no inferiority complexes, and therefore, no aspirations to greatness, wealth or power as we of Earth know these things."

Preceding him into the ship, the Marellan answered. " Precisely. Countless ages ago, our complexes were removed —over a period of time, of course—and our energies channelled into useful sources. The result was the banishment of many evils, like war, and a higher standard of living. No one had any *need* to fight."

They entered the neat, shining cabin and A'Kren checked with Control while Roos took the co-pilot's seat. Only the recession of the ground, as seen in the viewers told them that they were airborne.

Expertly, A'Kren computed the required orbit and put the ship on autonav.

The view was magnificent, with the double star, ashen green and pale reddish-pink, fully risen and the blue sun sinking in mournful hues towards the west.

" From what I can see," Roos resumed the conversation, " *we* on Earth are the menace, not the Galactics."

The Marellan nodded. " Earth has an inferiority complex a mile high and a mile wide. But don't worry. We have the situation under control."

The Earthman stared at him, noting the mischievous quirking of the other's mouth.

" I am taking you up to the Observatory to show you something, my friend," the big man remarked, changing the subject easily.

The little ship finally cleared Marellan's 1,000-mile deep atmosphere and, minutes later, entered the 1,400-mile orbit of the slowly spinning Observatory. He checked with Dr. B'Aarl that no observations were at present in progress.

He eased the ship into a landing bay on the saucer-shaped apron and they suited up and went inside. Sensitive instruments had detected the extra mass and compensating gyros ensured that the Observatory's equilibrium was maintained. The ship, hovering on anti-grav, did not register.

Below them, the hemisphere of Marella was a glittering glory of intermingled blues, greens, pinks and chocolate browns under the silver tinged mantle of air.

A'Kren led him to the observational cage of a superbly engineered reflector. He estimated its aperture at something like 130-150 inches.

At the huge control console, A'Kren's hands moved over buttons and operated switches. The dome panel slid back, revealing the sky.

" Dr. B'Aarl will be along in a minute," he said, as he swung the dome a few degrees into position.

He came to Roos' side. " Astronomy here was a bit frustrating for a long time due to the amount of incidental light that upset observations. A scientific group invented an ingenious shutter arrangement now in general use."

He broke off as Dr. B'Aarl joined them, and made introductions.

" I was explaining to Gerdun about the shutter, Doctor," Elis said respectfully to the bent old man who, somehow, still managed to appear taller than the Terran.

" Ah, yes," the astronomer remarked, " before its invention, astronomy was rather limited, unless, of course, one travelled right outside the Cluster and who would want to go to all *that* bother ? The shutter effectively enables an observer to isolate that part of the sky he wishes to study."

Roos commented. " Most of your work will be done by camera, I take it ?"

" Yes, yes, that is true. After the programme is set up, we can see the transmitted observations on closed circuit television. Data fed to a selector allows us to change the plates automatically after the correct types have been chosen."

" Our friend has a problem, Doctor. I was going to show him the Garnet Suns where the same problem exists."

Dr. B'Aarl fixed keen, clear eyes on Roos. " Ah, yes, Earth's problem."

Elis invited Roos to look through the eyepiece.

Three sparkling garnet pin-point stars swam in the field of view like a formation of exquisite jewelled fish in an inky ebon ocean.

" They're thousands of light-years off," the astronomer informed him.

"And there," A'Kren went on, "on the one, so far, inhabited planet is a race which has the same problem as Terran races —inferiority. They are reaching out for the system planets now, fighting every step of the way, two forward, one back. It is only a short time since the whole globe was plunged in war. We keep a number of field teams there. Gradually, we will guide them onto the right path—the one of peace—without destroying the urge to invent and discover and pioneer."

They turned away and clasping hands with the astronomer entered their ship and took off for the planet.

Roos was sunk deep in thought as his companion slid the ship into the atmosphere like a needle into a vein. The Marellan broke in on his thoughts.

" We could do the same for Earth, if they would let us. You, for one, could be trained as a team member. You would be striving for a goal you will never see, but you would have the satisfaction of knowing that you were helping to cure a planet."

The Earthman glanced at him. " A wonderful offer, Elis, and I am grateful to you. But I still have to convince the authorities that inferiority is at the root of our troubles. No one cares to admit that *he*, personally, has an inferiority complex. The man next door? Oh, yes ; but not *him*. I leave shortly. I'll have to do some fast thinking."

Departure time arrived. The yellow giant, with its servile puce attendant, hung in lambent glory at the zenith while the eastern horizon was sprayed with streamers of blue and cobalt and ultramarine. The heavens between the two stars were subtly hued with greens. He and Elis cast two shadows, one long, the other short.

" You look happy, Gerdun. Have you solved your problem, then ?"

Holding the Marellan's hand firmly, the Earthman nodded smiling. " I think I have. And, of course, I'm happy to be going home." He paused, gazed around, then continued wistfully, " I'm going to miss this place."

" You will be back," Elis assured him confidently.

Roos boarded the ship, *Queen of the Cluster*, and, giving a farewell wave to the tiny figure of Elis, began his journey home.

At the edge of the Cluster, the passengers had a last look at the diamond that shone with a hundred thousand matchless stellar facets. The sight had a heady effect, like that induced by a good wine. Which was not surprising ; the Cluster's bouquet had been blossoming for aeons.

Roos had work to do and he lost no time in making a start. Hyper-space radio messages came high but his Government position opened all doors—including the one to the communications room.

He made contact with his home office. Even with the new multiplier device, several minutes elapsed before he heard from Earth. He kept his request concise and brief.

When he had finished, the voice of his friend, Cranwell, eventually squawked, " You're crazy !"

" Do it ; I'm carrying the can."

Silence, then : " They'll be able to boil you in oil in it."

Roos grinned wryly as he broke contact. That was very likely to happen.

A long, official black car—it resembled a coffin, he reflected morbidly—awaited him at London Space Terminus. He eased his lanky frame into it. The driver and the Security Officer weren't exactly talkative, as he was whisked away to HQ. That suited Roos admirably. He had much to think about. If Cranwell failed to obtain the information—

The car travelled swiftly along many streets through tunnels and over intersections until it drew up outside a carefully nondescript building, one that had fifteen floors underground.

Only when he excused himself to go to the bathroom did Cranwell slip him the information that he hoped would clinch his argument. Sweat popped out on his forehead and upper lip as he tucked it into his cigarette case ready for a casual inspection. He had heard some shady reports about the mines on Callisto . . .

General Haymire was a small, fiery man, very conscious of his small stature. He took the aggressive attitude to this unforgiveable blunder on Nature's part.

His hair and moustache were as bristly as himself and his sharp, intelligent grey eyes, pug nose and determined chin underlined his aggressiveness.

" Welcome home, Roos," he greeted the arrival in a surprisingly quiet, cultured voice, shaking hands firmly.

" Thank you, General," Roos replied as they seated themselves comfortably.

Haymire fixed his penetrating eyes on Roos. " I trust you have brought news ?"

The other barely hesitated. " I have."

His superior pushed a valuable, ornate, Capellan silver-and-platinum cigarette holder to him.

" May I smoke my own, sir ?"

The officer affirmed, he took his case out, opened it and ran a swift, expert glance over Cranwell's cryptic data. They were better than he had expected ! Lucky for him that the General was a small man or he might not have hit upon his clincher.

Two strong pulls helped to steady his nerves and he launched into his narrative. Haymire's expression altered but little as Roos talked.

When he had finished, the General contemplated him unwaveringly, much to his disconcertment. Such an examination usually preceded an explosion of nova proportions.

After five minutes of silence so taut it almost twanged, Haymire spoke softly. "Let me get this straight. The Galactics have no inferiority complexes, therefore they have no aspirations to greatness or fame—as individuals. For the same reason, they don't have war, famine, power-lust or any of the ills that terrestrial flesh is heir to. That's a fascinating theory."

Roos said, relief plain in his voice at Haymire's reaction, "It's not a theory, sir, it's a patent fact."

The General's eyebrows quirked. "I find it hard to believe, though . . ."

"That inferiority can inspire people to great attainments you mean? I once heard a story about a boy who, when young, was frail and puny, never very well. The other kids, cruel as only children can be, laughed at him and wouldn't let him play at soldiers or any other game with them."

The General, who had been looking down at his virgin blotter, raised his head slowly, like a panther that had sensed his prey, and fastened a chipped flint gaze on Roos.

He went on, meeting the gaze. "One day, when things were hell with bells on, he resolved that he would become a great soldier and tell the rest of 'em what to do."

Roos, in turn, examined Haymire frankly. "I believe he achieved his ambition."

"A *very* interesting story, Roos . . . you clever devil!" An attractive boyish grin tugged at one corner of his mouth.

Then he barked abruptly. "I'm convinced." He slapped the desktop twice. "Now all we have to do is convince the Solar Council."

Five days later, flushed with triumph, for he had just been told that his information and the deductions drawn had been accepted, Roos presented a request to General Haymire.

For a small man, he owned a hearty laugh. Still chuckling, he called his secretary and had her type out a stencil and run off the official memos.

As he departed, Roos heard the General say between laughs, " The High Admiral will blow all jets when he sees that one."

Roos glanced at one of the memos.

Ref: As Appended List. Executive Office of Solar Council.

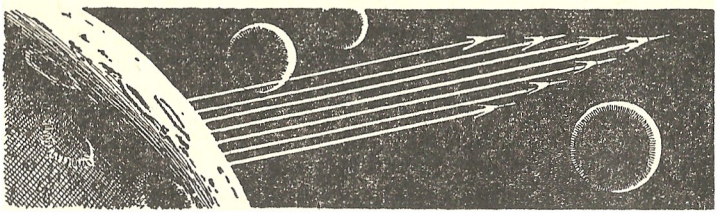
To: Director, General H. A. L. Haymire
Museum, Ancient Weapons Section,
Kaplan,
Kaplan VIII,
Sector 9.

With reference to your request for a ship to display in your section of ancient weapons, I have pleasure in forwarding one " SOL " class heavy cruiser, fully armed, with the compliments of the Solar Council.

For And On Behalf of,
Solar Council,
General H. A. L. Haymire.

Roos grinned. The High Admiral would probably take off, complex and all.

Donald Malcolm



This story is another delightful angle on the power of advertising—futuristic, this time, inasmuch as it could be a logical development from subliminal suggestion.

BEYOND SURREALISM

by E. R. James

Gerard Avon, weekend case in one hand, interplanetary passport in the other, ran headlong for the helibus. There was a fifteen minute service so he had been told, but over three years had passed since he had seen his brother, Melvyn.

Dropping into a seat, he panted a moment with the case awkwardly across his knees. A small man, very spry in his movements, he was never still for long, neither physically nor mentally.

In three years the civilisation of Earth seemed to have changed but little, but there were differences. His quick brown eyes noted the fashions in clothes. Women seemed to be in a romantic vein, becomingly feminine ; less repressed than he remembered.

Above a chic, flower-decked coiffure of a charming girl in front of him, there were strange posters, nothing intelligible at all, just lines and splashes of colour like something out of an impressionist nightmare.

He realised vaguely that his eyes were being turned without his willing them to move. He seemed to be slipping into a part of the poster which caught his eyes. The design seemed to open out around him, absorbing him . . .

The stars stood in silence around him as he spun in the eternal void. He felt he ought to be frightened, but somehow

there were reassuring presences all around him. The view was awesome, magnificant, a riot of colour and pattern greater than he knew the reality to be . . .

His quick thoughts, racing ahead of his impressions, freed him from them. The interior of the helibus came around him again.

On the seat next to him, a sly-eyed business man nodded. " Fresh from space ?"

" That's right." Gerard was too bewildered to think of hiding his ignorance of current trends. " That poster seemed to take my attention—is that how you knew ?"

" Yes. It's one of Mel Avon's. Designed to soothe men returning from space, so that they will not be so terrified of going back."

" Mel doing poster work ?"

" I don't think you've heard of the new art, have you ?" The business man's bowler hat was straightened on his knees as though its owner were delighted with the opportunity to air his knowledge. " How exciting for you. It is the result of developments made by this Mel Avon. There are several variations but on the whole Avon's work is by far the most vivid. The psychologists call them Guided Auto Suggestion Pictures, but they're usually called Dreamies. Have fun with them, spaceman." He stood up. " But be warned not to get so you prefer their illusions to the challenges of real life. This is where I get off."

" Thanks . . ." Gerard scratched his small, turned-up nose. And cocked an eye from the grinning business man back at the posters. Deliberately passing over the one previously taking his attention, he frowned at a splurge of rich colour, all drifting wavy lines. He stared at it grimly. What was it supposed to mean? His eyes turned slowly towards the centre of the poster.

He was suddenly back sitting at a laden table and his mother was cutting the Christmas goose and his plate was getting heavy with the festive fare, and there were delectable odours of mince pies and rich puddings and rum sauce . . .

" Terminus," said a voice.

Gerard came back to his real surroundings with a start. Everyone was getting out. Following the others into the street, the unmistakable odours of Earth-cooking turned his head. Directly opposite to the helibus terminus was an enormous glass and chrome restaurant with busy tables and flashing signs.

" Dreamie advertising, too ?" Gerard shook his head. "Mel, you certainly have changed things."

Gerard lifted his hand to hail a taxi, but halted. The sign on a cinema flashed GUIDED AUTO SUGGESTION PICTURES. SEE ALL THE LATEST DREAMIES WHICH CAN BE CONJURED FROM YOUR OWN IMAGINATION.

He frowned. A glaring pattern above the sign seemed to draw his attention by its very familiarity. He felt his heart begin to pound. All around him people stood staring in admiration. He was about to show all this vast audience exactly what he could do—

He shook his head. The busy street hustled uncaring about him, a reality which somehow seemed less real—perhaps because less desirable ?—than the fantasies which these Dreamies were able to conjure up in the beholders' minds.

" Cab, sir ?" The driver's face strained with impatience.

" Yes." Inside the cab, directly in front of his eyes, a simple design of curves seemed to lift him so that the cab wafted along. It was an effort to give his brother's address, and to look away from the soothing lines and accept the hard old springing of the conveyance . . .

Mel Avon lived in a medium-sized detached house between towering blocks of concrete and glass. Gerard rang the front door bell, and, looking around, felt as much of an anachronism as this old house amongst its cubist neighbours.

Receiving no answer, he went around the back of the mellow building, up a half dozen worn stone steps to the back door. Twelve milk bottles stood on guard beside the rusted boot scraper. A morning paper stuck out of the letter box. Gerard pulled it out, poked open the flap and saw two other creased papers on the carpet half way down the hall.

He hung over the metal railing, glimpsed a box of groceries tucked up against the kitchen door in the basement. He glanced around, swung over the railing and caught the old casement windows, teetered a moment on the window sill and got his balance. The back sitting room was lined with pictures in the old art and the new, some covered up and some unfinished and some savagely crossed with angry paint daubs.

One covered-up painting caught his eye, because its cover was marked with his name in heavy black, sprinked with star dots.

He set one foot back on the railing, jumped down and went looking for a telephone kiosk. If Mel had moved out, Elaine would know—unless he had finally married her.

An unfamiliar voice answered.

" Is Elaine Appleby there, please ?" he asked.

" No, I'm sorry. You didn't know she was dead ?"

"Dead? Uh? Oh, please don't ring off. What happened?"

" She was knifed—murdered. Were you a friend of hers ?"

" I'm Melvyn Avon's brother. Can you tell me what happened to him ?"

" He's been arrested, Mr. Avon. This must be dreadful for you. I'm Janet—"

" Arrested. What for ?"

" They think he murdered a man, I believe, although no charge has been made because of the outcry that would follow . . ."

The cramped interior of the kiosk seemed to revolve around Gerard's head. He found himself staring at a queer little pattern of lines at eye level above the telephone rest. His eyes moved along the lines and fastened on a point and the kiosk receded from his awareness. He glimpsed waving branches of a tree—

" Mr. Avon !"

" Yes !"

He shook his head. " These damn' hypnotic patterns everywhere I go . . ."

" You must find them strange. But they do have their uses. Try to accept them, Mr. Avon. Perhaps they will help you. I'd like to, if I can in any way . . ."

" No . . . Thanks all the same."

He caught another cab, refused to look at its eye drawing Dreamie and opened the paper instead. There were Dreamie advertisements and a whole page of Dreamie cartoons, and there was a leading article which seemed to have been written in answer to criticism by some leading personality. Dreamies, claimed the article, were the wonder of the age, replacing television, and the older pastimes of radio and the written word.

" Nearest police station," said Gerard.

He located his brother, who had apparently not yet been charged with any crime. After argument and proof of identity and finally a threat to bring in a lawyer, he was asked to wait and at length allowed into the cell in which his brother sat with head in hands as though he had been in that posture for days.

" What's all this, Mel ?" Gerard asked without preamble.

Mel looked up. " Good God ! Gerry ! Thought you were safely in space."

" Home on vacation. What's all this about you being charged with murder ?"

" I killed him all right," said Mel, and looked at the floor. " He had put a knife into Elaine, so I agreed to do him an individual Dreamie. Now the police and Home Office are trying to make up their mind whether I can be charged with murder."

Gerard frowned at Mel. Mel was quite unlike him. Mel was quite tall, rather slow moving, with prominent, almost protruding dark eyes, a dark complexion and a spade beard which in anyone else would have probably seemed affected, but seemed perfectly suited to the man. His wine coloured fustian jacket was splashed with paint of several colours if one looked closely. One of his socks had a hole in the toe seen through the openwork of sandals.

Gerard sat down and set his face in determination. " All right. Now tell me exactly what happened."

" If you want me to." Mel had always been indifferent to anyone's opinions. His sad eyes considered Gerard. " I wonder just how much you know of Dreamies ? Have you got a pencil and piece of paper ?"

Gerard felt through his pockets. " This ballpoint do ? Here's a piece of paper."

" Thanks." Mel sat with eyes half closed for a minute or so, and then began to draw. " A crayon is better . . ." He added deft strokes. " But I think this will serve."

Gerard took the proffered paper and looked at the strange configurations upon it. His gaze drew to the centre of the paper and the drawing seemed to balloon out around him.

He stood in a garden and saw himself, as a boy, rushing with characteristic vim towards him. " You stole it !" The furious image of himself lashed out with small chenched hand—

" Ouch !"

Gerard blinked. He was back in the cell. His head sang, and a dull pain ached and throbbed through his right eye.

" Do you remember hitting me like that when we were kids ?"

"Yes . . . it was the only time we fell out," Gerard answered and lifted his hand to his swelling eye. " Why did you pay it back now ?"

" I didn't hit you," said Mel. " You were induced by this Dreamie to experience my sensations during those moments in our mutual past."

"Uh?" Gerard eyed Mel doubtfully, turned to look through the grille of the door at the back of the guard's head, and frowned. " I still don't understand."

" Mind over matter," said Mel. " The thing was so vivid to your brain that it reacted on your flesh and gave you a black eye. In some cases—unfortunately very few—Dreamies can cause people to heal themselves, by showing them how their illnesses began in their minds. I reversed the process, for you —and for Koap. Elaine had been stringing him along I think. in a blaze of jealously, he stabbed her to death. I drew him a Dreamie and it killed him, opening his flesh just as surely as if he had had a knife used on him."

Gerard stared at the squiggles on the paper. " What are these ?" he murmured as he fought the desire to let his eyes turn in to look at the inviting centre.

" Symbols . . . hieroglyphics . . . half formed drawings which are completed by your mind from memory or subconscious thoughts. If there had not been a link between us which I could bring into your mind to the exclusion of all else, I could not have given you a black eye. I would have had to be content with universal symbols—which are only vague, enough to give you a chilly spine or tired feet . . ." Mel shrugged. " Now go away, and let them make up their minds whether I'm a murderer or not. For it is quite true that I have killed a man." He sounded proud of that.

Gerard shivered involuntarily.

" Now," nodded Mel, " your mind is affecting your body without help from me."

Gerard swallowed hard and stood up. He could not just sit. He could not just accept what his brother said.

But Mel had a passion for telling the truth no matter what the cost. Mel had, after his own fashion, loved Elaine very much. Everything did fit together.

Gerard's fingertips moved over his hurt eye. As he turned, the guard's eyes widened.

" Didn't see that when you went in there, sir."

Gerard shook his head. "Never mind. Let me out, please."

He quit the depressing atmosphere of his brother's prison, and went hurrying off, driven by the demon of his own

restlessness. From a videokiosk, he phoned Elaine's old number.

The image of the girl he had spoken to before appeared on the little screen above the speaker so quickly that she must have been waiting to hear from him. As they eyed each other, he found his mind had been expecting another Elaine. But this girl's dark hair was soft and wavy, unsophisticated. Her brown eyes somehow gave the impression they had looked frightened ever since Elaine's murder. Her soft lips trembled. " Have you seen him ?"

" You mean Mel ? Yes . . . He says he did it."

" I know. With one of his pictures. Do you believe it is possible for any man, even a very clever man like your brother, to revenge himself for the murder of his girl, like that ?"

" Quarter of an hour ago, I wouldn't have. But now I've had a demonstration," he touched his aching eye, " I'm not so sure."

" Oh." Tears glistened in her gentle eyes but, while biting her lip, she determinedly blinked them away. " How dreadful. I was hoping so much you'd prove it was all a mistake."

" Were you indeed ?" Gerard moved restlessly, uneasily. " I'm afraid I'm no superman." He frowned at her anxious face. " Don't you believe Mel did kill this man ?"

She shook her girlish head vehemently. " Oh no. He couldn't have—not really. He's intoxicated with his own genius, that's what. He's got so big-headed he thinks he can do anything with those pictures of his."

"You could be right," he said slowly. He wondered whether he believed she might be, or if he was only trying to reassure her. " How's a nice girl like you come to be mixed up in this mess ?"

" I'm Janet Appleby. Poor Elaine was my sister. She—"

" Good heavens ! Oh, I am sorry, Miss Appleby. I—I wish there was something I could do . . ."

" Just letting me talk to you like this is a help, Mr. Avon," she said, eagerly. " I . . . sort of feel that Elaine was the reason for Mel wanting to commit a terrible crime. It made me feel very guilty, but there was no one I could turn to till now."

Unconsciously straightening to his full five feet six inches, he smiled. " I wish I could do more . . ."

" You . . ." She watched him earnestly. " You could go and see this dreadful picture for a start. I haven't had the nerve to."

" Where is it then ?" He felt tense, like a wound up clockwork spring.

She swallowed. " Still in the place where Elaine was . . . stabbed to death, I suppose. Seeing that horrid Jack Koap was stabbed there too, it's hardly likely anything's been moved yet."

" The address ?"

" Top flat—penthouse Elaine called it—in the new luxury block opposite Eros. I knew no good could come of Elaine meeting a man in a place like that—even though she said it was about a business deal for a Dreamie by Mel."

" I'll call you again later," said Gerard.

A mere few minutes after that, he stepped out of a silent, self-service lift, crossed a thickly carpeted corridor and touched the announcer button on a door.

A small acknowledging light flickered. A voice inquired from a small grille. " Who the hell are you ?"

Gerard announced himself.

" Mel Avon's kid brother, eh ?" A low whistle came from the grille. " And what are you after here ?"

" I want to see this horrible picture my brother used . . ."

A sound of indrawn breath came from the grille. " The devil you do. That's police evidence."

" The police have Mel's confession. No evidence is required. Why don't you let me take the picture away ?"

Several moments passed in absolute silence, and then the door swung open. A flashily dressed man smoothed little dark pencil lines of moustache as he considered Gerard warily. " The damn' picture does give me the willies," he said slowly.

Gerard went in, looked around. Nothing but the best had been used in a place of this quiet magnificence. Dreamies with their ultra modern note seemed almost out of place upon the walls amongst so much luxury.

" Jackie Koap collected them," said the man. " We were partners in everything but that. I don't like Dreamies. Be glad to get rid of the last one Jackie got."

" Who are you anyway ?" asked Gerard.

The man fingered a diamond tiepin while his narrowed eyes continued to consider Gerard. " What's it to you ?"

" Nothing, I guess," said Gerard. He was holding himself very still. " I just thought I'd like to thank you for doing me this favour."

" That sounds reasonable. I'm Des Barton, if that means anything. No ? Never mind then."

Barton pointed with a beautifully manicured hand. " The painting's in Jackie's bedroom. Go and get it if you want. I'll be glad to have the thing out of here."

" Fine," said Gerard. As he moved with a deliberate step unusual to him, he noted Barton glance at the visiphone, and frowned without pausing. He pushed open the door. In the mirror of a dressing table immediately in front, he saw that Barton was looking sideways instead of into the room.

That was strange.

Gerard's gaze fell. Bloodstains all over the deep carpet around a chair set in the middle of the room. He moistened his lips and eased his collar.

Directly facing anyone sitting in that chair was the picture —it had to be the picture because it was the only one in the room. It did have a drawing affect, just like the others, but he found himself staring uncomprehendingly at the centre. Mel had said that with a special Dreamie like this, there had to be the bond between picture and viewer before it could have any effect.

" Hurry up, blast you !" swore Barton.

Gerard crossed the room, unhung the picture and came back to the connecting door, where he stopped. Barton was holding open the door into the corridor. There was a gun in his hand.

" Get out, you young fool, before I change my mind !"

Gerard went with slow, even paces across the room but stopped, still several feet inside.

Barton's left cheek, which was all that Gerard could see of the man's face, had blanched to the colour of wax.

" Get out ! You young fool. Get out, or I'll call the police"

" Call them then," said Gerard.

Barton shook. A rivulet of sweat coursed down from his forehead. He jerked the gun. " I'll shoot !"

" You don't dare."

Barton steadied. He whipped around.

Gerard held up the painting so that Barton must see it.

The gun went off with a deafening roar in the confined space, and something smashed, and bits fell to the carpet with little flashings of light on the edge of Gerard's vision as he watched Barton.

Barton's eyes stared at the picture. They widened in dreadful horror. The thin mouth below them dragged open. The whole face twisted in a torment of terror. Lips writhed

in pleading. Agony jerked back the head, clenched the man's fists.

Blood rushed out from the chest in a red, pulsating fountain which diminished until it merely oozed as the body slumped down like a sack from which the contents are running out.

Voices and footfalls sounded in the corridor. Faces—blurred to Gerard's horror filled gaze—appeared in the open door. A woman screamed.

He turned and picked up the telephone off the table. "Police," he said . . .

He was sitting in one of the deep, soft chairs when the police came. "I'm Inspector Dewart," said a tall man to Gerard while they both stared at the corpse. "This is the third killing in this room. What happened?"

Gerard told him.

"I see," nodded the Inspector. His sober face seemed to say that he listened to everything he was told but believed nothing until it was proved. "Why do you think he died like that?"

"Isn't it obvious," said Gerard. "I guessed what he had done from his bearing. Who killed Elaine Appleby I have no idea—either might have done it. Perhaps this man did it at the command of the other. But I think that Barton certainly killed his partner. He must have understood what the picture was. Perhaps it almost got hold of him before. He used it to take the blame when he killed Koap. My brother was flattered to think that his picture had done what it seemed to have done."

"I see," nodded the Inspector. He made a non-committal gesture with his large hands. "At any rate from what the witnesses say, *you* could not have killed this one." He pursed his lips. "Not any more than you could have killed the others."

He jerked his head towards the door and two constables standing just inside the room took the hint and left, closing the door after them.

"Now Mr. Avon, what do you propose doing about this—and about your brother?"

"There's one thing," said Gerard, "and that is he must never know that his Dreamie did actually kill a man as he expected it would. If he thought he held the power of life and death over criminals, he would soon be . . . quite mad."

"Quite. No man should be burdened with the knowledge he has such power. He might begin to see himself as a God."

The Inspector took the Dreamie from his hands and looked at it. " It means nothing to me."

" Nor to me. Only to the killer of Elaine Appleby according to . . . Mel . . . That shows Barton did it, doesn't it ?"

" I've no doubt your suppositions are substantially true, but I think this picture ought really to be destroyed—"

" No !" Gerard caught hold of it again and met the Inspector's chilly grey eyes. " This dreadful picture has to seem to be of no value. The only person—perhaps two persons—who might say it was dangerous are beyond being harmed. Mel has to have it back to think of as being one of his failures."

Inspector Dewart let go. " I'll come and help you get your brother out of custody."

They walked around the body on the carpet.

Fifteen minutes later, Mel and Gerard walked side by side along the London streets. " Barton confessed to you that he killed Koap ?" said Mel for perhaps the tenth time. " I still find it hard to believe." His shoulders sagged, the corners of his mouth were dragged down, and even his feet dragged—as though the artist in him would rather have been left a murderer in the hands of the police.

Gerard nodded. " Did I tell you that this Inspector Dewart is anxious to keep the whole affair out of the papers. We don't want people to begin thinking that some Dreamie or other may kill them. It would disrupt the whole pattern of life—which you, perhaps more than anyone else, have helped to create."

" Huh-uh." Mel seemed to be brightening a little. He frowned. " Wonder where we can go to get a bit of decent company ?"

" There's Janet Appleby. I promised to call her."

" Let's do that, then."

Mel headed for the nearest telephone. He turned from the receiver a few moments later. " She says she's expecting you. She's got your case, whatever that is. You seem to have left it by the milk bottles at my back door. You're to go and collect."

He shook his head at Gerard. " No, I'll just go on home." A slow smile lifted the corners of his mouth and brightened his eyes. " I've got my art—even if I haven't done my best work yet."

E. R. James

Mr. High's latest story is basically one concerning an undercover war taking place without the masses knowing anything about it, A highly-developed psychological type of warfare, however, requiring new talents.

PSEUDOPATH

by Philip E. High

Welling paced restlessly up and down his office. He was not exactly frightened but he was near enough to it to be jumpy and over-tense. One expected casualties in a war, but this one—Soames was dead, losing Soames was like losing a brilliant tactical general, one couldn't afford to lose a man like that, particularly now.

Welling stopped pacing and stared out of the window at the city below. A beautiful city of delicate pastels and architectural perfection, humming with life. Yet, down there, beneath the untroubled surface of normal life was war. A war as brutal, as vicious as any in the world's history, a new kind of war.

Meeker came into the office silently and joined him at the window. "Deceptive, isn't it?" Meeker seemed to be reading his thoughts. "The enemy walks beside you in the street, he brushes against you in the park, speaks to you in a public conveyance and you do not know he is your enemy."

Welling nodded and made an angry gesture. "How did they miss this? Why didn't they see it coming? The trends were there, centuries ago, but never seen, never prepared for. Now that we're in it up to our necks, all we get from H.Q. are reports on enemy weapons which they don't attempt to

counter." He sighed abruptly and changed the subject. "You heard about Soames?"

Meeker nodded. His face in the sunlight had a waxy look which emphasised the lines about his mouth and the pouches of weariness beneath his eyes. "How did they get him?"

Welling shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"I suppose not." Meeker fumbled a cigarette from his pocket, sucked it alight, hungrily, and stared out over the city. "It just means that it's our turn next, yours or mine. One day we'll walk out of this building and—phut!"

'Fatalistic,' thought Welling, tiredly. An almost calm acceptance of a sudden and violent death. An acknowledgement that the enemy were lying in wait, biding their time for the moment you were off guard. The enemy could afford to wait, they could almost announce victory with a fanfare of trumpets. When the balance, in terms of numerical superiority was about two million to one, you could afford to dictate tactics. God! If only they could get Magnesta; if they could do that, they could split the enemy into warring factions and then . . .

Welling scowled at himself mentally. He was day-dreaming, wasn't he? They had about as much chance of getting Magnesta as they had of spitting at the moon and hitting it.

"Oh, I brought this." Meeker laid a folder on the desk. "You should read it, you really should. I think H.Q. or the psych labs are really scraping the bottom of the barrel, all we need after this is a man with two heads."

Welling sat down slowly at the desk and opened the folder. It contained a long and unnecessarily wordy report on a new officer. He turned the pages indifferently, reading only a few words here and there until a phrase at the foot of the third page brought him up short—*to be regarded as a telepath.*

"What the hell do they mean by that?" he said, aloud.

"Yes," said Meeker, "what?"

Welling ran a tired hand over his face. "What do they think we want—freaks? With only eighty-five trained men and nineteen women to hold down a city of twenty million, they send me *this*. God, they must be mad. Listen to this: '*Although this officer's talents are strictly non-telepathic, on no account should enemy intelligence be allowed to discover this. On the contrary, enemy intelligence should be discreetly advised that a telepath is now operating against them.*' My God!"

Welling's voice was almost an explosion. " Even if this man is a telepath which, according to the reports, he isn't, the enemy would blast this building wide open to get him if they thought it was true. Now they're asking us to stick our necks out and say we have."

" There are no telepaths," said Meeker mildly. " They've been trying for years and even neuro-surgery can't make one that works."

" They've got themselves a dummy one." Welling tossed the folder angrily to one side. " They're sending it to us to operate—and note this, Meeker—under the direct orders of H.Q. In short, although I out-rank him, he does as he likes. On the other hand, if he gets his fool head blown off, they'll ask me, as the superior officer, why I didn't take more care of him. Hell, haven't we enough on our hands ?"

" Officer Lott, reporting for duty, sir."

Welling returned the smart salute casually. " We don't bother with that stuff here, Lott. This is the front line, we try and save our energy for other matters."

" I'm sorry, sir, I—"

" Never mind, you'll know next time, won't you ?" He smiled. He was too good an officer to let his irritation become personal. After all, it wasn't Lott's fault that Headquarters had singled him out to do a specific job in a particularly idiotic way, the fault lay, as usual, with those at the top.

" Sit down, Lott." He introduced Meeker casually and picked up the folder. " Your training reports seem particularly good, we can use a man with brains and ability but, candidly I can't see any use for your—ah—talents, as yet."

Lott smiled. He was a slight, pleasant-faced man of thirty with amused blue eyes which concealed considerable ability. Those eyes, Welling was to learn, missed nothing. Further, although the man's movements appeared slow, there was a suggestion of power and control which was unmistakable. Welling cursed again inwardly, this was first-class fighting material and H.Q. had thrown it away on some wild scheme or other which would never work.

Lott said, quietly, "With due respect, sir, you can use those talents now."

Welling sighed, he supposed he'd have to explain it all. " We haven't the time to try, we're practically besieged in here. Every time we go out we take our lives in our hands, every flyer from the roof is tracked by enemy instruments—"

" I'm sorry, sir." Lott was interrupting, firmly but politely. " My instructions are to use my talents, they're there, they don't have to be tried, sir."

Welling opened his mouth but the caller at his elbow interrupted him. " Yes ?"

Meeker watched, letting the smoke trickle from his nostrils, ready to act if action was called for, ready to relax again if the call was routine.

Welling looked up, he had forgotten Lott. " Mottram," he said, softly. " Mottram got Soames and that's official."

Meeker ground out the spent cigarette. " Who does it ?"

Welling shrugged. " Roberts or Judy, maybe both, it's their district."

" The enemy will expect it," said Meeker in a detached voice. " They'll be ready and waiting."

" It's still got to be tried, perhaps two of them may bring it off."

Meeker nodded. He didn't believe it and Welling didn't expect him to. In Welling's place, he would have to give exactly the same order which was virtually sending two agents to their deaths with no assurance of success to justify it, yet it had to be done, Meeker saw that. It was like the days of the old wars when retreating armies sent suicide detachments in the form of rearguards. There was little hope of the detachments returning alive but they had to be sent to give the army time to withdraw in order. It was even more important now, if they became wholly ineffectual they were lost. Nevertheless he was acutely conscious of the fact that Welling felt like a murderer every time he was forced to issue such an order. He realised suddenly that Lott and Welling were arguing bitterly.

" Don't be a damn fool." Welling banged his fist angrily on the desk. " At least Roberts knows some of the enemy, he has a chance of recognising some but you'd be completely in the dark."

" No." Lott's voice was stubborn. " I can detect the enemy."

" Heavens, man, listen to reason, we'd have won the war if we could do that, but we can't, we can't distinguish them from friend or neutral, no one can."

" *I* can," said Lott.

Welling paused, his clenched fist raised above the desk. " You mean you actually can read minds or something ?"

Lott smiled gently. " Let's just say I have something—"

Roberts was a tall pale man with the bright, deeply sunken eyes of one who has lived on his nerves too long. He was breaking up fast and he knew it. He still walked with the springy step of a trained athlete but shoulders were inclined to slump and the strong hands were never still. Trigger-twitch they called it back at base and he knew it would not be long before he would be forever sliding his hand into his gun pocket to assure himself the weapon was still there.

He met Lott in a small downtown eating house and introduced himself with the correct gestures. " Welling says you can help us. We need help." He sat down at the table and glanced quickly over his shoulder. " I was tailed at first but I think I threw them. The real trouble is that there are so few of us, they know us by sight." He stirred his coffee absently, staring unseeingly at the dark liquid. " Mottram frequents the *Blue Grass Tavern*, usually gets there round about ten." He paused to sip his coffee.

" What's the set-up ?" Lott toyed with a meal he didn't really want.

Roberts shrugged. " Purely tentative. Judy will be drinking by the bar, maybe she can create some kind of diversion and in the general excitement—" He shrugged again and said, bitterly, " Candidly it would be easier for us to cut our own throats here and now, save a lot of trouble. Mottram won't be alone, the place will be packed with neutrals and guards we can't identify." He pushed his cup away irritably. " Why did they have to drag Judy in ? She's a nice kid, pretty, bags of courage but they'll kill her, too, with less compunction than a bed bug."

" I take it we don't stand much chance."

" If we get Mottram, which is unlikely, we'll come out feet first."

Lott said : " Thanks," drily. He leaned a little forward over his plate and began to cut at the cheap syntha-steak. " Welling tell you anything about me ?"

" Oh, he said something about you being able to identify enemy personnel, but I'm afraid we won't have time to find out."

Lott was still cutting industriously and did not raise his eyes. " Two men just came in, they're standing by the auto-serve, they're both enemy units."

Roberts lit a cigarette and looked without appearing to do so. " You're sure ?"

" Dead sure."

" Looking for us ?"

" You, anyway, they're not sure about me."

Roberts flicked ash at the table disposal slot. " Are they going to start something in here do you think ?"

" Yes." Lott's voice was detached. " They're working up to a drunken fight, there'll be a struggle, shots, and somehow you'll get killed."

" Thank you," said Roberts, bitterly.

" Skip it." Lott pushed away his plate. " I can use another coffee." He rose before Roberts could stop him and crossed to the counter. " Excuse me," he said politely. Then there were two plopping explosions, so close they sounded like a single report.

Roberts turned just in time to see one of the men, face blank with surprise, clutch at his chest and fall slowly backwards. The other was already face down on the floor and very still.

" Let's get out of here." Lott's voice was quite calm and his hands were empty.

Roberts waited until they were a mile away and had changed air-taxis three times before he said anything. " My God, I thought you were green."

Lott shrugged. " Special training. The enemy concentrates on new weapons, we're concentrating on special type personnel to use the ones we have—reflex fighters."

" And I thought I was fast." Roberts stared unseeingly in front of him. " The first two enemy units in four months, knocked out by a recruit. If we're lucky enough to get Mottram too, they'll think we're getting reinforcements somewhere."

" Or perhaps," said Lott, " they'll start worrying how we managed to hit them so hard after all this time."

Roberts looked at him sharply. " Just what are your talents ?"

" I can identify enemy units, even in a crowd of neutrals." He grinned faintly. " My file says I can read minds too."

" And can you ?"

" No, but in due course, the enemy will probably think I can."

Roberts did not pursue the subject, he could see that Lott did not intend to commit himself and he probably had direct orders not to. Nevertheless something damn funny was going on. How had Lott *known* that the two men in the eating house

were the enemy? There was no doubt that he was right, as they had left Roberts had noticed that one of the dead men had a Geeson pistol half drawn from his pocket. How had Lott known? The implications struck Roberts suddenly and he stiffened. With the ability to detect the enemy, they stood a chance. Not just a sea of faces in a night spot, any one of which might belong to the enemy but a few, identified, pin-pointed and allowed for by a man who had—what? If he didn't read minds, he got damn close to it. "What the hell do you call yourself?" he asked. "If you're not a telepath, what are you?"

Lott rubbed his chin and frowned. "I suppose," he said, after some thought, "you'd call me a pseudopath."

The *Blue Grass Tavern* was enemy controlled but designed to attract the neutrals. It was, therefore, outwardly respectable and prohibitively expensive. Real waiters, instead of table-dials, accepted orders and delivered meals, even the near-nude floor show was flesh and blood and not the usual solidex transmission. Between shows, tables were pleasantly intimate islands of shadows and artificial moonlight, made even more subtle and romantic by the new half-heard melody-projectors.

Roberts looked about him as they entered and said: "Damn!" under his breath. The lighting set-up was going to make shooting difficult, and, further, the place was packed with neutrals. Neutrals, the blind innocents of society who lived their comparatively normal lives unaware that around them was being fought one of the most savage wars in history. The ironic aspect of the war was that neither side told them it was going on. On the one side were the defenders, who for many reasons couldn't, they didn't control public news services any more and without those they were mute. Second, they had been manoeuvred into fighting a guerilla war and could not tell too much without betraying both their strength and, possibly, their sources of supply and revenue.

The enemy, on the other hand, was striving for complete domination and you can't cook your goose until you've caught it. In point of fact, the enemy went to considerable lengths to convince the neutrals that all was well with the world while they skilfully undermined it from within.

Roberts looked round again, shrugged, and allowed a smooth waiter to guide them to a centre table. He studied the wine list and menu with some care, ordered the meal and waited

until the man had gone before he spoke. " Judy's at the bar, blue dress, dark, shoulder-length hair—got her ?"

" Got her," said Lott without appearing to look.

" Mottram is in the corner by the pillar, heavy, dark hair parted in the centre."

Lott saw a heavy-faced man with small but alert dark eyes. It had always troubled him that enemy units looked so normal, he felt that they should look tight-mouthed, expressionless and vaguely furtive but they never did. This man had a heavy, full-lipped mouth and, when he smiled, which was frequently, he displayed large but very white teeth. In the peculiar vernacular of the enemy he was a Top Torp and would be addressed as ' Gun ' which was roughly equivalent to a specialist officer in a normal army.

" He hasn't seen us yet, I think," said Roberts softly. " Not that it matters, someone knows we're here. They never take chances and this place has talents of its own. There are little probes dotted around, so sensitive they can register a metal filling in an eye-tooth." He smiled without humour. " That means they know all they need to know, they know two men have come in with weapons, they know about the tiny spit-rod between Judy's breasts, the only thing they don't know is when we're going to start. They could, of course, start the ball rolling themselves but they like to play it cat-and-mouse with the additional advantage of making it look like self-defence."

The waiter arrived with the order and Roberts discussed sport until he was out of hearing. He scowled briefly at his plate then drew it slightly towards him. " Damn it, I'm going to enjoy this, it's probably my last." He grinned twistedly at the other. " Don't imagine I'm joking heroically, will you ? If it wasn't for the Andrabenze tablets they issue I'd never have got in here."

Lott made no comment, outwardly he was calm but inside he was like a coiled spring. He could well imagine what one felt like after one mission too many, the inevitable day when one was compelled to fall back on the Andrabenze tablets in order to complete that mission without cracking.

He appeared to be eating quietly and steadily but he was watching, measuring distances, checking angles and noting exits. He pushed his plate a little to one side and toyed with his wine glass. " Four," he said casually. " The big man

with bald head by the bar—he's there to cover Judy. Then there's the barman, watch him, he doesn't have to draw, his weapon is just below the level of the counter. Then on the opposite side of the room, two men in evening dress by the table near the wall."

After a few seconds Roberts said : " Got 'em." Then bitterly. " They're not taking any chances are they ?" He sipped his wine, studying the situation. " Think you and Judy can keep those gentry occupied while I try and take Mottram ?"

Lott was bending slightly over his plate and did not look up. When he spoke, his voice was almost inaudible. " You won't take Mottram, you'll never get the gun out of your pocket. There'll be a hole burned through to your spine before your fingers touch the butt."

" What are you trying to do—unnerve me ?" Roberts sounded angry and bitter.

" No." Lott was still bent over his plate. " You see that fork he keeps playing with, sort of toys with and waves in tune to the music ? Well, it's not a fork, it's a spit rod."

" My God !" For the first time Roberts paled slightly. " I could have walked right into it thinking I had a chance." He frowned and said : " Clever," bitterly. " All he has to do is aim." He looked at Lott with a new respect. " Perhaps it would be better if we thought out some other idea between us, any suggestions ?"

Lott drained his wine glass. " If I can take those two characters in evening dress by the wall, I might have a chance of swinging round and knocking out our bald friend before he knows quite where it's coming from—"

Roberts nodded quickly. " Go on, I'm listening—" When Lott had finished, he considered carefully before answering. " Yes, yes, it might work but you'll have to be devilish fast." He lit a cigar with some care and exhaled smoke.

Lott watched, the cigar was a signal. It was one thing which the enemy did not know and had probably never suspected. The enemy were probably waiting for he or Roberts to confer with Judy and then to act. A cigar might be a signal for that act but it never occurred to them that the conference was already in progress. Roberts made casual gestures, he toyed with a knife, he studied the contents of his wallet, he rubbed his chin. The gesture-code was vastly superior, at least for

close work, than the enemy's micro-transmitters insofar that it could be neither jammed nor tapped and was almost unbreakable.

Judy raised her wine glass to the level of her eyes as if studying the wine and put it down again. The gesture meant : ' Message received and understood.'

Lott pushed his empty plate to one side. " Okay ?"

Roberts nodded. " Good luck."

Lott rose. They were watching him, he could feel them. He sensed, rather than saw, the indicative sliding of hands, the sudden blanking of faces, the tensing of muscles. They expected him to approach the bar to contact Judy or, alternatively, to try and get behind Mottram. He did neither, he walked easily and steadily towards the door marked 'Washroom.'

He felt the tension drain from the watchers, the spurious fork in Mottram's hand, which had steadied drooped slightly towards the table again.

Inside, Lott felt a knot of coldness which seemed to fill his stomach and invade his heart and lungs. This was his first real taste of action, the culmination of nearly seven years intensive training and, at the moment, the seven years didn't help. He was a soldier going into action for the first time and he was scared. Would the reflex action be automatic now ? Would his body, his brain, his judgment react as they had reacted under laboratory test ? ' If they don't,' he told himself, suddenly fatalistic, ' this is goodbye.'

Four more paces towards the door and action. Was everything clear in his mind ? The two enemy units were in front, slightly to his right. Behind him, also to his right, was the bar, raised some two feet above the floor. Judy was there, the big bald man just behind her, his hand casually, too casually, in his jacket pocket. Mottram of course would be invisible behind the decorative pillar. Pray to God some fool neutral doesn't decide to stand up in the line of fire just as you turn—*now* !

Roberts, watching, had never seen anything quite so fast in his life. One minute Lott was walking unhurriedly towards the washroom, and the next, the tiny electric machine-pistol was spluttering redly in his hand.

The two enemy units never stood a chance, a line of black spots cut across the immaculate shirt fronts before they knew what had hit them.

Lott spun round, and, at the same moment, Judy dropped flat. The second burst knocked the bald man off his stool and back against the bar.

Mottram half rose then fell forward across the table. Judy had shot him neatly between the eyes as she went flat.

Roberts fired once and the barman toppled from sight before his bewildered fingers could grasp the weapon concealed beneath the counter . . .

" They screamed the place down, milled around like sheep. We got out before anyone could figure quite what had happened." Roberts leaned back tiredly in his chair, he was shaking unashamedly from reaction and wanted nothing better than to sleep.

" So Lott did identify the enemy units, he actually does have some faculties for recognising them ?" Welling was leaning tensely over his desk.

" If he hadn't we wouldn't be here now, they were all set to shoot us to pieces at the first move." He reached in his pocket and tossed something on the desk. " Judy scooped that up as we broke for the exits. Now how the hell did Lott know it was a spit-rod ?"

Welling examined the ' fork ' with interest. " Very neat." He frowned. " Yes, how did Lott know ?"

Meeker, puffing the inevitable cigarette, said : " Hadn't we better concentrate on the immediate danger ? They won't like this, seven of their units knocked out in a day is going to shake them and they'll react fast. They'll be drafting exterminator units for all their worth and in our honour. In four days this city will be hotter than a frying pan."

Roberts said, wearily : " Can I sleep until I feel the heat ?"

" Sure, sure." Welling's voice was very understanding. " Room 229 is all ready for you." He smiled. " Hurry along, we brought your wife and kids in for safety."

" That's damn decent of you." Roberts eyes misted a little. " You don't often do that, do you ?"

" It's not because we don't want to, it's because we haven't the room. In this case we daren't take chances. False names and spurious backgrounds may not be enough to protect them." He made an abrupt gesture as if to brush aside further thanks. " Tell Lott I want to see him as you go out, please."

Lott looked tired but still very alert. He looked enquiringly from one to the other but did not speak.

Welling waved him to a chair and poured out the customary after-mission drink. " You did damn well, exceptionally well. I've no word of criticism to make." He paused, looking unhappily at the younger man, not knowing quite how to put it. How could you tell a man that a soldier in this war who was too successful automatically signed his own death warrant. This war was a personal war. It was like the old stories of air warfare when an ace flyer was a natural target for every aspiring pilot in the opposing squadrons. Yes, it was like that only more so. In this case the whole potential of the enemy would be directed on getting that ace, only there would be no chivalry, no chance of survival and no warning.

" You've stirred up a hornets' nest," said Meeker, trying to help.

Lott nodded. " Thank you, I know what you're both trying to say but you see H.Q. wanted it this way. They *wanted* me to do rather well. You see, they want Magnesta rather badly."

" Would you mind," said Meeker, in a carefully controlled voice, " explaining that."

Lott smiled. " I did put that rather badly, didn't I ? What I mean is that we know nothing about Magnesta, he's a complete enigma. One day there is no Magnesta and the next he is in supreme command. Who is he ? Where did he come from ? All we know is that he exists, that somehow or other he unseated the previous commander and assumed absolute power. We have seen his picture and heard his voice but there has never been any actual contact, nothing we can use to draw up a psych chart. We know he is vain, hypno-educated, and a natural leader and tactician but beyond that—" Lott spread his hands in an almost Latin gesture of helplessness.

Welling nodded then frowned suddenly. " You're trying to provoke him, the recent success, the whispers about a telepath—what do you hope to gain ?"

Lott laughed softly. " We're hoping he'll be vain enough and, incidentally, stupid enough to come through on the solidex where I can work on him."

" You mean you can actually get something from a three-dimensional transmission ?" said Meeker. " You see a moving picture and read its mind ?"

Welling was rubbing his chin thoughtfully. " We could add to this," he said before Lott could answer the question.

" We still have one one or two reliable contacts with courage enough to drop hints, we could start a crop, say that someone betrayed the enemy units, lots of things." He pressed a button. " Get me Hambling—"

Meeker stared unseeingly before him, thinking of Magnesta. The man who had welded the enemy into a complex but unified fighting machine which threatened to throw the race back to barbarism and had already brought it to the brink of economic and cultural collapse.

Magnesta who lived in a house which was half mansion half fortress and cunningly erected in the heart of the city. It was mansion enough to deceive the neutrals, fortress enough to stop a restricted-fission grenade and yet too densely surrounded to try anything bigger without loss of life.

Magnesta, the most powerful dictator of all time who, but for a handful of devoted fighters, was complete master of the world. What could they use against him ? The army ? The army was rotten with enemy units and they could never bring it near enough to him without interiorly inspired mutiny.

What did Lott hope to gain ? Certainly knowledge was power but you had to have a means of applying that power or it was useless. Probably H.Q. had something up their sleeve but, apart from Lott, they were keeping very quiet about it.

Meeker wondered if the provocation and bluff would work and, if so, how long it would take.

It took exactly seventeen hours.

" Mr. Magnesta calling on Solidex, sir." The operator's voice sounded almost awed.

Welling snapped his fingers and grinned savagely. "Hooked! Come on Lott."

In the reception room, light flickered mistily about a receptor chair, light which seemed to plane sideways into shadow and solidify . . .

" Good day, Mr. Welling," said the projected image, politely.

" You want something, Magnesta ?" Welling's voice was cold.

" But of course, why else should I call ?" The voice was smooth like the man, cultured, gentle almost, but not quite ; oily. Brown bright eyes in a sallow face, dark hair, inclined to curl, small almost chubby hands but nothing to suggest the arrogance of power.

Welling said. " What makes you think you'll get what you want ?"

Magnesta shrugged. " Deals and negotiations are not new."

" Between opposing armies ?" enquired Welling, sharply.

Magnesta smiled, showing very white almost feminine teeth. " You asked before thinking, Welling. Are not the exchange of sick prisoners deals between opposing armies ?"

" They might be if you took prisoners—what sort of deal had you in mind ?"

Magnesta smiled again. " Let us try and understand each other first, then, perhaps, negotiations."

Welling laughed. " Really, Magnesta, I am not a fool." His voice was almost gentle. " You called because you heard whispers ; you heard that, perhaps, someone betrayed your units, or, maybe that we had a telepath. You called yourself because, in your heart, you trust no one." He paused. " Would you like the answer ?"

" If you give me the answer so easily then, obviously, it is not true. I, also, am not a fool."

Lott leaned slightly forward in his chair. " Suppose we can prove our answer ?"

Magnesta only shifted his eyes slightly in the other's direction. " This is your new officer, Welling ?"

" Yes, he is also our telepath, you may have heard about that."

A slight flush appeared in Magnesta's cheeks. " You think I am a damned idiot ?"

" Lott reads minds well enough to identify your units." Welling's voice was even, almost detached. " You can dismiss it as fantasy or you can prove it. Call in some of your units, call in some neutrals, Lott can tell you which is which."

" Yes ?" Obviously Magnesta was debating inwardly, then he frowned. " Very well."

The test was a pure triumph for Lott. Of the forty people, enemy and neutral, who entered the projection room, he identified them all.

" You are a clever man." Magnesta's expression was a controlled blank. " You can identify friend from enemy but this does not mean you can read minds."

Lott smiled. " Would I tell you if I could read yours ? I would keep it to myself and use it later. Don't make too many plans here, Magnesta."

The other shrugged. " You are all fools. With a thousand such men you might have achieved victory. With one—pouf !" The image shimmered and began to fade.

" Any help ?" said Welling later.

" Maybe." Lott was non-commital. " Excuse me, while I check World Army regulations." He was back ten minutes later, holding a slip of paper and grinning faintly. " *A deserter, or suspected deserter. Shall be taken into custody irrespective of civil law and, in the face of resistance, the officer-in-charge shall take such action as seems necessary insofar as he safeguards civilian life and property.*" He quoted from the paper.

Welling said : " So ? " blankly.

Lott lit a cigarette. " Magnesta is a deserter from World Army, section seventy-four. As you know, all service personnel are marked with a red spot on the ball of the thumb on discharge. Short of removing the thumb altogether, this spot cannot be erased. Magnesta has no such spot, therefore he deserted."

" How did you know he was in the army in the first place —no don't answer that, you read his mind." Welling sighed. " I wish I knew just what your talents were." He stopped, frowning. " If you think the army can arrest him, think again. The army does what Magnesta tells it."

Lott exhaled smoke. " If you lack power, use a lever." He rose. " What I want now is an officer of fairly high rank with a reputation for honesty and conscientious devotion to duty. No doubt a few such officers remain."

" Only neutrals."

" When I've finished with him, he fights for us. If he exists, records will find him with their classification computers."

" And then ? "

" Then Judy and I will talk to him. I take it there's a way of getting out of here without being noticed."

" We can do that, but why take Judy ?"

Lott grinned. " Why not, I need her for the psychological side, not that you'll believe me."

" I don't," said Welling flatly. He paused. " We can smuggle you out Lott, but you can't hide forever. Keep low and stay low, once they spot you you're a dead duck."

Colonel Wintering was a tall, greying man with tired faded blue eyes, slightly sagging cheeks but a firm chin. " Security ? What the devil has World Security to do with the army ?"

He looked from one to the other in a puzzled way. " Why come to me?" He had checked their credentials carefully and there was no doubt who they were.

Lott said, directly, "We have access to army records, Colonel. We were seeking a particular type of officer and the classification computers selected you."

" You require some kind of assistance?"

" Perhaps a little more than assistance." Lott paused. " This may stagger you, Colonel, but the race is at war."

" I beg your pardon." Wintering stared at him blankly. " This is some joke perhaps?"

" No joke, Colonel, this is a war that has been going on a very long time and we're losing it."

" Really?" Wintering's voice was remote.

Lott sighed inwardly. He didn't want to be brutal but he saw he had no choice, the Colonel was disinterested and only half listening.

Fortunately Judy softened the blow. " You had a daughter, Colonel, a girl about my age—she died in this war."

Colonel Wintering stiffened and the faded blue eyes grew suddenly cold. " I consider that remark uncalled for and in extremely bad taste." He rose from behind his desk. "Would you be good enough to leave now. Any assistance you may require should be forwarded through the proper channels."

Judy didn't move. " Your daughter was killed by a stray bullet in a street battle. An innocent bystander shot by an enemy unit trying to get one of us."

" If you do not leave," began the Colonel, stiffly—"

Lott interrupted him, angrily. " Colonel Wintering, when the forces of organised crime become greater and more powerful than the forces of law and order then one is at war."

Wintering slowly resumed his seat, his face was pale but there were twin spots of colour in the cheeks. " You are serious? You do not exaggerate?"

Lott shook his head. " World Security is all that is left. The last barrier against chaos."

Wintering stared at him blankly. "I don't understand. Why is it not known, why is not something done? If this is war, why is it not fought like one, by armies?"

" In the first place politicians control the army and crime controls the politicians. In the second, the army itself is lousy with enemy units."

" It seems incredible, how did this start ?"

" It dates as far back as the twentieth century when crime became organised by syndicates who conducted their affairs behind legitimate business fronts. A situation which slowly began to undermine society and force the cost of living to dangerous levels. In Paris, a determined Prefect of Police, succeeded in breaking up one of the syndicates but the resulting exposure resulted in a change of government. An unbelievable state of corruption existed, reaching almost to the heads of state themselves. Crime had almost succeeded in completely dictating city policy. High officials were found guilty of taking bribes or admitted that they had been intimidated by threats, either to themselves or those dearest to them, into acting for the syndicate."

Lott paused to light a cigarette. " The result of course, was to cause similar crusading elsewhere with the same evidence of corruption in high places. The repercussions, however, were unfortunate. Some of the syndicates were nation-wide, some international, and the present purge threatened to break them up and seal off their immense illegal revenues from such undertakings as work unions, vice, protective associations and narcotics. For years, the syndicates had been at each others throats, now, in self-defence they combined. They were not fools, not stupid criminals, but astute tacticians skilled in administration. Their first move was to enrol an immense army of lawyers whose business it was to circumvent and corrupt the law. The corruption and intimidation of those in high places was resumed with skill and subtlety and very soon the law became a mockery. Corrupt judges, intimidated juries, bribed officials—"

Lott ground out the cigarette and laughed without humour. " Under criminal administration the situation seemed outwardly to improve. Crime had learned a great deal and there was a great show of purges, police action and so on for the benefit of the masses. All that stood between crime and complete domination of public administration was World Security. And World Security found itself deprived of its only weapon—law. It could arrest, only to have the criminal released by a corrupt court. Crime on the other hand had begun a private war of its own against Security, and Security in self-defence had to fight back and already they were at a disadvantage. If crime could corrupt the law, it could also

intimidate or manipulate science to fight in its favour and the battle became not a clash of arms but a retreat—" Lott, leaned back tiredly in his chair. " Do I have to say more ?"

Wintering drummed nervous fingers on the edge of his desk. " You have some proof of these assertions, I take it ?"

Lott had. The Colonel studied the figures, the tapes, the view-shots and grew slowly paler. " It's unbelievable ! Why couldn't I see it myself ?"

" Neutrals seldom can, they are wrapped up in their work and, at a glance, all seems well with the world. Some, of course, suspect but have heard of enemy reprisals and deliberately bury their heads in the sand."

Wintering nodded, his mind evidently made up. "What do you want me to do ?"

" Quite a lot. First, access to secret records, inductions, section seventy-four."

The Colonel lit a cigarette. " That can be arranged."

" I want to pick, unseen—incidentally, about forty men from your best combat troops. Lastly and most important, I want the troops under your command ready to march at a moment's notice. Now, before you say it, I know you can't move ten men and a sergeant from one place to another without authority from Army Council. Bluntly, they take their orders from the politicians who, in turn, receive them from Magnesta." Lott smiled, it was almost a feline grimace. " It has been proposed from H.Q. that coming from you, we might get sanction for moving a large body of troops and equipment. Now here's what they had in mind—"

Wintering nodded, almost boyishly, when he had finished. " Yes, yes, on the basis of recruiting figures alone, they would probably sanction it without a thought."

Lott stood up. " Thank you, Colonel." He paused. " You realise there is considerable personal risk, this is after all, war."

" No, Lott." Wintering shook his head. " I am not a religious man but I would call it something more than war. I would call it—Armaggedon.

Welling stared moodily from the window at the streets below, for reasons he could only half explain, he felt strangely depressed. It was irritating to realise that this was H.Q.'s first major counter-attack and that they had left him in the dark. He liked Lott but he found it infuriating that the fellow could apparently read minds and promptly turn round and

say he couldn't. H.Q. always fed you bits and pieces and left you to guess the grand strategy.

Judy standing beside him, turned. " Do you think it will work ?"

" If we can get them there, yes."

" It could be the decisive battle couldn't it ?"

" If we win this one, it *is* the decisive battle, it's the turn of the tide." He laughed briefly. " God, in ten years we might be able to arrest someone and make the charge stick."

" Instead of having to kill one of them when they kill one of us." She turned away from him. " Could you go for a girl you'd seen shoot a man between the eyes ?"

He laid his hand gently on her shoulder. " We're soldiers, Judy, and this is war. Maybe he wonders if you could go for a man who can read minds."

Meeker came in. " How do I look ?"

Welling studied him carefully. " Colonel Wintering will probably have apoplexy," he said, unkindly, " but I guess you'll pass in a crowd."

" The Advocats have started," said Judy tensely, " they're on their way."

Welling turned and gazed down into a street empty of traffic but lined with sightseers. Above their heads the advocats tossed their bright luminous words like bunting. THE ARMY IS COMING . . . THE ARMY IS A *MAN'S* LIFE . . . JOIN THE MODERN ARMY.

In the distance could be heard the faint strains of a military band and the rumble of armoured vehicles. DON'T JUST WATCH IT, said the advocats, JOIN IT—*NOW*.

" I must be going," said Meeker. He held out his hand. " Wish us luck."

Welling watched the parade pass, obselete, he realised, but still stirring and impressive. The launchers, the armoured vehicles, the rumbling land monitors, the lines of marching men. JOIN THE ARMY NOW.

He watched it until it was out of sight, then picked it up again on the telecasts. He watched it march to the centre of the city, encircle the private Green Tree park and stop.

Welling grinned savagely. In the centre of Green Tree park was a white ornate building which was half fortress and half mansion.

" Blast !" He punched angrily at the switch. " What the hell's the matter with the damn thing ?" The screen had gone

black. He punched the switch again and slowly vision returned but it did not show the progress of the recruiting parade. In the screen was the face of a man Welling knew almost as well as his own.

" Attention, please, attention. This is Douglas Monkton, Director of World Security calling you from Command Headquarters . . . "

Welling sank a little shakily into the nearest chair. This was tantamount to a mass assault and they must have been preparing for it for years. Adding to it piece by piece and keeping those pieces in the dark until they found a weakness they could exploit. Now they'd found it, they were throwing everything they had at it. This broadcast, for example, they must have been holding that in readiness until they could really use it. He'd always considered it virtually impossible to jam the immensely powerful enemy-controlled newscasts but they'd not only succeeded in jamming them but had imposed their own transmission without a flicker of distortion.

" God," he said suddenly and aloud. " It looks as if we might win."

Magnesta said, wearily : " Because I sanctioned this damn recruiting parade, it doesn't mean I have to look at it. If you've seen one soldier, you've seen them all. Turn it off, Morden."

His lawyer did so. " A lot of people seem to like it."

" Yeah, yeah, stops them worrying their M.P.'s, or senators or whoever they think represents them, about what they call gang war." He laughed abruptly. " Hell, this marching stuff may even hook a recruit or two."

A section of the wall, close to his chair, glowed briefly and he pressed his hand to the contact pad. " Yes ? What is it ?" He listened. " Are you insane, Condor ?" He punched the vision switch angrily and found himself looking into the face of a uniformed man. " Yes ?"

Wintering played it strictly according to the book. "Auguste Magnesta ? "

" Yes."

" We have reasons for supposing that your real name is Otto Linz and, as such, are a deserter from World Army. I am, therefore, instructed to place you under close arrest until said charges are proved or disproved."

Magnesta stared at him, blinking. " Are you out of your mind ?" Aside, he said, " Call Morris, get this damn parade pulled out of town, fast."

" I can't, I've been trying." The lawyer's eyes were furtive and frightened. " We're surrounded, Magnesta and every damn truck must be full of jamming equipment. I can't call anyone."

Magnesta saw one of the uniformed figures behind the Colonel step forward. " Are you coming out, Magnesta, or do we have to come in and get you ?"

He stared, recognising both the face and the voice. "Meeker, you're a fool. If you take me, even you can't visualise the reprisals. You won't be tolerated, you won't be permitted slow liquidation because of neutral alarm, the whole lot of you will be hunted down and destroyed within a week and that goes for the toy soldiers with you."

" Magnesta, you're the fool. Linker and Moran will be close in line to take your place and they hate each others guts. Without you in the saddle to hold them apart, they'll be daggers drawn and we're still smart enough to set them at each others throats. Your pet boast is that you're a general, that you've studied history and this is a case of divide and destroy. I think your units will be too busy liquidating each other to bother about us." Meeker smiled, almost beatifically. " May I add, it gives me infinite satisfaction, Magnesta, that you unwittingly sanctioned the entry into this city of your own execution squad."

" You come in and get me, eh ?" Magnesta showed his teeth.

" We don't have to." Meeker raised his arm in a signal and the firing ports of one of the land monitors clanged open. He didn't wait. " All right, let them have it."

The disrupter cannon was already obsolete and misleadingly named, its affect, however, was spectacular and wholly terrifying. It literally hosed its near-microscopic pellets down the projector beam. With each pellet containing the destructive power of the old-time six inch artillery shell, the weapon's misnomer was almost justified. Magnesta's mansion simply vomited skywards in a column of red flame and spinning black dust . . .

" The broadcast was the final blow, it really scared the neutrals and already they're clearing things up for themselves."

Welling leaned back comfortably in his chair and puffed smoke. He had unearthed a box of enormous cigars from somewhere and a long hoarded bottle of brandy.

" I suppose," said Meeker, " H.Q. has been working on this for years while we held the fort." He looked at Lott. " And you, of course, were the prime weapon."

Lott shook his head. " To be perfectly honest, no. I was one of many experiments and only thrown in for a test. When it looked as if my presence might produce some results, H.Q. hastily adapted one of many plans to exploit the enemy weakness."

Welling studied the tip of his cigar. " I suppose you couldn't tell us just what your talents are now ?"

Lott grinned. " I'm afraid this is going to shake you, I haven't any. I don't read minds, I interpret gestures. My talents are nothing more than acute observation and the ability to interpret what I see."

" You wouldn't," said Meeker, carefully, " care to enlarge on that would you ?"

Lott lit a cigar. " Remember the trend of employment psychology, when a man applying for an important post was interviewed by a psychiatrist. The psych could tell by the way the man sat, used his hands, position of his feet and voice inflection, whether or not, the applicant was suited to the position, without asking a single direct or personal question. We carried this technique a great deal further until we were able to interpret from a man's actions, if not his thoughts, at least his general way of life and, more important, his immediate intentions. This gave us the advantage of being able to distinguish enemy from neutral. Violence writes its intentions plainly in a man's actions and, in moments of tension—such as in the *Blue Grass Tavern*—to me the enemy might just as well have worn a uniform."

" We, too," Welling reminded him, " have also lived by violence for a very long time."

" With a different motivation," said Lott quickly. " That, also is detectable to a trained observer."

Welling sighed. " Without undue sarcasm, just what did you get from Magnesta ? Are there certain gestures which say, ' Look, boy, I'm a deserter from World Army ' ?"

Lott laughed, good naturedly. " I wish it had been that easy. No, Magnesta had gone to considerable lengths to cover his past. He'd had his face re-moulded—detectable to

a trained observer—had his finger prints, the shape of his ears and the colour of his eyes changed. In fact, he had even gone to the lengths of surgical operation to change his walk but there are certain things one cannot alter. Word pronunciation placed him as having lived most of his life in mid-Europe and there were certain vocal mannerisms which one only acquires in military training.

" In the first place, as I have mentioned, there was no red discharge spot on the ball of the thumb and in the second he was inordinately proud of his teeth, even a casual observer would have noticed that by the way he smiled. I noticed, however, that the eye-teeth were small and undeveloped which, of course, would be noted on an army dental chart. I figured that a man so vain about his teeth would probably leave them untouched. It was then only a question of getting the sorters to work on the charts and having them re-sorted in relation to height, shape of head, etc."

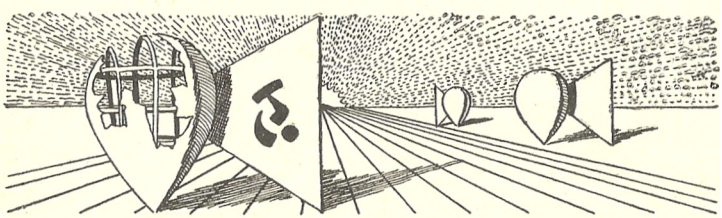
" Sherlock," said Meeker, but there was no malice in his voice. " And Mottram's spurious fork ?"

Lott shrugged. " That was an easy one. Mottram was waving it around, toying with it, beating it on the table in time to the music but every time one of us made the slightest movement, his hand lifted and the end came up. The only possible weapon which could be adapted to look like a fork was a spit rod and, in any case, the man's every gesture was literally shouting : ' This is a weapon.' "

" Just one question more," said Meeker. " Just how did you know, when you were in the eating house with Roberts, that those two were going to start a drunken fight ?"

For the first time Lott looked slightly uncomfortable. " I lip-read too," he said, sheepishly.

Philip E. High



Rupert Clinton—the man with a secret which could smash Earth's attempt to overthrow its alien conquerors—is still on the run from the Shang overlords and their sychophants, and just as far away from knowing exactly what that secret knowledge contains.

THE PATIENT DARK

by Kenneth Bulmer

Part Two of Three Parts

FOREWORD

In 1975 *Man reached the Moon and was preparing for the jump to Mars and Venus when the alien Shangs arrived from outer space, apparently peaceful visitors. It looked as though star travel instead of interplanetary travel was to be Man's good fortune, but the aliens gave little away in the first thirteen years. Then from* 1991 *to* 2025 *they unsheathed their claws and completely took over the Earth, making it a vassel state to their galactic Empire. Earth's punitive revolt in* 2025 *was ruthlessly crushed and no futher scientific advances allowed.*

Two hundred and forty seven years later the status quo was still unaltered, except that many human beings were actively collaborating with the Shangs. Foremost among these were the Wasps—the World Alishang Police—whose duty it was to uncover any attempts to overthrow the Shang's rule.

In 2072, *Colonel Robert Ney was chief of the Homicide Bureau of the Wasps at their HQ in what had once been the United Nations' Building in New York. He was also one of four men who had been entrusted with the secret of ZI—a mysterious*

symbol handed down through the years purporting to be the signal for the planned uprising and overthrow of the Shangs. Man's nature being what it is, this longed-for hope had almost passed into legend, but behind the scenes the Four Who Knew controlled a resistance movement known as International Intelligence—Double-I—members of which were continually sabotaging the Shangs' rule and eliminating sympathisers.

Ney meets his three colleagues in the Earth Resistance Council on a houseboat on the Thames—Steeger, responsible for all Asia, Horner in charge of Europe and Asia, and Cromwell, head of Double-I, an old man dying of cancer who is determined to live long enough to see ZI Day. Ney informs them that Rupert Clinton, one of his Double-I operators using the assumed name of Harris, has apparently killed a Shang sympathiser named Burgess and in trying to evade the Wasps has been seriously injured about the head when his escape car crashed. Operated upon by a brilliant female surgeon, Dr. Elizabeth Eddington, his life has been saved but Wasp police are waiting by his bedside to interrogate him when he recovers consciousness—and Clinton subconsciously knows something vital concerning ZI day.

As Clinton is being moved from the hospital to the local Wasp HQ the ambulance is attacked and he is rescued—Ney having to sacrifice the lives of his local police chief and several loyal men for the purpose. Clinton is taken secretly to Cape Town to recover and then to a secret hide-out in the Antarctic. Meanwhile, Dr. Eddington has disappeared and it is feared that the Shangs have taken her into custody.

Horner visits Clinton in Antarctica and informs him that he will be going to the Shangs' home world of Alishang to join the underground movement there. Rupert arrives safely in London and meets Horner (who has brought him up like a son) and his aide Bennett, who is expecting to join the Council when Cromwell dies. They leave by car to rendezvous on the houseboat but are trapped by Wasps, during the ensuing battle Clinton manages to escape and hide in a farmhouse.

Cut off from his colleagues, Clinton makes his way back to the house where they originally met—only to find it a smoking ruin. His only remaining contact with Double-I is a schoolhouse address somewhere in Surrey, for which he makes. Arriving at the local railway station late at night he contacts the railway inspector, who is a Double-I man and identifies himself.

The man immediately threatens him with a revolver.

VIII

The part of her old life that Doctor Elizabeth Eddington missed most was the fresh-every-day challenge of repairing the human brain, of taking injured egos and, by whatever means came easiest to hand, moulding them and their bewildered owners into responsible citizens. A grandiose conception, she had often thought, and in conversation with Doctor Henderson had expressed her own fears that she was attempting too much, was trying to take over God-given powers never meant for the feeble minds of men.

Henderson pooh-poohed the idea. " Oh, no, Liz. The more we can understand about the human mind and brain the better fitted we are as a race to live in the face of hostile nature." Which, as they agreed after laughter, was just another grandiose conception. Especially with the aliens from Alishang everywhere.

But, that of course, had all been in the old days.

Now, Elizabeth Eddington was forced to watch human brains out of control of their guiding minds, was compelled to sit idly by and see men and women gripped in every stage of madness and know with bitterness that she could do nothing to ease a moment's pain.

But, far worse even than that, was the macabre pretense she must maintain that she, too, was just another madwoman.

When she had protested at the idea when Doctor Henderson had first mooted it, he had said : " Well, at least it'll give you first hand observation, Liz."

" But we don't *know*," she persisted stubbornly. " We don't *know* Spillersby gave us away. We don't *know* that anyone apart from ourselves really *knows* I was with Harris when he was rambling in delerium."

" No matter, Liz." Henderson had regained much of his old fire and decision under the pressure of events. " Your life is in danger. You must disappear." And so, here she was, taking the place of a poor girl who had died in the St. Mary's Hospital, committed to a mental hospital. The very idea of hiding in such a place seemed on the surface crazy ; only a few minutes thought showed that with the peculiar advantages their profession conferred upon both Henderson and Elizabeth, such a hideout was a perfect camouflage. No-one would think of looking for them in such a place ; and Liz could be got out easily once the danger had passed.

That was the theory. Standing with one hand holding cold iron bars and staring down upon a concrete courtyard where a few poor wretches walked lackadaisically, Liz hoped fervently that it would work out in practice.

She turned slowly from the window as Shirley came in the opened door of their room. The girl put her galvanised iron pail down and fished around in it for her scrubbing brush. Shirley was a case that could bring a lump to Liz's throat, even as the Doctor Elizabeth side of her character could tally-off the symptoms of Shirley's insanity. Married at sixteen and with twins at seventeen, and then her husband taken away and shot by the Wasps and her—well, even Liz didn't like dwelling on that. Suffice it that now Shirley's mind lived in some grey region of its own and refused to come out into the glare of the world. Why should it? Didn't the world hold nothing but kicks and blows?

Liz smiled and held out her hands, palms downward.

"Come here, Shirley. Let me look at you."

Shirley looked up, a hank of dark hair falling across her face. A once plump face, now thin and gaunt, with smeared rings beneath the eyes and wrinkles sowing lines and shadows around her nose and mouth and across her forehead. Her skin shone unhealthily. Her eyes were bloodshot.

"What you want to look at me for?"

"Now, Shirley, you remember what we were saying yesterday? About appearances? And look at your dress! All muddy. Now is that nice? You like nice things don't you?"

Shirley wiped the back of one hand across her face, and, on her knees with the coarse grey dress tight across her thighs, she looked down at herself and a great sob welled in her throat. "Course I do. Do I? It doesn't matter any more. Nothing matters any more."

And that was the sort of opposition that Liz set herself stubbornly to break. She went at her self-imposed task with a frightening zeal. She had to. She herself, shamming insanity, had to have something concrete in a world of phantasmal shadows so that she could cling to it when the going became really rough. Her treatment of Shirley was as much self-therapy as anything else. Starkly, Liz saw that in this bedlam she must have a rock to keep her sane during the worst of the storms.

" And all," she'd say, over and over, " all because a stupid idiotic fool like Harris had to shoot a man because he'd found out about his wife and Harris." But, deep within herself, she knew that the real threat had come from the Shangs and that in any normal world it would not be necessary to run and hide just because you'd heard a man babbling in delirium.

Rupert Clinton's reactions, for all his tired and beaten body, were spasmodically swift and shocking. The station master had made a mistake. He should not have spoken before the gun was safely out of his pocket and aimed at his potential victim. Clinton swung his foot and the toe of his shoe slapped hard against the station master's wrist. The gun circled lazily in the air. Its thud, when it landed upon the carpeted floor, was surprisingly loud.

Again the station master played it wrong. Clinton let the man dive first for the gun. When he went past, Clinton rabbit-chopped the back of the man's head. That finished the episode.

Sighing, Clinton picked up the gun, checked that it was really loaded, and slipped it into his pocket. He looked down at the station master. The incident had been so swift and deadly that no sound disturbed the night from the house's upper storey and Clinton could suppose that the wife was still soundly asleep. He took an ankle in each hand and dragged the man into the first door in the corridor.

He did not put on the light. He found a curtain cord, ripped it loose and bound the man's hands. His handkerchief balled into the mouth and left loose should answer as a gag until Clinton had the forthcoming interview along the lines he wanted.

He refused to think why a Double-I man had received instructions to kill him. That, he would find out.

When the station master had recovered consciousness, Clinton showed him the revolver. He said : " I suppose you realise that you tried to kill me. I shan't hesitate to use this on you if you don't tell me what I want to know."

The man's eyes rolled above the makeshift gag ; but there was no fear in his face. Clinton pulled the gag away.

" All right, mister station master. Who told you to kill me ?" He pushed the gun into the man's teeth and felt the metal grate on bone. " And if you yell I'll smash all your teeth out. Just talk softly. Well, who ?"

" Orders." The man's tones were deadly, filled with the loathing men had when they talked of the Shangs. "Special instructions from area HQ."

Clinton realised he was stymied. The cell system ensured he could get no further back than that. This man took his orders ; how they got to him was a mystery.

" Reasons ? Good Lord, man, you knew I was a Double-I man. You must have been given a reason to kill me."

" Just that you knew too much for your own good."

" But I was coming to you for help. I'm a Double-I man, dammit ! Why should they give orders for me to be killed ?"

" You ought to know ! You're a traitor ! A rotten slimy little Shangsyc. That's what I guess."

Clinton waggled the gun. " Brave words, man, when I could kill you like that."

" I'm a Double-I man."

" So am I !"

" And I've received orders that you are to be killed because you know too much. What more can I say ?"

" No, you're right." Clinton stepped back, his face grey with fatigue. " I can't think right. Look, pal, I tell you I don't understand this at all. I'm not a traitor ! That's impossible ! Why, only today I killed two Wasps—"

A spring twanged above his head. A creak. Floor boards easing under the strain. Footsteps padding across to the door. The groan of a door opening. A sliver of yellow light down the stairs.

" Henry ! Henry ! What's going on down there ?"

A high, imperious, demanding voice. The station master visibly wilted. Impossibly, Clinton felt himself smiling.

" Oh, no," he said. " The brave Double-I man, fighting for Earth, is a hen-pecked husband. That beats all."

" *Henry* !"

" Well," Clinton said sympathetically. " You'd better say something. Only," he added, waggling the gun suggestively, " it had better be the right thing."

The station master tried twice before he got out recognisable words. " It's all right, my love. Just a friend on business."

" Friend ? Business ? This time of night ? Henry, you're up to your tricks again. I suspected that bottle wasn't what you said it was . . . I'm coming down."

" No !" The station master's voice rang clear and true. Clinton heard the naked fear in it and recognised the man's love for his wife, whatever her arrogance of nature and disposition might be. He couldn't fight against that. He couldn't battle against an honest man, doing a job, called, in the middle of the night, to kill another man who hours before might have called him friend. Clinton knew he was beaten.

" Listen to me, Henry," he said, speaking softly and putting as much vicious sincerity into his words as he could manage. " You get a message back through HQ and the chain of command. I'm no traitor ! I'm a good Double-I man, working for Earth. Tell 'em I'll make contact again and I want fair play. I want a hearing ! Right—I'm off." He went to the door and slid it shut. Through the crack he whispered : " My regards to your charming wife, Henry."

An angry and yet half amused shout answered him. But Henry wouldn't raise the alarm. His wife was descending the stairs and the stranger in his house was armed.

Clinton shut the front door behind him, the flare of the woman's torch ruby through the glass, and went at a brisk trot down the path and out into the road. He set off towards the village of Wagshott and the next contact he carried in his memory. The beauty of the system of using the railway as an underground was that he couldn't be traced by the Wasps. Even if they suspected him at the station where he had boarded the train, even if the oldster with the moustache and rheumy eyes and shiny clothes gave him away, they could search all of Brighton—and bad cess to 'em ; so Clinton said.

Then he halted abruptly, one half-raised foot waving stupidly in air. It was no use going any further here ! Henry would by now be on the telephone, a few well-chosen words, and the rest of the little Double-I cell here would be ready for him. He put his foot down slowly and cursed. The only consolation he had was that his message might be passed along. If he tried to talk to the next man now, they'd be ready and, still under orders to kill him, would do so. Oh, sure, they'd pass his message along then.

But then he'd be dead.

He walked slowly along the lane, with the rustle of trees loud in the night silence and the hesitant babble of a stream bordering the lane running a counterpoint of music to his

thoughts. Late June—no, must be July by now, he'd been losing track of time—with a giant moon just rising over the Downs and silvering all the trees and roads and rooftops—it was difficult to believe that he was a hunted man, fleeing from too-ready guns.

He'd best find some shelter for the night and sleep on his problems. If a car or lorry would conveniently drive past now and give him a lift, he could be in any one of a dozen hamlets in time to find a hotel. Pub, rather. The thought of clean sheets and soft mattresses, with a pint of best Sussex and a slab of bread and cheese just before almost made him break into a run. Well, it was a good chance. He'd just have to keep walking until he picked up a lift.

This part of the world hadn't changed much in a thousand years, apart from petrol stations and railways and macadamed roads ; but those symbols of modern life seemed, somehow, to become mellowed and gentle, a part of the landscape. Certainly the advent of the aliens from Alishang had been felt here in these villages nestling in the Downs with only the mildest of shocks by comparison with the devasation and terror of the industrial centres. That was all to the good, of course, and one of the reasons for International Intelligence siting their English rendezvous here. Clinton didn't know where the school was, of course. His contacts who had proved singularly uncooperative would have directed him there. He trudged on and waited with surprising patience the arrival of his lift.

It did not come. He walked right into the ambush long before his sleepy wits aroused to any sense of danger.

" Grab 'im, George. Ah, that's it. Mind 'ee gets both those guns 'es got in 'isn's pocket there."

Clinton struggled, then relaxed as hands jerked his arms behind his back. He recognised the strength in the sinews, and knew that he did not yet have all his own strength back. " What's going on ?" he demanded angrily.

" Now wouldn't 'ee be surprised !" A general laugh followed this obviously witty sally, and Clinton estimated that at least five men were gathered about him now in the tree-darkened lane. They had chosen their site well. He could not see their faces clearly, their coats and trousers were dark and merged with the hedgerows. Another form thrust itself close up to him and a torchlight shone in his face.

" Damn and blast !" The girl's words shocked him. He struggled again and felt those sinewy hands close excruciatingly on his arms.

" Just you bide yerself, then, when you'm being talked to."

The girl said angrily : " It's not him. It's someone else."

" Someone else ?" The whispered words travelled the rounds of the men, their deep Sussex voices burring with the inexplicable wonder of that. " Who be 'ee then ?"

" Never mind who he is," the girl said peremptorily. " The question is, where's the Wasp ?"

" Ah. Where be 'ee, that's what us'n like to know."

Clinton's head felt as though it were rising on jets to soar and ride among the stars. His stomach churned horribly. He cleared his throat, and said : " D'you mind taking some of that pressure off, pal ? I'll pass out in a minute."

The girl said something and the pressure slackened. His back and ribs felt as though they had been bludgeoned.

The girl's torch flickered across the road, blinked off and on and off. " Bring him into the ditch. We'll wait."

She sounded terribly efficient and tough and just a wee bit—a mere breath—nervous, Clinton decided. So long as he wasn't to be killed right away—he'd like to know one way or the other at once—he was quite prepared to go along with these people. At least, if they intended to keep him prisoner, they'd have to feed him. At that, he perked up. They all bundled back into the ditch and a rough bandage was lashed around Clinton's mouth. He spat it out and said to the girl, making it fierce : " I'm not in the mood to be gagged. I won't shout out. Just let me go to sleep." He yawned, and made sure she could see him, a mere black blob opening in a blob of white. " Wake me up when you've killed your Wasp and then we can all go home."

She gave a little gasp and Clinton repressed his smile.

That had got home. Then she rallied.

" You know," she said, still nettled enough to be angry : " You're lucky to be alive."

" I know. I don't know that I'd call it luck, though. Now, if you don't require my help in this Wasp affair, I'll just shut my eyes and doze off—"

Clinton had no need to fake his tiredness. He was asleep before he'd finished talking.

IX

From the cold came blankness and from the blankness streams and rivers and avalanches of light, bursting over him in silent eruptions of fire. He screamed. And, screaming, awoke.

He was lying on straw, with a roof over his head, and the yellow glimmer of a lamp throwing shadows at flat angles across the cross-beams and rafters above, very eerie, told him he was in the loft of a stable. He was shaking all over and sweating and his eyes saw, superimposed on the friendly gloom of the stable beneath the flickering rafters another picture, a picture of lines of light all moving away towards some invisible point. He fought his panic, a grim, lonely struggle that, in his weakened condition demanded reserves of spiritual energy that left him, when the spasm passed, mentally numb and emotionless.

"You feeling all right, now?" The voice was low and controlled, familiar, and comfortingly friendly.

"Sure," Clinton said. "Just dandy." He recognised the voice now; the momentary lapse of identification had come from the fact that the last time she had spoken it had been in anger and baffled bewilderment.

"You were screaming."

"I'm all right."

"Words. You were shouting about lines of light—"

Clinton put out one unsteady hand and pressed down, forcing his shoulder up and feeling the sickening surge in his head as his body moved. He blinked, trying to focus her in the dim light, seeing only a chestnut halo and the dark sweep of eyelashes. The rest was hidden behind a blue handkerchief, all but the eyes which shone enormous.

"Forget what I was saying. Who are you?"

"I—don't think I'll tell you yet. You're very weak. I've brought hot broth—"

"Hot broth!" Clinton put his head back despite the stab of pain and laughed. "Hot broth from a masked female murderer! Don't get your roles mixed, please."

He saw her stiffen up, saw the quick rise and fall of the blue handkerchief as she breathed an angry curse.

"You don't seem to realise that you've been unconscious for a day. Lying here, moaning and groaning and screaming—it's been no picnic, I can tell you. Quite obviously you've been

sick, only just recovered—your head is red raw at the back—hair all scraggly where there is any. Have you escaped from a prison hospital ?"

Clinton by-passed all that. She had not given any indication of surprise or annoyance when he had called her a murderer. He said : " You did that Wasp's business, then ?"

She shook her head. " No. We've been waiting every night now for a fortnight. He has to come that way soon. When he does—"

" So it was no accident I walked into the ambush."

" No. We thought you were just an unfortunate late night traveller and were all ready to dump you safely where you wanted to go—when you passed out. The revolver and automatic also showed you weren't an ordinary citizen. So, I had to bring you here." She finished fiercely. " And now you're going to drink this broth if I have to hold your nose and pour it down."

" All right," said Clinton, meekly.

That set the pattern for the succeeding days. He was astonished and alarmed at his own weakness ; the crack on the head must have been far more serious than he had supposed. He enquired the date, and when the girl told him : " August the Fourth," he simply refused to believe it. She had to bring up a copy of the *Times* to convince him. He read eagerly, pushing aside the unpleasant fact that he had lost a month somewhere—and it wasn't since he'd landed in England, either.

The *Times* was filled with the usual Shang-inspired rubbish. Reports of increased food production, keeping easy pace with the growth of the population so that, not only was there never any fear of the shortages that had plagued mankind for most of his history, but the Shangs were able to absorb huge proportions of every produced article—whether food or machinery or samples of the decadent art they allowed to fester still. The Earth, even after nearly two hundred and fifty years, had not yet replenished the human stockpile to the fantastic and dangerous heights it had reached just before they came. The Establishment was rolling along in much its usual way, except that every major policy decision now had to be triply-approved by Shangs. No man now decided what he or his brethren would attempt to achieve upon the face of his own planet.

The girl persisted in wearing the blue handkerchief. It would have been absurdly simple to have reached up and pulled

it off. Somehow, the idea repulsed Clinton. He owed the girl enough as it was without being gratuitously ungrateful and insulting. He had convinced her that he was not a criminal lunatic escaping from a Terran Police hospital ; but she was astute enough—and really, it needed very little observation and deduction—to see that he was not just an ordinary member of the Wasp-cowed public.

He realised that she must be a member of a Terran underground ; but she couldn't belong to the group centred round the school and the station master, otherwise she would have settled his business by now. The conception of another resistance movement against the Shangs, co-existing beside the one Clinton had known of all his life seemed, superficially, amazing. A few moments sober thought showed him that it was inevitable. The secrecy surrounding his own organisation debarred many would-be members. Other men with determined wills would set up Wasp-killing outfits. It followed.

He read the paper every day after that, and asked for the earlier ones immediately following the brawl when the car had been set on fire. The papers did not mention that. It would have been impossible for them to have done so—or, at least, if they had then the editors and sub-eds and reporters and typesetters and printers and even the paper boys would have been taken out and shot along the ditch around the tower. No Terran believed the Press or Radio or TV any longer. Real information was passed by word of mouth.

When Clinton had been idling, as he put it disgustedly, in the stable loft for a week he caught the girl's wrist as she set down the empty plate and determined to find out all he could of the present set-up. He felt a strange sort of kinship for this slim girl with the chestnut hair and enormous eyes and dramatic—and somehow pathetic—blue handkerchief.

" Look, what-ever-your-name-is. I'd like you to tell me just what goes on." He laughed. " I can promise you that I shan't reveal any of your secrets." He released her wrist, and said meaningfully - " I killed two Wasps the day you found me."

" I know." Her words surprised him. " You rambled on about that, too. I know very little about you, but I trust you." She sighed, and made herself comfortable on the straw. Warm sunshine slanted through a dormer window in the roof and fell across her jodhpurs and lime green sweater. " It's very simple, really. This Wasp comes from Lewes. He visits a girl in the

village upon whom he has forced his attentions. There has been little trouble around here for twenty years ; now we feel that we ought to take care of this one vile man. We have measured the risks and are ready to face the consequences."

" Hum. You don't know what they are likely to be."

" No. But we can guess. My father will not stir a finger now." She was visibly distressed. " He is—not as antagonistic towards the Shangs as I could wish."

" Shangsyc ?"

" No !" She drew away and her eyes blazed at him in the sunshine. " He was out in the Twenty Five."

" So were a lot of people."

" I respect my father, and his views, even if I do not share them. What I am doing is without his knowledge. But down here in the country we are still an almost feudal, a personality-centred culture. My father would once have been called the Squire. The men look to me."

" What's your name ? Can you tell me now ?"

" Diana." She hesitated, and then added : " Diana Fortescue-Ewart-Napier."

" The Hon. I suppose ?"

" Yes. Does it matter ?"

" Not any more. All that matters in the world today is one's feelings about Earthpeople as people and as kinsfolk in face of the Galaxy. If you see what I mean."

" I do. And you ? Can you tell me your name ?"

This time it was Clinton's turn to hesitate. He could revert to his role as Crawfurd, or even further back to Harris, or further back still. He stared at the girl. Then, slowly, he raised his hand and, gently, tenderly, removed the blue handkerchief from her face.

He stared for a long time.

That she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen he doubted ; but the aliveness, the piquancy, of her features, with the aquiline nose doing nothing to detract from that aura of boyishness, affected him profoundly.

He said, simply : " Rupert Clinton."

Her red lips moved, parted ; she smiled.

He said : " And now my life is in your hands."

" It's safe, Rupert," she said. Something new had come into her face as she spoke ; something that Clinton vaguely realised was tied up with any woman's feelings towards a bird with a broken wing that she has tended and fed and seen back to health and strength.

" Well," he said briskly, deliberately breaking the spell the warm afternoon under the eaves, with the bees buzzing busily from outside in the courtyard, had enshrouded him in. "Well, now we see about your Wasp. And then I must move on."

That night Clinton went out with the little hunting party, carrying his own automatic, scrupulously clean, and with Diana carrying the station master's revolver. They drew a blank. The other men of the village accepted him because their Squire's daughter vouched for him. The next day they talked desultorily, and Clinton stretched his legs around the courtyard, with Diana standing casually in the gateway, watching. When he walked up to her and stamped his feet and felt the blood flow tingling along them, and stretched his arms, he knew he was just about back to full strength. It was a wonderful feeling. Diana helped in the creation of that feeling, too.

That was the night they caught the Wasp.

He walked along the road, a few minutes from midnight, leaving his car parked in the hedgerow and heading directly for the girl's door. When they had finished with him, and a couple of the men, wearing gloves, were starting the car to take him away and dump car and all in the abandoned quarry, Clinton halted them. He took out his knife and, carefully, in the light of Diana's torch, carved letters in the Wasp's forehead. The blood shone redly.

ZI.

No-one said anything. They all understood.

But how much did they understand ? Clinton wondered, cynically, if the hope dwelling in every man's mind at thought of what ZI really meant had any foundation in fact. Horner didn't think so.

They walked slowly through the warm night, thick with stars and redolent with hedgerow scents, said low-voiced goodnights as the men one-by-one departed for their cottages. At last, only Diana, Clinton and a gangling youth were left. He said : " Good night," and turned, his tall figure black against the stars, went down a narrow lane.

A hoarse voice shouted. A sputtering of shots threw vivid fire across the road. The youth gasped horribly, and fell with a thud that was lost in the crunching run of a man's footsteps.

" All right ! You ! I can see you ! The game's up."

Without conscious thought, Clinton had seized Diana and bundled her into the ditch. He lay half across her, scarcely

conscious of her softness pressing into him, staring up wildly into the night. The footsteps grated closer. A torch swung, the glare passing low over his head. He ducked.

"I know you're there ! Come on out, and save me shooting you in the stomach." The torchlight waved back.

Clinton remained motionless. Silence. Then soft footsteps, loud enough—just—for him to guess the Wasp was creeping closer. The torch went out. Wild thoughts thronged Clinton's head. Had this all been an elaborate trap ? Had the Wasps known that one of their number was due to die this night and had let him go to his death, willing to allow that so that they could round-up the Earthmen responsible ? It was an old Wasp trick. A pebble grated at the very edge of the road.

How many men up there ?

Carefully, hardly breathing, Clinton raised his head.

His eyes were still accustomed to the night with its stars, even after the brief blindness of the torch. He hoped that the Wasp had blinded himself more thoroughly. He could see nothing. And then—was that a dark form—there, against the stars between those two trees ? No—yes. It was !

The darker patch seemed to swell, to blot out the stars. There came the chink of metal on metal. One man ? Clinton had no sure way of knowing ; but he had to take the chance. Without a sound he lifted the gun over the edge of the ditch and held it squarely on the advancing form.

What he thought about as his hand squeezed the trigger he did not know. Then everything was lost in the bellow of the gun and the gout of fire that stunned his eyes and left him momentarily blind.

Hard on the explosion he was up, over the edge, flinging himself forward, to crash upon the dark figure and bear it down in a weltering smother of arms and legs.

Tacky wetness was warm on his hand. The man was like a bundle of old clothes, tossed out for refuse collection. Someone was breathing in great stertorous gasps like the pumping of a steam engine. It was only when he heard Diana's quick footsteps and her anxious voice that he realised that the gasping was his own.

"The only one, Rupert," she was saying. "Are you all right ?"

"Yes." He struggled to his feet, feeling the dead man's body fall away and flop onto the road. "Yes. I'm all right. But he isn't. He's dead."

Diana's voice was cool and controlled, yet through her shell of composure Clinton detected with an ease that should have told him more than it did that she was worried, scared, a small frightened girl.

She said : " What do we do now ?"

" Do ?" Clinton said, bending and grasping one limp wrist. " Why, toss him in the ditch." He began to drag the body across the road. " Then forget him."

" But we can't, Rupert. Don't you see ? We can't just leave him—the Wasps are sure to find him. And when they do they'll massacre the whole village."

Hard on her words there came ringing through the night the sound of hoarse official voices, the flare of torches and the approaching stamp of booted feet.

X

Colonel Robert Ney, of the Homicide Bureau of the World Alishang Police, straightened his impeccable black and yellow uniform and entered the office of General Kane, wondering if this summons was the final one. When you played a perilous double game, fighting for the ideals of a free Earth whilst pretending to bow before the alien might of the Shangs, any summons might be the last. He presented as calm and cool an exterior as he could—it was probably just a routine matter, something to do with the canteen committee or other foolishness.

" Ah, Ney. Job for your department. Right up your alley."

General Kane, area superintendent of the Wasps, could have posed for the portrait of the perfect fighting man in any past generation. Tall, broad shouldered, hair just tinged with modish grey at the temples, keen-eyed and alert, he could have ordered the charge of cavalry brigades, directed aircraft in an attack upon a continent, hurled armies of men to die in mud and blood soaked trenches—or issued the orders that would herd a million Terrans into concentration camps. In any age, it seemed, there was occupation for men of his stamp.

" Job, sir ? Homicide business ?"

" Not really, Ney. This is prevention of murder instead of its detection. This fellow Harris. You remember the case ?

Your men killed the local Police Chief and Harris got away. Damned poor show."

" I remember, sir." Ney kept his voice perfectly steady. A maelstrom of emotions battered at his mind.

" Well, we've now had information—a Terran friendly to the order, you understand—that someone was talking a little loosely when the detectives came to arrest Harris. You will recall, no doubt, that it must have been by the connivance of the local police that Harris escaped ?" His heavy irony was painful ; it was not funny.

" You can't run a country without trusting someone, sir."

" I am aware of that. This report says that two doctors, Henderson and Eddington, were involved. Eddington has disappeared. Henderson was questioned—mildly—but maintained complete innocence. A lie, of course. Now, he, too, has disappeared. The only lead is that another report speaks of irregularities in a lunatic asylum about fifty miles away. There may be a connection ; the two traitors were working on diseases of the brain—Harris was a brain case. Your job, Ney," Kane paused meaningly, " is to find the two traitors. You're handling it because it is a chance to redeem your department in the eyes of the Shangs and also because it is business affecting the so-far unsolved Harris case. There's a lot more to it than appears. I know it. I feel it in my bones." He chuckled throatily. " And you know what that means."

Ney permitted a half-smile to curl the corners of his mouth. Oh, sure, he knew what one of Kane's bone-feeling spasms meant. More torture, more arrests, more shooting parties. " I know, sir," Ney said respectfully. " You have a hunch that will work out another victory for the Wasps."

" Too right, Ney. And you're in on this one from the beginning. Get to it !"

Standing under the stars with the night breeze rustling the trees of a leafy English lane and with a young girl standing defiant beside him—sprawled on the gravel the dead body of a Wasp, still warm—Rupert Clinton had to make a decision that tested every moral fibre in him, a decision that he tried to strip of all emotion and all cold calculation.

Calculation told him that it was his duty not to become involved with this petty local fracas but to leave at once, whilst there was still time, make a break for freedom. Emotion thundered at him that he could not desert the girl standing now

so vividly close to him that he could hear her soft breathing. Time was running out too fast. He could not, in that thrilling instant of peril, make up his mind.

So he did the only thing he could do.

With a heave and a grunt he snatched up the corpse, flung it in a clumsy fireman's lift over one shoulder and ran fleetly across the road and onto the grass verge. Soundless on the soft underfooting, he fled down the road towards the house. He didn't even bother to call Diana to follow.

For a wild moment he thought he would not outdistance his pursuers. Then, gradually, the clamour and tumult as the Wasps advanced steadily down the road faded and was lost in the murmur of the night. The glow of their torches dwindled against the sky.

She was running behind him, now. They turned into the gateway and, willy-nilly, crunched across the gravel drive.

"Where—" she gasped out. "Where are you taking him?"

"Well." He had breath for no more.

"I've got this gun and torch. Unless they see the marks in the road and the blood—"

"They will."

Clinton's heart was hammering now and the blood pounded in his ears. But he had rounded the back of the house, past the outbuildings, was making for the decaying wooden cover over the disused well in the back courtyard.

"No good, Rupert," Diana was panting out. "That's the first place they'll look. If they don't find him, they can't prove anything—we might have a chance then."

"Where—else—then?" Lights were beginning to dazzle him now, sparks fired from his protesting brain.

"Inside the house. Priests' hole. I'll show you."

It seemed an age to Clinton before they had crept quietly, so as not wake Diana's father, through the rear door, up a single flight of stairs and halted before a panelled angle of wall. "Quickly," Clinton said. "We don't want blood everywhere."

The panelling slid back under Diana's fingers. Clinton went straight into the black hole, and then blinked as she switched on the torch. A small space, dusty, bare, cobweb patterned. He bundled the corpse in and stood up, feeling the twinge down his back and shoulders, gulped in musty air. "Whew. Quite a run. Now what?"

In the glow of the torch her chestnut hair gleamed like an aureole. She flicked the light about the priests' hole. " Only one thing for it, Rupert. You'll have to hide in here, too. If the Wasps find you, covered in blood, and with no explanation why you're here and no reason to be, you're a dead man."

" I suppose this funk-hole is safe ?"

" Quite. This is an old house ; it keeps its secrets well." They were both regaining their breath now, their unsteady panting quietening, the fresh difficulties they faced beginning to loom largely in their imaginations. Diana went on speaking, determinedly, with a little tip-tilt of her chin that, even then, brought a quickly-smothered smile of amusement to Clinton. " They aren't likely to find this hiding-place provided you keep quiet. It's a family secret that hasn't got into all the guide-books."

" Food ? Water ?" Clinton looked over the hiding-place that might, for all he knew, be his tomb. " I might be in here a deuce of a long time."

" I'll see to it."

How long they had before the Wasps instituted the inevitable house-to-house search that would follow the murder of two of their men, Clinton didn't know. Pretty fast, he reckoned. Even though the Wasps couldn't find the bodies, they would know two men had disappeared ; they'd search in the hope of uncovering something to use as a clue, however small. And they might not be too choosy just what they did do. He gave a little grimace, and looked down on the dead Wasp.

As soon as Diana returned, he said gruffly : " You know, if Wasp and I are discovered here, it means both you and your father will be shot. It might be better if we pushed on. I could find—"

" Idiot !" She was genuinely angry. Two spots of colour burned in her cheeks. " You'd be captured in no time at all. And you'd draw unwelcome attention to the village ; I still have a responsibility to them, and I'm not having you mess it up. See ?"

He did not reply in words. An insufferable longing compounded of loneliness, hatred of continual violence, need for comfort, swept over him. She came into his arms almost as though she had been impatiently awaiting it. He kissed her.

And as they stood, astonished at what had happened, with the corpse lying sprawled in the corner, a clamorous hammering boomed up from the front door. The Wasps had arrived.

Clinton released Diana, forcing himself to think about the peril they were in. It was difficult, with the imprint of her lips still warm and sweet upon his own. He stepped back into the Priests' hole and motioned imperiously to her. " Shut the damned door and act the innocent, my sweet. And don't get caught !"

The angles of her face changed, the lips tightening up and the eyes going bleak. She blew him a kiss. " I won't. And keep quiet !"

The door slid shut.

Only then did Clinton realise that he had no light.

At first, it did not bother him overmuch, apart from that initial qualm that rippled down his body at thought of being shut up with a corpse in the darkness. It might not have been so bad had the corpse not achieved that status by Clinton's own hand . . .

He was annoyed to discover that his hands were trembling. Angrily, and with an edge of unacknowledged fear stirring, he struck an old-fashioned wooden match. Part of his training had always been to carry everywhere a shilling, a penknife and a piece of string. Why those three objects he did not know ; to them, half humourously, half seriously, he had added a box of matches. In the cup of radiance the dead man's face leaped out at him like your own face seen by the light of a torch in a mirror at night. He dropped the match.

" Stupid idiot !" he grumbled ; but immediately struck another. The man had been well-fed, with the dark hair thick on his neck and temples, and with the strong bristle just bruising the skin around his chin. The mouth looked slack and foolish. Thankfully, his eyes were closed. *Its* eyes, Clinton corrected himself, and shivered. At once he brushed his hand around, deliberately thinking : " Yes, it is draughty in here." He wasn't fooling himself. The match went out.

The third stick was in his fingers, pressing against the box, when sanity caught up with him. He was going to be in this coffin for a long time ; he might need light later. The matches wouldn't last for ever. He managed to push the match back into the box without spilling any ; his fingers seemed numb. He'd just have to sit it out.

Toilet facilities existed down at the far end, an opening in the brickwork connecting with the house system. He took a sip of

water—in the darkness—just dipping his lips into the bucket. The water was warm.

Smell? Surely—he couldn't be smelling yet? Impossible. The body was still limp, probably; rigor mortis wouldn't set in for a time yet. The corpse couldn't be smelling yet—impossible. Clinton sniffed uneasily.

Then every sense came alert. Feet tramped past on the landing, going towards the back quarters of the old house. He watched the sliding panel carefully waiting for a betraying crack or chink of light. If light shone in, then he couldn't have light at night inside. He waited, tensed up, as the noises receded. Nothing showed through the door. Pleased with the minor victory, he sat back. But had he been looking at the sliding panel? Suppose he had twisted round when he'd drunk? Suppose a light had glowed through a chink from the panel at his back, whilst he had been staring hypnotised into the darkness in the wrong direction? He cursed himself for drinking, for losing his orientation, and began to crawl towards the panel to check.

He touched the dead man's face.

Not to cry out—to keep his tongue gripped between his teeth—was as cruel an agony as any he had known. Something wet dripped onto his nose. He raised a shaky hand, felt it vibrate against his forehead, slimy with sweat. He opened his mouth, releasing his tongue, and drew in a great gasping breath.

This way lay straight to a breakdown. Here he was, a perfectly sane, level-headed, healthy and tough specimen of humanity allowing himself to become overwrought because he was imprisoned in a coffin with a corpse. Although, come to think of it, was he sane? He certainly, even now, wasn't back to one hundred percent fitness after the accident. And level-headed—for the very first time Rupert Clinton began to consider just what it was in this dread he had of moving lights, this fear of seeing lamps rushing brilliantly by.

Always before he had evaded the question in his mind, putting it off, assuming a mere hallucination. But of course, when he thought about it, like this, sitting in the dark, he began to realise that it couldn't very well be hallucination. He didn't know what it was—perhaps just a ruptured blood vessel in his brain, or perhaps a growth? Sitting in the blackness he grappled desperately with the problem, forcing himself to

think of the one thing that might hold his sanity away from thinking about the corpse smiling at him from the floor. From one horror he was forced to seek refuge in another—it was a sort of balance.

Balance. Like the time he had been driving along the highway, fleeing from Sheila and her dead husband—balancing his speed against his blindness in the light. Lights, flickering past, one after the other, receding in chains of brilliant dots . . .

Light burst in on him abruptly, and a grating noise brought him upright, his mouth open in a soundless scream.

" All right, young man. You're safe. It's not the Wasps, bad cess to 'em."

Clinton looked stupified past the glow of light from the torch, vaguely made out the outlines of a tall man. He blinked and shaded his eyes with a trembling hand.

He had to swallow twice before he could say : " Who are you ?"

The torch beam whisked past him, centred on the dead man.

" Ho-hum. A stiff, eh ! No wonder you weren't keen to pass the time of day with our visitors."

Clinton was waking up. " You must be Diana's father."

" You know, son, you're right."

" You—know, then ?"

" Know ? What, about Diana and her female Scarlet Pimpernel stunts ? My dear feller, I wouldn't stop her for worlds, even though I think she's getting a little too old for this romantic rubbish now. Time we people started to adjust our thinking to changed conditions."

Clinton was remembering things now, odd references by Diana, a reluctance to speak of her father. He recalled her vehement denial that the old man was a Shangsyc. Clinton wondered. He essayed a probe, forgetting his horror of the dead man in the corner and his erstwhile fears.

" You condemn me for killing this man ?"

" But no—not condemn. Deplore. After all, he is a man. Like us, you know."

" He's a Wasp."

" Wasp. Hum, yes. Red-flag word. Say it and you evoke an immediate unthinking response. Have you ever thought that these men of the Wasps may think that they are right, that they are the repository of Earthly culture, that they look to the

future, and your sort are the barbarians, those who would hold Earth back from Galactic citizenship ?"

" So you are a Shangsyc," Rupert Clinton said, a lifetime of inherited, indoctrinated and automatic repulsion forcing his reflexes along the only paths open to them. He had never known any other way of thinking, and circumstances now did nothing to make him suddenly and typically change his mind.

The shadow that was Diana's father humped around, settled to the floor and the light was extinguished. The absolute blackness rushed back.

" Don't want our friends nosing around here, do we ?" The tone was light conversational, an accompaniment of silver cutlery and tea trays and fragile china. " Shangsyc. Another red-flag word. Do you actually feel the adrenalin pumping into your bloodstream when you hear these words ? Wasp. Alishang. Shangsyc." The shadow breathed gustily. " All you young fellers are the same. Pavlov's dog sort of response."

" Your kind of talk sounds unpleasant to me. Even if you are Diana's father."

" Good grief, son. You don't have to be respectful to me just because an accident of nature made me the father of a damned attractive girl. She goes her own way, as you'll have noticed. I like to keep tabs on her, though." The voice dropped its imperiously hectoring manner, quietened. " Can't talk loudly. Your pals are wandering around. Won't hear us if we speak quietly. Well built, these houses. This one especially."

" Why did you have to come in here ?"

" My dear feller ! I don't want my daughter hauled off to be shot. Not on your life." He chuckled throatily. " Saw you dragging a body in here, didn't know if he was dead or drunk. But I guessed you'd need—a little company. Seems I was right." Something tinkled and sloshed. " Here, take a swig of this."

Clinton stretched out in the darkness, found the bottle and took two fiery mouthfuls. It was good whisky. He handed the bottle back, and something of the macabre situation was borne in on him as Diana's father said : " Bung ho ! Bottoms up !" followed by gurgling noises.

" You were implying that ideas of fighting for Earth's freedom were wrong, were—"

" Not quite. Not your way. Not the way of violence."

" The Shangs are pretty violent, in their own cute little way."

" So they are. But a people can have their own way without resort to violence. China absorbed it conquerors. Haven't you heard of passive resistance ?"

" Heard of it ?" Clinton said with contempt. " Didn't we try it ? Didn't we employ all the psychological tricks of non-help, objective and subjective humiliation, playing dumb, passive resistance ? I don't know how many millions lost their lives. I don't suppose anyone does. When you're arguing with people who don't mind how many of your folk they destroy, when they can marshal millions of dumb slaves into working for them so your passive resistance crowd have all that extra inertia to buck—when they are, quite literally, inhuman, all your neat little tricks are shown up as shoddy thinking."

The dark, heavy shadow stirred, the slither of clothes loud in the darkness, the sound of breathing oppressive, as though pressing down from all sides. The little room was growing stuffy. The old man said in his gravelly voice : " All this night-time banditry and shooting and sabotage weakens Earth. We've got to find a *modus vivendi* with the Shangs. You talk about ' Freedom for Earth '—just what do you have in mind?"

" It's obvious, isn't it ?" Clinton felt puzzled, angry. Outside the quietness of the old house lay grave-like upon his consciousness. He had expected more thorough search than this from the Shang-inspired Wasps. A kernel of the truth began to swell slowly, imperceptibly, in his mind, like the first flicker of flame heralding an all-consuming fire.

" We've got to fight for Earth because we are of Earth—it's as straight-forward as that—what's happening out there now ? Why are they so quiet ?"

" It's not so simple as that. Quiet ? Maybe they've gone."

" No." Clinton stood up unsteadily, pushing his hands out as though he would support himself on the blackness. " No—they've not gone. Diana. They're asking Diana where we are —foolish—should have thought—" His voice ceased.

From below stairs, sheering clearly through the still air and the panelled door, a scream knifed in at them, a scream that was chopped off even as it reached the full stretch of lung power.

" Diana," Clinton said. " Diana. They're torturing the truth out of her."

XI

Everything seemed to be going wrong and troubles and problems were piling up like massing thunderclouds, so that when Horner and Ney landed and went into the houseboat's close and friendly cabin they were disturbed just a little more than they relished by the bad news about Cromwell. Steeger, shaking like a dancing dervish was there, happy that he didn't fancy this time that he had been followed. Horner, his broken arm strapped in surgical efficiency to his side, brushed past Steeger, the level icy words of contempt and condemnation on his lips unuttered, and crossed at once to the curtained bunk.

Looking down on Cromwell, Horner tried not to think what it would mean to the old man if he didn't last the two years.

Of course, once he was dead, it wouldn't matter ; but it was in the fitness of things that the leader, the man who had carried on so brightly the torch of Terran resistance, should last out these few hurrying years to see the end.

Thinking of old Cromwell with his yellow bird-like claws for hands and his scraggy-corded neck and patient, indomitable will that, like Moses, had planned and fought for his people and seemed now to be debarred from entering the promised land, standing there thinking these things, Horner was aware that his affections for Cromwell must in great part be the same affections as animated young Rupert Clinton in his regard of Horner himself. That was the way life maintained the thread. The flame of spiritual affinity, handed down irrespective of family or race or colour, that was the great force that drove and sustained and uplifted the human race.

And now it looked as though, at one stroke of time, Horner was to be deprived of both the adjacent links of that chain. Cromwell was gradually losing his bitter rearguard struggle with the disease that tore at his body, and Rupert Clinton through treachery was a man marked for death. He thrust his concern for Clinton and Bennett from his mind, forced himself to forget the battle and the running and the fear when the car had exploded into flame, to ignore the flight and the eventual, cautious re-emergence into his old job, drove his energies into dealing with the present situation.

A nurse was there, a pale wisp of a girl with fine blonde hair peeping beneath her starched white cap, and a trim no-nonsense figure. She probably had a gun stowed about her somewhere ; only members of Terran Underground could be

allowed here, and the thought brought a whelming rush of regret and self-doubt. Must all Earth's strivings to be free depend on the use of force ? He sighed. It seemed they must, until the Shangs had been forced away from Earth, back to their planet of Alishang. The girl looked unsmilingly at him.

" You may talk to him. But do not excite him. He is very weak."

" All right," Horner said. He pressed Cromwell's wasted shoulder, not caring to meet the eyes and see the dim light that now animated those once fierce fighting lanterns of the man's soul. The whole frame was woefully wasted and shrunk. It comes to us all, he thought, one day.

Ney drew him back. " We can't tell him about Bennett and Clinton, not in his condition."

" I suppose not. I haven't heard a word from Bennett." He put both hands into his pockets, bunching his fists. " That house was supposed to be safe. A hundred percent cover. Yet the Wasps called round, almost as though they'd been waiting. Bennett seemed quite confident. He had a young arsenal there ; but the Wasps countered everything we could do—I cannot believe that Clinton escaped, and the last I saw of Bennett he was running into another house with four Wasps after him." The whole thing flared up again in Horner's mind, once more chilling him with that dead dull feeling of impending age and decrepitude and inefficiency.

Steeger fussed about, quite obviously oblivious to the murderous thoughts that thronged Horner's brain. Even then, Horner could not find it in his heart to condemn the man completely, to write-him-off out of hand. He fretted over the realisation that, with Cromwell in his present condition, he would have to make the decisions about Steeger.

" Well, how are things going now," asked Steeger. " Time's coming up, eh ? Time's coming up." He rubbed his hands in an ecstasy of anticipation.

Robert Ney turned away from Cromwell's bunk, his own dark rapt face carved as though in mutual suffering with Cromwell. " Not so loud," he said.

Steeger nodded and chuckled and bobbed his head towards Horner. " If poor old Cromwell dies, then you'll be taking over, Horn. How do you take that, eh ? Feel important ? We all carry a big—" He paused and looked about licking his lips. " We all carry a big secret, you know. Have to be careful who we tell."

Glancing casually at the indifferent nurse, who was doing tucking operations to Cromwell's bedclothes, Horner said : " That's true, Steeger. Why don't you sit down and relax. We'll be starting the meeting in a moment."

" Meeting." Steeger wandered towards a chair. " Responsibility, you know. Great responsibility."

" Sit down, for God's sake !" said Ney.

" Surely, surely," Steeger answered. He was still smiling, Horner saw, and again he felt that web of frustration that even here, in Earth's high councils, there had to be that personality clash, that enmity and misunderstanding that had plagued mankind for far too long. He talked to Cromwell, trying to find strength in that withered husk, trying to find there the power to carry on and appear calm and reassuring.

He was immensely relieved—and immensely astounded—when the photo-electric eye was cut on the deck, and Bennett breezed in.

Bennett looked fit, if a trifle drawn and dark about the eyes, and the bandage he wore round his head added a raffish air of panache to his phenomenal good looks. He was smiling, exuding charm and that force of his personality that seemed to surmount obstacles by not admitting that they existed. He seemed almost studiously to be acting the bright crisp young and up-and-coming executive.

" Sorry I'm late, my plane acted up over the Timor Sea and I had no wish to share the shark's dinner—as a prime part of the menu. How are you, Horn ?"

" Busted arm." Horner stared at Bennett. " Why didn't you let us know you were safe ? Here we've been wondering and worrying—"

" Sorry about that, Horn. Things happened fast, even after the fight. I suppose I figured I'd be here before ; didn't realise the next meeting was so far off. Everything all right ?"

" No. Everything is not all right—Cromwell's in a bad way. He's getting weaker."

Bennett was lighting a cigarette. He paused now, and the lighter flame glowed perfectly steadily, the illumination throwing up his strong features and liquid eyes in a startling mask of light and gliding shadow. " Cromwell," he said, the cigarette between his lips barely moving. He lit up and took a long satisfying drag. " Cromwell. I suppose it had to—hell, that's bad. I'm sorry."

" You've always been an extra on the council," Ney said, turning with his tight, intense smile. " A sort of supernumery. I hate like hell to think of what you must be imagining—but don't bank on anything."

" I—I'm not sure I follow—" Bennett began.

Steeger chuckled, low and splashily, like a drain. " You'll be surprised, my boy. I can tell you—responsibility—"

" Suppose we begin ?" Horner said harshly. " And so Bennett and I look like a couple of comic opera heroes. So it hurts just the same."

" You were lucky to get away," Ney said.

" Too right," Bennett said, and laughed.

After Horner had seen Cromwell and the realisation had sunk in that he might, in a very short time, be the actual as well as the temporary leader, he had felt a vacuum in his bowels. He wanted to turn somewhere, anywhere, for support. He could count on Bob Ney—the man was fine-tempered steel throughout—except for his brain, which was ice and fire, and his heart, which tortured him with the responsibilities and stigmas of his job with the Wasps. Steeger could be counted out. The man was a broken reed. So it was that Horner felt a great relief at seeing Bennett again, a tidal wave of emotion that, if he had checked it, he would have seen to be out of all proportion to its causes. And Rupert Clinton, upon whom he had been building the future, was now a hunted fugitive—if he wasn't dead.

He turned on Steeger now, his face betrayingly smooth to those who knew him, and only the reflex clenching of his fists any outward sign of his anger.

" Steeger, why did you issue the orders that Clinton was to be shot on sight ?"

Steeger fought back with equal fiery anger. " Why ? Surely, man, it's obvious, isn't it ? After what you'd told us about him, what he knew, his father dying in space like that and the boy running about, all unknowing, running about like a burning fuse—"

Bennett followed the byplay in fascination.

" I only said he had the information," Horner rattled back. " I didn't say he knew. Your action was precipitate."

" My God ! I like that. Here do I take charge and avert a nasty situation when you and Bennett were helpless, Cromwell dying, and Ney shut up in the Wasp Building. The trouble is,

Horner, you're too fond of that boy—you take too many chances. I made the decision and everything would have been perfectly all right, except that your bungling English fools let the boy get away."

" I'm thankful they did. I know that boy. I told you, he is destined for great things. What he knows will be valueless anyway in two years—"

" Two years is a long time—"

" Not when you've waited two hundred and fifty !" Horner hated this sort of scene ; but he had to go on. " You're callous and frightened, Steeger! You've lost your sense of proportion. And you've no heart."

" All right, all right," said Ney soothingly ; but soothing words were scorched to nothing by unleashed passion.

" You can't talk to me like that !" Steeger was flaming.

" You're incompetent, bungling, scared silly !" Horner was openly shaking now, his face pinched and ugly. " I loved that boy like a son. And you give orders he is to be shot down on sight like a dog—"

A horrible gargling rattling gasp stuttered from the bunk. Everyone whirled. The nurse swooped like a cat taking kittens from water.

" Please, gentlemen ! Mr. Cromwell is becoming excited. If you'll keep your voices down—No, it's too late. He wants to know all about it. Now."

Horner stilled the others with a peremptory gesture. He was still riding the wave of his own anger. He crossed to the bunk and looked down, and his anger drained. He smiled.

" It's all right, Cromwell. Nothing important. We have good news for you, in just a moment." He looked at the others, and singled out Steeger. " You'd better report."

Sulkily, Steeger said : " Recce ship dropped out of hyper-space right on the button. They were there. Safe."

Cromwell's lips fluttered. Horner bent. He strove to hear ; but nothing intelligible came from those bloodless lips. He straightened, pressed Cromwell's shoulder again, and went back to the centre of the cabin.

" Good. Now, you, Bob."

Robert Ney began slowly. " Two items. One—I've had orders to find the two doctors who treated Harris—that is, Clinton—after his accident. I can do it, too. They're hiding out in a mental hospital only about fifty miles from St. Mary'

Hospital. I suppose they thought it was a good idea. General Kane sniffed them out pretty fast. Now I have to arrest them —I don't think he suspects me and this is a test ; but it could very well be. I'm not boastful, but I sincerely think that my use to our organisation is enough for me to be able to sacrifice these two doctors—even if I don't sleep very well at nights."

" We understand, Bob," Horner said gently. The tensions of anger had partially drained from the cabin under the impact of business. Ney made a grimace, and went on speaking, moving his hands together, palm to palm, as he spoke.

" The trouble is that the girl—Doctor Eddington—may have heard some of Clinton's ravings. We don't know."

Steeger interrupted. " She'll have to be eliminated."

This time, they all took it as a suggestion of policy. There was nothing in it, now, of hysterical reaction to extreme pressure. If the girl knew too much, then either they took her where she would be safe—Antarctica, say—or she was—eliminated.

She could not be allowed to be questioned by the Wasps. Particularly by General Kane.

" And the other item, Bob ?" Horner asked.

" Had a note in from Palmgren of Invention Control. You know—as a side remark—he's getting more and more fed up with the job. I can't tell him it's only two more years ; we may have to replace him. And that may not be easy. Anyway, he's rounded up a gang—Good Lord ! Hark at me, a gang ! No, I mean, he has rounded up a group of Terrans working on suspended animation. Their idea was to crawl into a cave and wake up a thousand years ahead when things might be different from what they are today."

" They will be," growled Horner. He brushed his grey moustache, his eyes bright on the quiescent bulk of Cromwell on the bunk. " Suspended animation, hey ? I suppose he turned it over to the Shangs ?"

" Had to. They were well aware of what had been going on." Ney let out a breath. " I wouldn't mention it but for the fact that it was almost exactly the same method as Doctor Ghananamba used. Which proves a point, like history repeating itself."

Bennett put a hand to his bandaged head. His keen eyes darted from one speaker to another. His face wore the closed-in look he adopted whenever these associates of his talked this

cryptic shorthand—referring to a secret that he knew, one day, he also would possess. Until then, he must remain a junior member. His eyes, reluctantly, strayed to the bunk where old Cromwell was dying of cancer. Then he glanced back at Steeger, and withdrew his gaze from the room. Two chances. The day might come sooner than he had expected.

Robert Ney sat quietly looking at Horner. There was a strong bond between these men—Horner and Ney. Each, in his time, had had to do many things that nauseated ; they had come through much mental suffering and searching self-analysis that left them hating themselves, into this cabin aboard a houseboat moored in one of England's forgotten riverways. Now they were having to face the knowledge that the responsibility for all Earth's future, the responsibility for the success planned by men long dead, was falling squarely on their shoulders. Horner took a long breath, slapped both hands down on his knees and said brightly : " Nothing happens to those who expect it to happen ; we've got to take decisive action. One : the suspended animation thing can be left as it is. Ghananamba wouldn't thank us for making him superfluous." they chuckled slyly. " Two : Clinton. Bob, you'll have to drag your Wasps' feet a little on that, until we've time to frame a break-out. I hate to suggest this ; but the other doctor, perhaps he could be—you understand me—?"

" I understand, Horn. A filthy business." Ney looked up at the smoke-blackened wooden shield, split down the centre, the carved letters ZI deeply incised by men long since decently buried—or shot by the Shangs. " I understand. I'll get the girl out, Raoul will see to that. Henderson may have to be taken in. I'll see that he doesn't suffer."

" I can't say : ' Good,' Bob," Horner said. " But I shall be thinking of you." He glanced at Steeger. " What ships have you available, and what crews, Steeger ?"

Steeger said at once, crisply : " There are three shipping lines operating out of Asia. All crews have been approached, with a hundred percent satisfaction. They will be ready on the day."

" That's fine, Steeger. Bennett ?"

" Two lines from Australasia. So far one is complete, the other has three Shangsyc crews. They will be taken care of as soon as you tip me the time. We can then put in crews friendly—the shipping line bosses themselves are firmly for Earth."

" I know Bob's position. Six lines, about eighty percent friendly. European and African, eight lines, ninety percent friendly. They, too, will be a hundred percent when the day dawns. How many ships does that give us ?"

" Upwards of three hundred," Hawkeshawe said.

" That's my figure, too—three hundred and twenty. We'll need every one. The armies of free fighters will have to be briefed very thoroughly, and as late as possible."

Bennett was sitting back now, looking at Horner with a little frown. Slowly, as though not quite sure of the propriety of what he was about to say, he said : " I've gone along with this sounding of interstellar shipping lines, and postulating the number of ships and men we can put into space on a quick seizure of spaceports. But—but I would like to know the answer to one question."

" Maybe, Ben," Horner said cautiously.

" It's a truism to say you can't invade one solar system from another. I mean, interstellar war is a fiction ; logistics would be incredibly enormous. Even invading a culture lower in the evolutionary scale would demand supplies carried over light years of fantastic proportions. The Shangs infiltrated us, made friends, wormed their way in and took control ; only then did they feel strong enough to invade. I suppose they're now advanced on us in science and technology even if they weren't far ahead when they fought." Bennett stabbed a sudden finger at Horner.

" I can't see the validity of going ahead on a plan that envisages the invasion of Alishang—and you don't just want the ships to keep them out of the Shangs' hands." Bennett was deadly serious now. " I'd like to know a little more of our plans. All I can see before us is a colossal failure !"

XII

Shirley looked down shyly at the crisp starched cleanliness of her grey smock. She ran her hands down the coarse material ; and the light in her eyes made Liz Eddington feel good—and humble and angry and an ordinary, frightened girl, facing problems of the great outside world that blew with cold blasts against which she had no protection.

Henderson had been forced to seek sanctuary in the mental hospital ; the Wasps had only twisted his arms a little, but the

old man's fragility had weakened under the strain. He was older now, shrunken and grey, and his big face drooped in fleshless folds of skin. Liz wondered where it would all end.

Late August, with the roses rioting along the walls and the iron bars hidden beneath branching sprays of sweet pea, a restful, placid period to anyone not hiding without real knowledge of what they were hiding from or why. Liz smiled back at Shirley. " That's fine, dear. And your hair looks so pretty."

" I feel better, Elizabeth, I really do." Shirley would not permit herself the familiarity of addressing Liz as Liz. "Doctor says I can visit in town tomorrow."

" Oh, that is nice ! You can buy some things—ribbons, new underclothes—I've got a little money hidden away. I shan't be using it for a long time, I don't suppose."

" Elizabeth—this is a lunatic asylum, isn't it ?"

The question took Liz aback. " Why, ye-es."

" Well—what are you here for ?"

The unexpectedness of that—and the difficulty of improvising an answer—vanished as the door slid aside with a clang and a female nurse, bulky and competent, strode in.

" Doctor wants to see you, Elizabeth," she said.

Shirley jumped up. " Can I come too ?"

Liz at once assumed control. " Of course, Shirley." She was vaguely alarmed at the transfer of identity the girl was making ; one day Liz would have to leave and the problem of Shirley would then be acute. But until that day she hadn't the moral strength left, under the impact of what had happened, to make decisions in advance. They went downstairs.

Grandison was waiting in the hall.

Liz recognised him at once, despite the disguise.

" What—what do you want here ?"

The portly detective this time betrayed himself by twirling a battered felt hat in his fingers. The same nervous gesture that could not conceal his chilling efficiency.

" Nothing serious, doc—that is, Liz. Nothing serious at all. You're coming with me. Pack at once. We leave in ten minutes."

Before that could sink in, Shirley's little wail took Liz's attention. The girl was cowering in her grey smock, leaning hard against Liz, with one arm around her waist. Her eyes were enormous, fixed on Grandison in utter hatred.

" Is it—" Liz could not finish.

" Yes." Grandison ignored Shirley. " They're following up. We leave, at once."

" Shirley," Liz said gently. " I've got to pay a visit, but I won't be long—"

" You're going away for good ! You're not coming back !"

For all her sins, Liz couldn't lie to the girl. She had brought her out of a grey twilight world where nothing mattered, given her back an interest in herself and her appearance and was ready to go on with the therapy—how could she toss aside all that, all her work, the sort of work she had dedicated herself to when still a young girl? Grandison scuffed his foot impatiently. " You'll have to hurry—Liz."

A thought occurred to Liz. " What about Henderson ?"

" You mean Smith ? He's staying here."

" Yes. Yes, I mean Smith." She spoke dully, hating subterfuge. " But why ? If the Wa—if they are coming here—?"

" That doesn't concern you. My job is to take you away, fast." Grandison, for all his efficiency, was wilting at the edges. He was clearly frightened, Liz saw, and the knowledge did more to unsettle her than anything else.

" I cannot leave," she said firmly, " without Smith and Shirley here. Can't you see—"

" Look, Liz !" Grandison was pleading now. " It's our lives ! Please come. Please !"

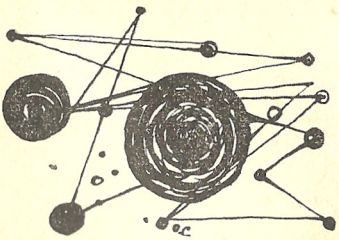
Shirley had been watching him like some wild animal peering from a thicket. Now she released Liz. She said, with a dignity that caught the throat : " Elizabeth. I think you should go. Now. There is something wrong—there is big trouble, I know. You must go, please."

" No." Liz firmed down her mouth. " I'll pack. And you, Shirley. And tell Smith, Grandison. We'll all go together. I'm quite sure you can arrange that with the asylum."

Grandison acknowledged defeat. His eyes were furtive. " All right ! But for God's sake, hurry !"

As Liz ran across the hall and back to the stairs, Grandison said : " And God help the boss ! They'll guess, they're bound to guess—"

When Liz returned, carrying a case in each hand, one hers, the other Shirley's, Doctor Henderson had been called over from the male wing and was waiting, pale and indifferent, with Grandison. Apart from these, the foyer was empty. No-one else wished to become involved ; it was transparently obvious what was going on. They went towards the doors.



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" Late," Grandison was saying. " Late. Oh, damn and blast it all. Late. Hurry up, there !"

The doors opened. Uniforms crowded it. Black and yellow.

Grandison pulled out his gun and pulled the trigger twice before the slugs hit him. He still stood, a calm, remote look on his face. He said quite clearly: "As an Earthman I spit in your faces ; and I die doing my duty."

Then the machine guns cut him to pieces.

The Wasps ran across the foyer's tiled floor, knelt beside Henderson and Liz. Grandison's two bullets had done only fifty percent of their work. Henderson was dead. Liz still breathed. The bullet had missed her brain, at which Grandison had fired, knowing that at least she deserved a clean death, and had gouged out a piece beneath the right ear. She was unconscious. The Wasps lifted her, began to walk out of the door.

Shirley stood, hands slack at her sides. She did not scream. Her face was blank. She stooped, picked up her case.

Then, slowly, she turned and began to walk back to her cell in the asylum.

" A colossal failure, Ben ?" Horner said. He rubbed his eyes and then extended his arms, stretching. " That's what we are dedicated to avoid. God, I'm tired ! Hey, how about a drink, Bob ? Steeger ?"

" Surely." Whilst the drinks were being arranged, Horner studied Bennett. The younger man, with his clean-cut features and hard, eagle look, sat composed and waiting for a reply to his question. Very deceptive, those handsome features of Bennett. He killed Wasps with a cold loving ferocity. Horner knew of course, that he couldn't be told the truth. Only the Four Who Knew possessed that ; and the Four were all still alive. But, perhaps, a few hints. Bennett was brilliant ; he might stumble upon the answer—although that was almost as unlikely as the answer itself.

" I'll admit, Ben," Horner began carefully, " that if we merely envisioned seizing the interstellar ships allowed to Earth by the Shangs, cramming them with troops and then blasting through hyperspace and invading Alishang—well, we wouldn't get far. That's not it. Only part. The men transported by the hyperspace ships have a vital job to do ; a job that the assault training carried out in secret will prepare them for. They'll have to fight. They should enjoy that, fighting real Shangs."

" A real treat for them," Bennett said. " It's seven light years to Alishang. You send these three hundred and twenty ships there, loaded with troops—troops—troops mark you, armed with conventional weapons only. Oh, sure, we've 200 millimetre howitzers and midget submarines with guided torpedoes and rocket launchers and tanks—you can't just suppress an entire planet's manufacturing resources, the task is too vast. But we've no nuclear weapons, no guided missiles, nothing that the Shangs need worry about. We're an army equipped with sword and lance, man !"

" I know. And I know that it is seven light years away that we must fight our battles." He chuckled, grimly. " All the world awaits ZI. They imagine that it is some great popular uprising, a sort of gigantic Twenty Five. They expect us to fight the Wasps and Shangs on Earth. I was talking to Rupert about it. A flaming sign in the sky to sweep the aliens from the world, he said. Archaic—and useless."

" Agreed." Bennett was hunched forward now, bright eyes fixed on Horner. " But the distances, the logistics, you can't support the army, even supposing they effect a lodgement."

" Alishang has four moons, none as large as Luna, but all sufficiently of a size to maintain a garrison. Imagine those four moons manned by men from Earth !" Horner's eyes in the glow of the lights were shining with a fantastic's zeal.

Bennett moved impatiently. " A wonderful conception. If," he added sourly, " we had weapons to reach the surface."

Steeger started to say something ; but Ney cut him off sharply. " Let Horn handle this."

" Look, Ben," Horner said reasonably. " I could easily just say : ' Trust us. We have thought of everything. The plan we have, the secret, takes care of all eventualities.' But I'm trying to put your mind at rest by telling you as much as you must have already reasoned out. The trouble is," he added fretfully, " we really need more than just four to hold the secret. With one of the members in the Wasp Building, too much strain is imposed."

Horner broke off as a gargling grunt came from the bunk. A yellow hand appeared on the wooden edge, trembling, straining. The nurse appeared silently from her hidey hole, fussed, and when Cromwell had been quietened, withdrew.

" We had to appoint a man not in the secret onto the council to take the strain of Australasia off Steeger's shoulders. Only

four." Horner glanced over at the dim bulk of Cromwell. " I wonder whether or not we might waive that rule, now, and tell Ben everything. After all, ZI is close, we've nothing to lose now—"

" No !" Steeger was vehement. " It's against tradition !"

" That for tradition !" interrupted Ney. He jerked his head towards Cromwell. The old man's spirit seemed to be pressing in on the cabin, peering down at them in the reflections from lamplit walls. " I say tell Ben ! One way or the other, it doesn't really matter." Ney's face was dark with passion. " And it would give us a feeling of unity again."

" Planning has been pretty intolerable, recently," said Bennett mildly.

" No !" Steeger said flatly. He had lost all his shakes, all his fluffy panics, all his semi-incoherent ramblings of speech. He sat erect. " No," he said again, not looking at Bennett, keeping his face turned towards Horner.

" But why, Steeger ? Why ? It's only a little way off. Two hundred and fifty one years, now," Horner said.

" The last two—" Bennett began. Then he stopped. His eyes went to the old smoke-blackened ZI shield hanging from the ceiling. He put one hand to his face. He looked frightened. " Twenty two seventy four," he said at last, as though reciting a prayer.

" So that's one secret no longer," Ney said. He sat back in his seat with satisfaction.

" This is the situation, Ben," Horner said. " We usually make a little ceremony of it—but this time—"

A voice that spoke from an unfilled grave croaked through the cabin. They all flinched, and whirled to face the bunk.

Cromwell had raised himself by some prodigious effort of will. Sweat streamed down his dessicated face. His eyes were enormous. Enormous and preternaturally bright. His two hands, side by side, clawed the bunk, pressed against his chest and holding his thin body up with visible effort.

" Stop," old Cromwell said. " Stop." He fought for breath. " Horn—come here." A slow gasping indrawn breath. " Do not tell—Bennett. I know." His purple tongue rasped his bloodless lips. " Horner—come here. Bennett must not know the secret."

Then he fell back exhausted into the bunk.

To be concluded