NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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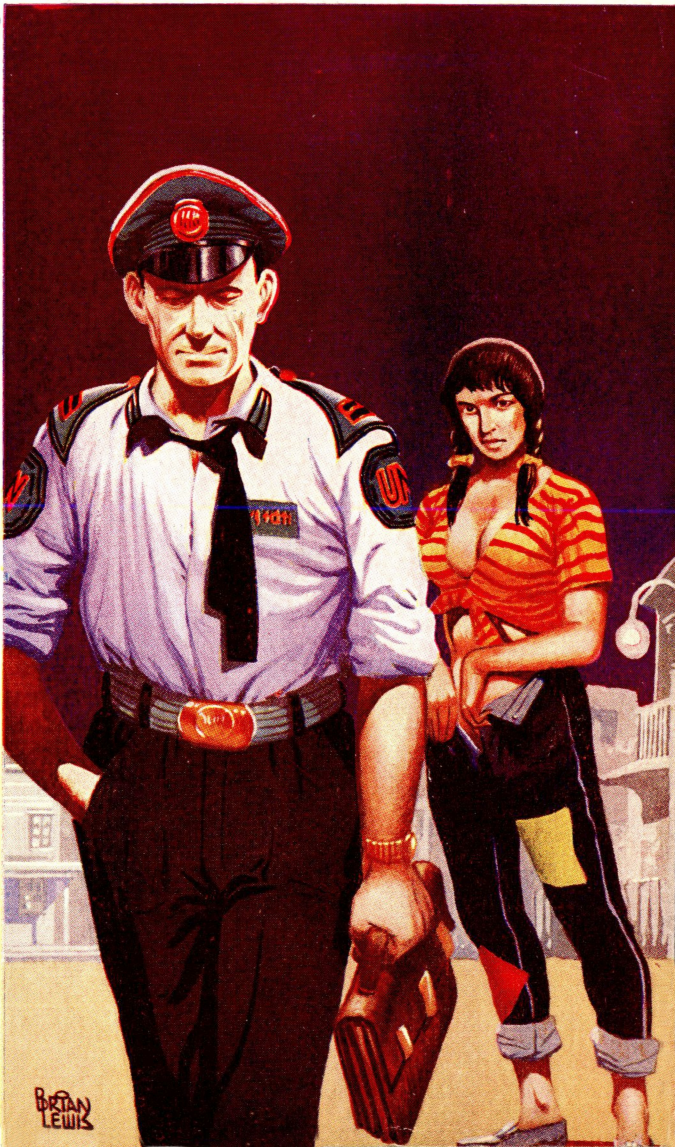

NEW WORLDS
PROFILES

John Brunner

London

One of the few fulltime British professional writers we have, John Brunner has been producing some interesting plots during the past few years. Of his latest serial he says:

"The oldest and hoariest question readers put to writers is: "But where do you get your plots?" To forestall the next person who's going to ask this—with particular reference to "Put Down This Earth"—here's a short answer.

"From contemplating present-day problems.

"Somebody (Edmund Crispin, I think) has said that science fiction is the last refuge of the morality tale—the allegory with a point, a parable. I find this one of the field's greatest advantages. You can take a basic problem, strip it of its prejudicial overtones like political catchwords and direct personal associations by setting it in an alien context or in the future, and work through it by logic.

"I make no secret of the fact that I'm genuinely concerned and worried by the problems I put into my stories. The kind of human apathy which could all too easily get us into the mess I've used as background for "Put Down This Earth"; the guilt complex which may haunt us because of our unpleasant history of wars and which figures in "The Analysts" (coming shortly in *Science Fantasy*)—things of this sort bother me personally and lead me to try and work out solutions in my stories. This is part of what science fiction is for.

"I don't mean to imply that that's the whole function of s-f; merely that it's very important. Call it propaganda if you like. Then consider whether propaganda in favour of common sense and logic in the organisation of human affairs is a good thing to have around. I think so."

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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CONTENTS

Editor : JOHN CARNELL

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TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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Complex . . .

A complex situation is building up in the British book publishing trade now that the American importation of paperback books is beginning to reach full swing after nearly one year since the lifting of restrictions. This situation is mirrored particularly in the science fiction field which produces the smallest number of specialised titles each year and where the effect of importation is immediately noticeable. If my deliberations in this field are correct they will eventually apply to all classes of fiction being published in this country.

While import restrictions were in force British publishers, both book and paper, were in the unique position of being able to choose only the best (or what they considered the best) American s-f titles to reproduce for UK and Commonwealth publication. This picking and choosing was particularly evident when the paperback boom started several years ago—only American authors whose names had been built up over the years as accredited leaders in the field were considered; Asimov, van Vogt (who hadn't written a new novel in years !) Heinlein (whose titles were always asked for but seldom chosen), Bradbury (the Disciple of the Flock), Sturgeon and Bester (both on the strength of two novels !) with concessions made to Blish, Sheckley, Tucker, Russell, Simak and a few others. British writers, with the exception of Clarke, Wyndham, Christopher, and to some extent Maine and McIntosh, were never considered.

When the paperback boom commenced many British publishers added s-f to their lists and had an opportunity of obtaining the British rights to many first-class s-f novels which had never been produced here. Few took immediate advantage of the opportunity although some widened their choice of authors as competition began to increase, while others relied upon producing paperback editions of hard cover novels which had been published here during the minor boom in the early 1950's.

All too suddenly, however, the honeymoon is over, for most of the American paperback publishers are now importing their own titles direct and British publishers are beginning to wonder rather frantically where they are going to obtain sufficient good titles to keep their lists going. The answer is that they won't.

Since import restrictions came off we have seen the arrival of paperbacks published by Ballantine, Pyramid, Bantam and

. . . Situation

Berkley. (In fact our recent serial *Venus Plus X* was published in USA by Pyramid and we were assured by Ted Sturgeon's literary agent that copies would not be imported into Britain—they went on sale here almost on the day we commenced serialisation). Ace Books of New York have had some distribution of their general titles in this country and will shortly import their s-f titles. New American Library, publishers of Signet and Mentor books, have recently acquired half the financial holding of our own Four Square Books and Ace Books ; it is logical to expect to see Signet titles imported through the new organisation. Frederick Muller Ltd., have been importing Gold Medal titles for some time.

Between these different distributions there are only a few top US paperback houses not being represented here with their own books. Not that such distributions are on a large scale ; possibly 10,000 copies spread thinly over the entire country—but what British publisher is going to be mad enough to bring out a British edition of an American title after it has seen partial distribution here ? Add to this fact that some American paperback publishers are now adding a clause to their author's contracts giving them the right to distribute throughout the English-speaking world and you have a fair idea of what our own publishers are up against.

At the time the import restrictions came off our own publishers were expanding their s-f paperback titles. Obviously not knowing that the major source of supply was about to be cut off. A good example of this is the range of titles to be published by Four Square Books who have just commenced their s-f list with Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (admittedly controversial, but one plum which didn't get away). The other six titles they list shows the strain of trying to find sufficient titles to keep their list going. Their second title, Hoyle's *Ossian's Ride*, is probably one of the dullest pieces of fiction in the genre in recent years, not at all bettered by Victor Valentine's *Cure For Death*, published some time back by Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd., which they also list as forthcoming.

Of the better-known authors Four Square list, there is *Fallen Star* by James Blish, who has never been well honoured in his

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One of the gravest problems facing humanity today is the rapidly increasing birthrate and the desperate efforts being made to feed everyone. Extrapolating into the future, John Brunner foresees the collapse of individual governments and the rise of a world government headed by the United Nations to combat the menace.

PUT DOWN THIS EARTH

by JOHN BRUNNER

Part One of Three Parts

one

The original plan was that he should change planes at Topeka, go to Pueblo, be at the Institute by two-thirty, get on a plane again at six and be back in New York the same night.

Only they cut the Topeka-Pueblo schedule directly after he left New York—they didn't say why but it was possible to guess : most likely, some essential spare parts or even a cargo of fuel had been re-routed elsewhere on the continent to meet a genuine emergency. There were always emergencies.

At Topeka, the local Transport Rationalisation officer was a surly, irritable man whose job was getting him down. The best alternative route he could produce was a ride in a five-year-old car driven by a red-faced man called Mitchell, who had a farm somewhere in the area and consequently enjoyed vital-production privileges. But the car had a dozen different grinding noises in its works.

And, a few miles short of the Kansas-Colorado state border, it gave a huge reverberating bang and ground to a permanent halt.

Since the moment the air hostess had warned him he couldn't expect a plane out of Topeka, Nicholas Greville had felt a helpless, senseless rage, born of sheer frustration, mounting inside him. As though the bang from the car's engine had been the sound of a tamper being blown from the vent of an erupting volcano, he felt that rage exploding upwards now.

Was the whole blasted world conspiring against him ?

With no more comment on the situation than a sigh, Mitchell switched off the ignition and sat back, fumbling a cigarette from his pocket.

" Aren't you going to do anything ?" Greville snapped at him.

" What ?" said Mitchell wearily, and lit the cigarette.

" Hell and *damnation* !" was all Greville could find in reply. He threw open the door beside him and got out.

There was nothing to be seen in either direction along the sunny-hot road. No other vehicles were approaching. The only sign of movement—aside from the illusory wavering of the heat-haze—was the single plume of smoke crawling up behind a rise that marked the location of the last small town they had come through.

Sweat prickled on his face, and inside the dark uniform shirt and pants he was wearing. The sun shimmered blindingly on his agent's shoulder-badges. He twisted so that the reflection moved away from his eyes and bent to look at the engine compartment. The fasteners on the hood had been broken some time ago, and replaced with loops of twisted wire. By its appearance, the wire hadn't been disturbed since it was fitted.

Greville untwisted the loops with nervous fingers, silently cursing his own clumsiness as he broke a finger-nail, and shoved the hood back. The stay was broken, too ; he had to fetch a rock and jam it under the hinge before he could stop the hood falling on his head.

Fumes rising from the engine choked and blinded him at first, and the whole mechanism proved to be covered with a thick black sludgy film of oil. Coughing, poking away the disguising sludge, Greville eventually established what must have happened. The oil in the main bearings must have been due for a change millions of revs ago ; the housing of the front

one had split open, and when he picked up a finger tip load of the oil which had escaped, to rub it against his thumb, he could feel the gritty sensation that indicated particles of metal suspended in it. With the oil in that condition, the bearing would have worn, kerosene would have seeped through from the combustion chamber—and the explosion had been the announcement that his kerosene had hit flashpoint.

He jerked away the rock that was jamming the hinge, slammed the hood down without bothering to re-twist the wires holding the fasteners, and spun on his heel to throw the rock as far into the distance as he could. The meaningless act relieved his tension momentarily. He fumbled out his handkerchief and rubbed his hands on it.

" Found the trouble ?" said Mitchell, not moving from behind the steering wheel.

" You need a new engine, that's all," said Greville harshly.

" Figured so," was Mitchell's only reply. He drew on his cigarette again.

" You *figured* so ! Is that all you've got to say ?"

" What else ?" the farmer countered. " You think I can find a new engine by turning over rocks ?"

Greville didn't answer. His burning eyes remained on Mitchell's face, but he wasn't really seeing the man. He was trying to figure out a course of action. It was after four in the afternoon now. He still had to get to the Institute—somehow. He couldn't just turn around and head for New York again. There still wasn't another car in sight. So he would have to walk back to the last townlet, find a phone, call the Institute and beg them to send out a copter for him—if one was available ; then call Leda and tell her he wouldn't be back in time for tomorrow after all.

He wasn't looking forward to that.

The fury behind his eyes was sawing through Mitchell's affectation of calm. Now the farmer shifted uncomfortably in his seat and spoke in a defiant tone.

" Don't blame me, Greville !" he said. " I didn't ask to have you hitch with me, remember—I just did like the law says, and told the TR office in Topeka I was going this way today."

" You ought to have changed your bearing oil !" snapped Greville. " I'd have thought a car was valuable enough to be worth looking after, these days !"

Mitchell sighed. " You UN agents must spend your time with your heads in the clouds. I don't know—mostly you just don't seem to be on the same damn' planet as the rest of us ! I've been waiting for lube oil for more'n a month, and not just for the car, either—for the harvesters as well."

" I'm not blaming you," said Greville with an effort. He felt the heat of his rage subsiding slowly. " It's just that—hell, *you* know !"

" Yeah, we all know. I didn't plan this, you know. There are guys, I guess, who'd deliberately wreck a car for the fun of stranding a UN agent in the middle of nowhere and seeing him squirm. That type—why take away what's ours and give it to a bunch of lousy greasers ? I don't feel like that. The Food and Agriculture man I work with is a good joe, doing his best to make supplies go around. I put up with it when things go short. 'Bout time *you* learned to, 'pears to me."

Greville shifted to detach his shirt from the sticky skin on his shoulder-blades. " Sorry," he said after a pause. " I wasn't getting mad at you. Just at the world in general. I had to get those documents "—he jerked his thumb at the briefcase lying where he had sat in the car—" to the UN Institute in Sandy Gulch. Should have been there at two-thirty this afternoon."

" If they were urgent, why didn't you get the UN to lay on a plane for you direct ?"

" Now who's living on a different planet ?" Greville snapped. " Why do people think the UN is filthy rich when everyone else is short ? We don't waste fuel and pilots' time on running little errands like this !"

" Well, if your errand is just a little one, why are you so mad ?" demanded Mitchell reasonably. Greville spread his hands.

" If you must know—tomorrow's my wedding anniversary, and I promised my wife I'd be home tonight."

Mitchell grunted. " Oughta have a wife like mine—she's grown used to this kind of thing . . . What are you going to do ? Walk back to a phone ?"

" Guess I'll have to."

" Uh-huh. Well, when you get to one, maybe you'd call my wife for me. Tell her I'll be back when I arrive." He took a slip of paper from the compartment on the dash and scribbled the number down.

" Sure, I'll do that for you," said Greville. He had been mechanically rubbing his hands, over and over again, with his handkerchief. Now he stuffed the oil-blackened cloth back in his pocket and took the paper Mitchel gave him.

" How about you ?" he said, picking up his briefcase.

" Me ? I don't fancy walking in this heat. If someone comes by, I'll hitch a ride to Pueblo—or somewhere. If not, then I'll walk down the road when it's cooler."

He tossed his spent cigarette out of the window. " What the hell !" he finished.

Greville hesitated. "And how about the car?" he demanded.

" If someone comes by who can tow it, fine. If not—then I'll just have to leave it here till someone finds an engine for me. Which may be never."

" Who's the FAO man you mentioned—the one you said was a good joe ? Maybe I could pass the word for you when I get to the Institute."

Mitchell shook his head, a sardonic smile crossing his red face. " Like I said, I sort of respect the UN agencies. I don't need any private words put in for me, thanks all the same. I know there's a graft and influence in the agencies, just like there is everywhere. But I wouldn't like to think it had touched me. I wouldn't feel the same about the UN afterwards, would I now ?"

" That's not quite what I meant," said Greville with an effort. " If there are any farm service teams operating near here at the moment, maybe I could have one of them pass along this road with a spare bearing for your turbine. That would get you home, at least."

Mitchell grunted. " It's a point," he said reluctantly. " Okay—do that. But I don't want to sit here after sundown waiting for someone to call by."

" Well—leave the key in the ignition lock, then. No one could move this thing as it stands. I'll tell them to mail you the key when they've finished fitting it up. If there is a team around here, of course."

" I'll do that. My home address is on file at the Institute, of course."

There was a moment of empty silence. " I'd better start walking," said Greville. " So long. Thanks for the ride—"

" What there was of it," said Mitchell, blank-faced. " So long, then."

two

The heat was incredible. The plastic handle of the briefcase felt as though it was welding itself to his fingers ; dust got up around his feet with every step he took, coating his shoes, and his legs almost to the knees, with a yellowish-grey film. The wavering plume of smoke behind the rise, indicating his goal, seemed to get no nearer.

In an overcrowded world like this, it was almost insanely ridiculous to think he was stranded miles from anywhere. He tried to relieve his tense mind by thinking of the fact as an amusing paradox, and failed. He pictured the house-boats jostling out across the Great Lakes ; he pictured the log cabins of squatters in Westchester County ; he pictured the rabbit-warren developments of Californian cities, and then glanced at the square miles of emptiness surrounding him.

He couldn't think of it as paradoxical, because it wasn't. It was logical. That was how it had always been. In this infernal rat-race against the population spiral, it was always quicker to add to what one already had. There was never time or surplus productivity to allot to a place where one could be compelled to start from scratch.

Oh, they'd started here—a bit. He saw one or two proofs of the fact not far away. A ruled-out square of green in the prevalent dusty landscape indicated a pilot project for soil-creation—there, a culture of anhydrous bacteria would have broken down rock and bonded it against the wind ; then other bacteria would have displaced them, and a truckload of hygroscopic compounds would have been ploughed in ; lastly, when the concentration of ground-water was high enough, cacti and other dry-earth plants had been sown. But the cacti weren't very useful yet, and in any case it was only a couple of square miles in the middle of scarcity.

The sign said ISOLATION, KANSAS—HEIGHT 2721—POP.

And someone had painted out the population figure, replacing it with a jagged, random line like a crazy fever-chart.

There wasn't much of it, as a town. But what there was of it was crowded—like everywhere else. There were kids—a lot of kids—playing alongside the streets ; schools here would presumably function in a relay system, as they did most places. The newer, post-turn-of-century houses and apartments on the

way into the centre were dusty and shabby and overcrowded. In the centre of town, things were worse—patched, cracking, shifting buildings full of people. Eyes followed Greville as he walked. A bunch of kids piled out of an abandoned car at the roadside and followed him, shouting, " UN thief ! UN thief!"

Well, you got used to that.

Maybe, Greville reflected, it would be better not to have uniforms for the UN agencies. And then, on the other hand, there was still the traditional association of a uniform with authority.

The hell with it.

He came to a drugstore not long after picking up the kids, walked in. There was dust all over. Behind the counter, a hand-written sign said NO SODAS. It looked as though it had been there for a month or two. No one was serving.

Greville shoved his briefcase on the counter and rapped at its hard surface. A head poked out from a door behind the counter—a middle-aged, greying head belonging to a drawn-faced man of average height.

" Yeah ?"

" A cold drink," said Greville. " And some phone tokens."

The man came slowly through the door, pulling it to behind him. He didn't say anything for a while, as he took in Greville's uniform. Then he glanced at the window, seeing the group of kids who had lined up outside, watchful, waiting.

He said, " Don't get me wrong, mister. But if I serve you in here, those kids are going to smash my windows. You know that, don't you ?"

Greville passed a weary hand across his face. He felt the accumulated dust grit his skin like abrasive paper. From a throat as dry as Death Valley, he said, " The hell with the drink, then. Just the phone tokens."

The store-owner hesitated. Then he said, his voice pleading, " Don't get me wrong ! But why don't you go to the UN agent's office, and do your phoning from there ?"

Startled, Greville let his hand fall to his case. " Is there an agent here ?" he demanded. " I didn't know."

" Sure there is !" said the store-owner eagerly. " It's almost directly opposite. Over what used to be a shoe-store. Can't miss it !"

" Okay," said Greville, picking up his case.

" Thanks, mister !" the store-owner said eagerly. " I sure appreciate that ! Don't get me wrong, but—"

" Nobody could get you wrong," said Greville acidly, and went out.

The grouped kids parted as he pushed the door back. They were boys and girls of fourteen to seventeen, thin, eyes surrounded with wrinkles as they screwed up their lids against the dayglare. Most of them wore faded shirts and jeans, some decorated defiantly with patches of contrasting material—red, skyblue, yellow.

A whisper passed among them while Greville glanced over the street. Sure enough, there was a sign in a window—the glass was out, but the sign was still there : ISOLATION—FAO OFFICE.

A decision had been taken among the group of kids while he paused. Now a girl stepped into his path as he made to move away : older than most of her companions, with faded brown hair clipped short, her adult breasts on her adolescent body tied into prominence by the knotting together of the tails of her shirt.

" Hey !" she said. " Hey, mister !"

Greville turned cold eyes on her. " Yes ?" he said sharply.

A snigger went round the watching group.

" Mister, we just want you to know ! You took away the sodas and the cokes and the whole lot of it all, an' we just want you to know—*we don't care* !"

Greville was at a loss for an answer, staring at the girl's tense, almost animal face, in which her brown eyes burned like brown fires. The muscles were taut on her bare midriff ; her breasts rose and fell almost as though she was panting after a long, hard run.

" No ?" she said after a pause, shaking her head. " No ? You don't get it, hey ?"

Greville shook his head, warily studying the girl's companions as well as herself. They didn't seem to be poised to do anything—but there was always the danger.

" Well, see here then !" said the girl with sudden vehemence, and thrust her thumbs into the waistband of her jeans, dragging open the snap fasteners at the sides and shoving the garment to the level of her knees. " The UN didn't give us this, mister, so what the hell is the good of the UN ?"

Almost before his eyes had shifted downwards, Greville knew with slick certainty what it was he was going to see.

So it had got this far, had it ? It had even reached this far.

And it was what he had expected. From the crease of the girl's thigh, where her threadbare briefs were grey-white on her tanned skin, to almost her knees, the pattern of small round scabs repeated and repeated and repeated.

They were waiting for his reaction : a comment, an excuse. Something. He didn't give it to them. He stepped past the girl and strode across the street. He didn't look back.

The door of the UN agency office was locked, of course. He pressed the annunciator stud and gave his rank and authority ; a man's voice answered, telling him to come in. The door slid back, paused for him to pass through, closed with a sucking sound behind him.

There had been subsidence here. There were small cracks in all the walls of the hallway, and the elevator door was too stiff to move when he tried it.

A voice—the same voice he had heard over the annunciator —called down to him. " You'll have to use the stairs," the man told him. " Elevator shaft is out of true, and the cab's jammed between floors."

Greville acknowledged the advice, and went slowly up the stairs. The man was waiting for him outside the office on the first floor ; he was youthful, but his eyes were old. He wore the FAO uniform, with junior rank badges on the shoulders of his shirt, and patches of sweat discoloured his armpits.

" I'm Lumberger, FAO rep here," he said, putting out his hand. " God, I feel marooned in this place ! Good to see someone else in the business."

Greville changed hands on the briefcase, shook Lumberger's hand, followed him into the small, untidy office.

" What on earth are you doing here, anyway ?" Lumberger was saying. " I saw you come down the street—couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you go into the drugstore. Especially with those kids following you. Say, what was the strip-tease act for? They're not going into the brothel business, are they ?"

" She wasn't selling anything," said Greville, his voice strangely rough in his own ears. " Someone's selling it to her."

" Selling her what ?" Lumberger indicated a chair, sat down, thrust a pack of cigarettes across the littered desk.

" Happy dreams, of course."

Lumberger stopped in mid-movement, the pack of cigarettes resting on his open palm. " Here ?" he said incredulously.

" You mean you didn't know ?" Greville's voice was equally incredulous.

" No ! This must be new ! I haven't heard—"

" New be damned !" interrupted Greville violently. " That girl must have been on it for six months at least—she's got scars all down both thighs. And from the way she was showing it off, she's probably not the furthest gone of that bunch." He took a cigarette from Lumberger's pack, and snatched up a book of matches from the desk. " You're falling down on your job, if you didn't know about it."

" Now look here !" said Lumberger. " It's all very well for someone like you to walk in and tell me I'm falling down on the job. But you just don't know what it's like in a place like this ! ' UN ' is a dirty word in a place like this. I hardly dare to go out on the street because those kids gang up on me ; they throw rocks at my car when I go to check the patches of reclamation we've got round here. They say I'm responsible for the shortage of sodas and the power-cuts and all the rest of it, and what can I do ? Turn round and tell them that it's thanks to people like me they can walk straight, haven't got bow legs from rickets, haven't got their bellies bloated with pellagra—?"

" Stow it," said Greville wearily. " I'm sorry. It's the heat. That, and the fact that I'm with Narcotics Division in New York, so it maybe seems more important to me than it really is."

Lumberger's defiant manner changed to one of sullenness. " Oh, sure it's important," he said. " But my business is Food and Agriculture, and I don't see why someone from another department should tell me I'm falling down on the job."

" If you weren't expecting to be told just that, how come you leapt to your own defence so quickly ?" snapped Greville.

" I'm saying it's not my fault !" blazed Lumberger. " The situation here is absolutely impossible !"

There was a whine on the edge of his raised voice, like the cry of an unoiled bearing in the heart of a noisy engine. Greville sighed, tapping the ash from his cigarette. " I didn't come here to abuse you," he said. " I just want to get the hell out. I was in a car that broke down the other side of the town, trying to make it to the Institute at Sandy Gulch. I have to use a phone. Let me use yours, and I'll get out of your hair."

" Hah ! Then someone at the New York end has made a fool of himself. You're supposed to be bringing a sample of happy dreams. About a half pound of the stuff."

A cold hand seemed to close on Greville's throat. Reflexively he slapped his hand down on the briefcase beside him, reassuring himself that it was still there.

" What ?"

" What I said. If you haven't got it—but you must have ! We didn't want to send it through the mails, because an addict seems to be able to smell the stuff through lead casing, practically."

" My God !" said Greville in a tone of thin alarm. " Then —well, if there's happy dreams in this case, doctor, you just missed losing it and me by the narrowest of margins. I was stopped by a gang of anti-UN teenagers outside a drugstore a few moments back. Addicts !"

Barriman didn't answer for a few moments. Then he said in a strangled tone, " Addicts ? *Where* did you say you were ?"

" Yes, I know—it astonished me, too. But there isn't any doubt. One of the girls pulled her pants down and showed me the marks on her legs."

The picture on the phone melted again ; this time the expression which froze on the screen was one of dismay.

" Isolation ?" repeated Barriman. " But don't FAO have an agent there ? Why haven't we been told ? Has this been going on long ?"

" I'd say six months, if this girl was among the first. Longer, if she wasn't." Greville drew on his cigarette again. " I'm talking from the UN agent's office now. Man called Lumberger. It was news to him, he said."

Barriman sighed. " Well, chalk up another area of incidence on the map," he said. " I'll get that 'copter out to you as quick as I can, and a couple of fieldworkers as well if they can be spared. Any chance of finding the source ?"

" In a town like this—they've painted out the population figures, but it must only be a few thousands—should be easy. If you can isolate the addicts from the non-addicts. Everyone in town might be addicted !"

" We'll work on it," said Barriman crisply. " See you when you get here."

The screen of the phone went blank. Greville put his own receiver down reluctantly. Now he had to call Leda and—explain.

Only, of course, he could put it off for another few precious moments ; he'd promised to call Mitchell's wife. The slip of paper with the number on it was in the pocket of his shirt. He pulled it out, seeing that the sweat soaking through the shirt had smeared the writing, but it was still legible. He dialled.

" Yes ?" A rather high, nervous voice ; the screen showed a middle-aged woman, fading from superficial prettiness, with a discontented mouth. There was a likeness to Leda in the set of that mouth. Greville shivered despite the torrid heat.

" I'm Nicholas Greville," he said. " Your husband—you are Mrs. Mitchell, I suppose ?"

" Yes, that's me. What about my husband ?"

" His car broke down near Isolation on the way to Pueblo. He asked me to call you and say he'd be home when he'd managed to fix transport."

" But he promised—!" Mrs. Mitchell wailed, and then her voice dropped into a sigh. " Oh, well . . . What's wrong with the car, anyway ?"

" Main bearing split. Engine seized up."

" I told him ! I *told* him if he didn't get some oil from—stupid bastard. Thanks for calling, anyway, Mr.—Mr.—"

" United Nations Narcotics Agent Nicholas Greville, ma'am," said Greville formally. The picture on the screen shifted, just in time to catch and freeze Mrs. Mitchell in the act of putting a horrified hand over her mouth. " And you don't have to worry about where your husband was supposed to be getting oil from. I don't think he's the kind of man who would."

The horrified expression was still there when Mrs. Mitchell hastily broke the connection.

And now—he had no further reason to postpone his call to Leda.

He dialled the inter-state coding of his home, waited for the attention signal. Instead, there was a sharp click and a woman's voice came on the line.

" Transcontinental superviser," said the voice wearily. The screen remained blank. " There is a delay of up to four hours on calls to points east of Chicago—I'm sorry." She didn't sound at all sorry.

" Check your line," said Greville harshly. He didn't like to use UN priorities for private calls, usually ; nonetheless, the consequences of not calling Leda up would be worse than what he expected when he did get through to her.

" Almost worse than that. Oh, it *is* habit-forming in the ordinary sense. The real danger, though, is altogether different. After long use, the compound resulting from taking happy dreams seems to deposit out in the central nervous system, *replacing* the constituents of certain nerve-cells. And when you get to that stage, the victim loses his or her hold on reality altogether. I mean—" He broke off.

" What happens to them ?"

Greville shrugged. " Well, we don't really know," he confessed. " We seldom catch up with a very advanced addict. We usually find that they've disappeared."

" Into thin air ?" said Lumberger sceptically.

" Are you seriously interested in what I'm saying ?"

Lumberger nodded, adopting a chastened look. Greville resumed, " Not into thin air, but into the teeming millions of the cities, which is just as bad. Very occasionally we get a lead that indicates one of them has been seen a long way from home some time later, but those leads usually break down. We can't keep track of the population any longer, even with the best computer records available. Most likely, the advanced addicts kill themselves ; just possibly, they eke out a beggar's existence in a tenement where no one asks any questions. Shortly before the end, they stop taking an interest in their surroundings." He shrugged. " They just—vanish. Like I said."

" Is that why you're so excited about finding happy dreams addicts here ?"

Greville nodded. " Ye-es. I mean it would be hard to lose someone completely in a little town like this, wouldn't it ?"

Lumberger gave a sarcastic laugh. " The whole damn' town's lost !" he said. " It's been lost for years !"

" Maybe."

" Who peddles the stuff, by the way ?" pursued Lumberger. " Is it sort of marketed conventionally, the way most drugs are ?"

" We don't know !" said Greville helplessly. " Look, we've known about the stuff for over two years. We've managed to seize a few consignments of the stuff—but usually from an addict we knew about already, generally from one who's past the point of taking much interest in his surroundings. All we know is that it's sold at a fixed price—five dollars for the first shot and *two* dollars for subsequent shots."

The phone buzzed. Greville seized the receiver and forgot Lumberger's existence.

four

" Your crash priority call," said the supervisor's voice. " Your circuit has sound only—sor-ree !"

The screen remained blank. The attention signal went on sounding. *Damnation*, thought Greville. *All this screwing-up of tension, all those rehearsals of what I was going to say . . .* He was expecting the flat recorded tones of his answering machine ; it startled him when at length—after more than twenty buzzes—Leda's voice came through.

" Leda Greville," she said. " Who is it ? I'm not getting a picture, you know."

" Hullo, darling. No picture on this circuit, I'm afraid."

" Oh, it's you." A snowstorm breathed in the voice, cold and distant. " Where are you ? At the Institute, I hope ! According to what you told me you're due aboard your return plane in about ten minutes."

Here it comes. Greville tried to swallow, but his mouth was parched. He said with an effort, " I'm calling from a town near the Kansas-Colorado state line. I got stranded. They cut the schedules out of Topeka."

" Don't tell me the rest of it," said Leda scornfully. " You won't be back tonight."

" I'm afraid not," said Greville. He was expecting almost anything bar what he got by way of reply—anger, pleading, even possibly tears. Instead, Leda laughed : a little tinkling laugh like breaking glass.

" I thought as much," she said. " You haven't kept a promise to me for months. You're always getting stranded. Now you call up on a circuit without a picture, so I can't see where you are. Well, wherever it is I hope you're having a *grand* time !" Sudden venom poured into her voice. " So get this ! *This* time I've made the right kind of arrangements ! When it pleases your high-and-mightiness to return to the arms of his loving wife, that loving wife is going to be out on the town having the highest time you can still find in this filthy, squalid, poverty-stricken world !"

And the connection broke.

" Give me some water, would you ?" said Greville, not looking at Lumberger.

" Sure, *that* I can find you," Lumberger answered, getting to his feet. " But I haven't been able to lay hands on a decent drink for a month. They won't sell me anything except basics

in that stinking store down the road. Can't even get coffee most of the time. It's a hell of a way to treat a UN agent—"

" One more complaint about the way they treat you and I'll push your teeth in," said Greville—factually, not with violence. " Who do you think you're talking to ?"

Lumberger looked suddenly frightened. " I'm—sorry," he forced out. " It's so seldom I meet anyone else in the same position—" He thrust out a cup of water, his hand shaking. " Here !"

It was warm, but it was water. Greville drank carefully, feeling almost that the inside of his mouth was absorbing the liquid, rather than that he was drinking it. He gave the cup back and muttered a word of thanks.

Uncertainly, Lumberger sat down again. " Uh—how long before your 'copter gets here ?" he asked.

" I don't know," Greville told him. He felt the snake-shaped coolness of the water inside him coiling down into his belly. " I'd like to wash up, if I can—and maybe stretch out for a while ?"

" Sure. There's a room through there—it's my bedroom, the rest of the premises. This is my home sweet home. All of it."

The head of water was minimal ; it took minutes for the flow to fill the sink. As soon as there was enough to cover his hands Greville cupped it up and sluiced his face. The dust on his skin became a kind of thin, slimy mud.

Leda . . .

Well, there wasn't much point in worrying about it it any longer.

Tomorrow would be their sixth anniversary. He'd been away on a job for the third, the fourth, and the fifth. And each time, trying to make up for it afterwards wasn't the same.

The dust was in his hair, under his nails, all over. Absently, he rubbed it away, rinsed, rubbed again.

How much of it is my fault ?

Because it wasn't just the missing of anniversaries. It was the whole complex problem of being married to a UN agent. In the beginning, it was romantic, as marrying an army officer had been in the last century. And of course, Leda would stoutly maintain, the UN was wonderful, the only thing that was keeping the world from falling to bits !

(*Was* it keeping the world from falling to bits ?)

And then, after the first year, when she had begun to hear the words she had shut her ears to at first, " But Nick is with the Narcotics Department ! You're not going to say that's the same as—as the rest of them !"

(But it was the same : in its principles, at least).

And now, when things were bad, Leda was breaking. Greville knew, although he tried to blame himself for some of it, that the real fault was in her. She wasn't strong enough to stand the strain of being married to a UN agent.

The water gurgled away from the sink, leaving a rime of grey. He wiped the rime with a finger, rinsed the finger, dried off sketchily on a towel. Then he slipped off his shoes and lay down as he had been invited, on the thrown-together bed.

Once, people blamed the government when things went wrong. They said, " *They* ought to—or oughtn't to—do such-and-such."

So it wasn't anything new. Now, people simply blamed the UN because it was doing the unpopular things governments used to do. And it was doing more and more of them, more often.

Greville lit a cigarette, staring at the ceiling. If only the governments hadn't hung on so long ! If only the UN hadn't been faced with an impossible task from the very outset !

He traced the deadly curve of the population graph with the tip of his cigarette. It seemed to float burning in the air. Alongside it he drew others. He knew them by heart—they hung on wall-charts in every UN centre, serving as a deadly mental whip to the flagging efforts of overtired workers.

Housing.

Known to sources of raw materials—millions of tons.

Food production.

Falling short. Always, falling short.

It had been a long time before the curves for North America crossed. They had only cut a few years ago, and for a while people said, " Well, it'll only be for a while. Tighten our belts !"

Then they said, " Other people are worse off than we are."

And now they said, " Those UN thieves !"

" What's the alternative ?" Greville quoted under his breath. " Legalise cannibalism, of course !"

That was from Secretary-General Zafiq's last state-of-the-planet report to the plenary session of the UN in New York.

And—as Greville had seen, watching on the internal television systems of the UN building—his face suggested that he didn't mean it as a joke.

Well, there were palliatives. There were directives about the use of fuel, power, essential raw materials. You don't light your furnace with oil that could be driving a train of one hundred flat-cars. You don't watch *Romance of the Old West* with power that could be pushing steel strip through a rolling-mill. You don't build a theatre with concrete which could erect another apartment block.

And then it had to become : you don't drive with an empty seat in your car if there's someone going your way. You don't sleep with two empty rooms in your apartment if there are applicants on the city housing list.

Blockage. Spate. Flood. And no storm-drains.

Before, there was always room to manoeuvre. So there was a shortage of employment : so you directed industries, to begin with. And those people earned wages, bought things, found thing to buy. There was a surplus.

There was still a surplus. Only much less of a surplus, and many more people had claims on it. In theory, so long as there remained a certain minimum area of ground per person, the world would remain rich. The trouble was—invariably—distribution.

Cure your local surpluses ! End the burning of bumper wheat harvests ! End the firing of locomotives with coffee beans !

What do you get ? A population of two and a half thousand million in the mid-twentieth century ; six and a half thousand million at the century's turn ; more than eight thousand million at the present day. Every moment, thousands of new mouths screaming for food ! Thousands of new bodies needing to be clothed ! Thousands of new minds demanding education, information, entertainment !

Oh, it could have been done ! thought Greville greyly, lying on the untidy bed. If the governments hadn't hung on to their local sovereignties until they were already squeezed ; if they hadn't panicked and frozen technical progress in the eighties ; if they had spent one per cent of their arms budgets in mid-century on planning for this explosion . . .

Only they couldn't have made themselves do it. They were all too busy saving their personal skins from the threat of nuclear war.

It could have been done ! The soil-analysis Lumberger was doing here—one man, a lab and half a dozen test sites—could have been done before 1970, and by now the world's deserts would have been halved. Instead, they were still growing. A properly directed research programme in the seventies would have led to true sea-farming, conserving resources of fish and plankton instead of merely drawing on them like a bottomless bank account, which was the traditional—disastrous—way.

And what happens ? They hang on right into the nineties, and then yell for Doctor United Nations to come and cure a patient who's been worse poisoned by quack remedies than by the actual disease.

No wonder, with the paper shortage and the power shortage and the shortage of luxury items like ice-cream and sodas and the need to build ploughs and harvesters rather than cars and juke-boxes, no wonder there were people giving up hope. No wonder there were drug addicts.

He turned his head, glancing at the briefcase laid beside the bed. Half a pound of happy dreams in there, was there ? Good lord !

He remembered the expression that had come across Lumberger's face when he spoke of the fixed price of the drug. He would have said, " But I thought the cost of shots of any drug was pushed up and up by the peddlers, as their victims grew more and more dependent !"

True. And yet there was this fixed price for happy dreams. Who fixed the price ? Who could say ? In two years, since isolating the happy dreamers from other addicts and getting their hands for the first time on a pure sample of the drug, Narcotics Department hadn't found out.

Meantime, its effects showed. Often, the victims who vanished were key men in important jobs ; still more often, they were enterprising people held back by force of circumstances, frustrated, despairing. And usually they were young.

No, it wasn't the victims the UN narcotics agents felt so sore about. Life hadn't much better to offer them, after all. No, what was far worse was that somewhere someone had control of fantastic production capacity for complex organic compounds—and was using it for making happy dreams.

Greville remembered how he had hardly believed Dr. Barriman's flat statement a few months before. " With that much plant," he had said, " you could—for example—handle the entire antibiotic requirements of the Western Hemisphere !"

" Impossible !" had been Greville's shocked reaction.

" All right, then explain this. Central Conservation has been trying to popularise short-shorts instead of Bermudas for summer wear, to cut fabric requirements. The major market—the teens and twenties—won't look at them in any big city of America or Europe. Why ?"

" You tell me," Greville had countered, sick anticipation rising in his throat.

" Because short-shorts expose the scars on the inside of the thigh where happy dreamers load themselves up."

" You mean there are *that* many addicts among young people ?"

Dr. Barriman had blinked. Shrugged. Said after a long pause, in a slow, sad tone, " A quarter of the population—between ages fifteen and twenty-five—in ninety per cent of all cities in America and Europe—over a half million population—is a conservative estimate of the incidence of happy dreaming. If we don't do something to stop this, Greville, happy dreaming is going to be as common this century as smoking tobbcco was in the last."

five

He sent the butt of his cigarette flying across the room into the sink, which had already dried so sompletely that the butt went on smouldering quietly. As common as smoking tobacco in the last century ! A terrifying thought. Greville had got the smoking habit young, and it had stuck, but it had lost its social connotations around the turn of the century, and the incidence was still declining. His own age-group—the mid-thirties—still had it ; you got individuals in the late twenties, like Lumberger, who had it. But the odds were that only one or two at most of that bunch of teenagers across the street were smokers.

An appalling idea struck him. Was happy dreaming literally supplanting smoking ? Had it in fact roots running back ten, perhaps twenty years or more ?

With that thought in the forefront of his mind, he dozed off for a while, and dreamed fitfully. He was back in front of the dusty drugstore, surrounded by the same bunch of kids. Again the girl thrust her thumbs in the waist of her jeans, again exposed the scars patterning her thighs. Only this time he couldn't tear his gaze away from her legs—not at once. And

it seemed that her lean, muscular legs were filling out, lightening under their tan, becoming rounder, softer, more adult.

When he looked back at her face, it was Leda's face, oval, framed with fair hair, smirking in triumph.

He woke with a groan, to hear a helicopter engine droning in the distance. For a moment he didn't place the sound, but then he remembered where he was and what had happened, and dropped his feet to the floor just as Lumberger opened the door and peered in.

" Sounds like that's your 'copter, Greville," he said.

" Yeah, thanks. I'll be out in a moment."

" I looked in to see if you wanted a bite to eat," Lumberger went on. " Isn't much—anyway, you were asleep, so I left you be."

" Good," grunted Greville, running his hands through his hair. He reached for his shoes and put them on. Then he picked up his deadly briefcase and started for the door.

" Uh—sorry I couldn't do more for you," Lumberger ventured. The droning of the 'copter died away. Greville told himself absently that it would have landed somewhere near the outskirts of town. He glanced at the window. It was getting dark.

" Don't let it worry you," he said. " You don't get issued with a red carpet to roll out in an agency like this one."

He met the two fieldworkers from the Institute when he had gone about a quarter-mile towards the point where the 'copter had set down. The straight line of Main Street converged towards the lights which glimmered like grounded stars on its undercarriage.

The fieldworkers paused as he approached ; they were in plain clothes, but even in the half-darkness there was a certain indefinable air about them.

" You're Greville ?" said the taller of the two. Greville nodded.

" You're from the Institute ?" he suggested.

" Yes. I'm Vassily Marek—that's Peter Rice. Think it's bad here ?"

" They don't like us," said Greville, conscious of making a vacuous understatement. " Were you thinking of heading for the FAO agency ?"

" I guess so."

" Then watch yourself with this man Lumberger. He's hard to stand for more than a few minutes at a time."

Marek gave a mirthless grin. " Aren't we all ?" he said. " Well, the 'copter's waiting—thanks for the tip."

" Same department," said Greville. The two fieldworkers gave him a parting nod and trudged on into the town.

The post office address of the Institute was Sandy Gulch, Colorado. Sandy Gulch had been a mining town in the nineteenth century, but by the time the Institute was created the address was about all that was left of it. Among the haphazard jumble of the landscape the chequerboard layout of the new buildings clashed like a screaming discord.

At the edge of the landing-ground—no one called it the field, because it was just flat, dry earth—Barriman stood impatiently waiting, a stolid figure in shorts and a loose shirt-coat whose pockets bulged with odds and ends.

" About time too, Greville !" he barked up at the door of the copter. " I burned the ears off New York for letting you get tn a mess like this. Why didn't you call us from Topeka, if there was no plane ? We could have fetched you in from there."

Greville clambered stiffly to the ground. " I'm going to do some ear-burning on my own account," he answered bitterly. " If they'd told me what I was carrying, I'd have done just that. It would have saved me a hell of a lot of trouble."

Stop kidding yourself about Leda, he added under his breath. *The last thing she wanted was for you to show up on time . . .*

He choked off the train of thought, and thrust the briefcase into Barriman's hands.

" Ah !" said Barriman, thumbing the lock expertly. " This is it ! I suppose they thought they might attract too much attention if they let it be known what they were sending—but this stuff is more valuable than gold right now—"

In the light of the pole-mounted floods which streamed across the landing-ground, he lifted the lid and gave a slow sigh of relief. Inside the case, a plastic liner glistened wetly. It was distorted, as though it was half-full of liquid, or very fine powder. It held very fine powder. It held half a pound of happy dreams.

Greville licked dry lips, thinking of dynamite and A-bombs and the risks he had unknowingly run. He didn't mind risks—his job was risky. But not to know their nature was different.

He said huskily, " I suppose that's the batch we found the other day."

Barriman nodded, closed the case again and looked up with a smile. " You must be hungry," he said. " Thirsty, I bet, on a night like this. I have beer and snacks waiting in my quarters, knowing you were coming. We'll go to the biology labs on the way and announce the good news, if you don't mind—"

Greville shook his head apathetically. Nothing made much difference right now.

From the landing-ground their route took them past most of the divisions of the Institute—FAO, Health, Conservation, Pure Research, Fuel and Power, in all of which lighted windows showed work proceeding late. There was the click-hum of computers at work, a snatch of music from a radio or TV set, a burst of laughter from the relaxation centre. But they went themselves in silence most of the way.

" I'm sorry about the detour," Barriman said finally, fumbling a key one-handed from his shirt to thrust it into the door of the biology labs. " But we're panting for this stuff. If you'd been delayed even overnight it would have affected one of our most crucial experiments."

The door opened. Greville had expected the usual dampish smell of rats and rabbits which he associated with biology labs; instead, there was an airlock behind the door. He said, " Uh—sterile labs ? Would you rather I waited outside ?"

" Doesn't matter," Barriman said, shaking his head. " It's not sterile at the moment. We're using this block for reasons of security. Generally FAO and Health use it, but for once Narcotics has a worse problem than they have."

The airlock cycled with Greville and Barriman pressed hard against each other in its narrow embrasure ; then the far door slid back and there was at once a stink of monkeys, far more penetrating even than the stink of mice. Dim overhead lights, flush with the ceiling, revealed a hundred feet of ranked cages ; at the far end of the room someone in a white lab coat was bending over some task.

Normally, Greville would have expected the monkeys to chatter with excitement at the presence of strangers. Instead, as he and Barriman walked between the cages, the monkeys ignored them, perched on their artificial branches. Mostly they were rhesus macaques ; there were a few spider monkeys,

and in the cage where the white-coated worker was standing there was a solitary chimpanzee.

" Kathy !" Barriman called out. " The stuff got here !"

The wearer of the lab coat straightened and turned. She was short, rather plump, but very graceful as she moved, with a round face, flat Amerind cheekbones, full naturally-red lips. In her dark, glossy hair, chestnut highlights showed. Across her wide-nostrilled nose, underlining her green eyes, there was a dusting of freckles. Greville found himself suddenly thinking : *what a shame she looks so tired* !

There was weariness in her mellow voice, too, when she answered Barriman's call.

" That's good—but Mike, there's definitely been a complete change in Tootsie's nature since this morning."

Barriman swung round, thrust the briefcase into Greville's startled hands, and strode forward to the ape's cage. The occupant, a handsome female perhaps four years old, squatted cross-legged on the floor, her back against a dead tree-stump worn smooth with much rubbing, her eyes closed, her mouth slack. Except for her breathing, she might have been stuffed in a museum.

" Tootsie !" said Barriman sharply. He rapped on the bars of the cage, and there was a metallic ringing sound that died slowly, as though retreating to a great distance. " Toots !"

" I can't get any response at all," said the girl, and passed a hand wearily over her forehead.

" It's progressed incredibly quickly, hasn't it ?" said Barriman cryptically. " You have the recording setup ready?"

" Everything bar the high-speed infra-red film. There's none available until tomorrow. Till then we'll have to rely on the meters."

Barriman nodded, bent down and slid back a panel below the front of the cage. A group of half a dozen dials and a tape recorder were revealed. Greville saw that there were similar panels on all the cages.

" Was she eating and drinking normally ?" Barriman asked.

" Until this morning, she was drinking within her usual pattern of variation. But she wouldn't eat at noon. I told you, didn't I ?"

" You did," said Barriman, straightening up. " And I promised to come down and look at her. But then I heard that the happy dreams consignment was held up, and I'm afraid everything else slipped my mind. I'm sorry."

The girl closed her eyes, placed the tips of her fingers close together on the point between her eyebrows, and drew her hands slowly apart, as though wringing tension out of her forehead muscles. " Yes," she said, opening her eyes again. " Didn't you say you'd just got it, though ?"

" It's in that case," Barriman answered, half-turning and gesturing towards Greville. " This is Nick Greville, by the way, from New York. You haven't met, have you ? This is Dr. Pascoe, from World Health, who's supervising the experiment for us."

The girl acknowledged the presence of Greville with a smile which managed to be more than just a conventional reflex in spite of her evident tiredness. She said, " You had trouble getting here, I heard."

" I damn' near turned round and went home," said Greville. " I gather it's as well I didn't. It sounds as though you need this stuff urgently."

" We do." Kathy Pascoe nodded at the motionless chimpanzee. " Poor Tootsie here, and all the rest of them, come to that, are happy dreamers through no fault of their own. We hadn't run any tests on apes or monkeys before this series, and we made a bad guess at the dosage rate required. If your people in New York hadn't got their hands on what you have there, we'd have been out months of work and a whole string of test animals."

Barriman gave one last frowning glance at the meters in the compartment below Tootsie's cage, and slid the panel shut. " Ye-es," he said musingly. " Without actually complaining, I do wish your people would capture a *few* more consignments of happy dreams . . . There's a hell of a lot of it. Must be."

Greville didn't say anything.

" Finished, Kathy ?" Barriman added in a brisker tone.

" Just about."

" Come and have a bite with us, then—and a beer. Tell us what's been happening to Tootsie this evening. Or are you too tired ?"

" No, love to. I won't be able to sleep with my mind churning the way it is. Hang on a moment and I'll close the lab up for the night ; then I'll be right with you."

* * *

six

They waited in the narrow porch outside the airlock while she extinguished lights, turned switches on the ventilation and alarm systems, made sure that everything was in order for the night. The air was very still ; overhead the stars burned down like peepholes into the heart of the celestial furnace whose heat was baking North America.

" Let's go," she said at length, and shrugged off her lab coat as they turned and began to walk. Under it, she wore—as most of the Institute's female staff did in this weather—only her uniform skirt and a bra. Her shoulders glistened a little in the light from the buildings where there were illuminated windows.

The weight of the briefcase tugged at Greville's arm. He caught Barriman's attention. " How about this stuff here ?" he suggested. " What do you want done with it ?"

Barriman grunted. " It'll be all right till morning in my quarters, I guess. There are no addicts here, thank God. By the way, Kathy, did you hear about the happy dreamers Nick discovered today ?"

The girl shook her head. She was walking with her eyes downcast, her lab coat draped over her hands which were clasped in front of her.

" In a tiny place called Isolation, near the Kansas state line," Barriman said. " How many would you say, and how bad ?" he added with a glance at Greville.

" Dozens, at least. The ones I saw were just kids."

Kathy Pascoe made a noncommittal sound by way of comment, and they fell silent again until they were in Barriman's apartment. This was two-roomed, with its own bathroom, a privilege of status not enjoyed by most of the staff. Like a military camp, the Institute had communal bathhouses, communal lounges, communal kitchens. Had to.

" There's beer," Barriman said, switching on the light. " I told the kitchens to send across some salads or something—yes, there it is. Are you two hungry ?"

Kathy Pascoe dropped her lab coat across the back of the nearest armchair and fell into it herself, almost as limp as the discarded coat. " Beer would be fine," she said. " But I'm not hungry, thanks.

Barriman nodded and began to open beer-cans with expertise. " Help yourself," he added to Greville, indicating the

dishes of salad on the table. Greville found that he was hungry after all—his apathy had masked it up till now—and loaded himself a plateful.

" All hydroponic stuff, I'm afraid," Barriman said. "They're economising at our expense again. But it tastes all right." He turned to put a can of beer on the arm of Kathy's chair ; she had her eyes closed, but when the beer was placed beside her she smiled like a Cheshire cat and put her hand caressingly round the cool side of the can.

" Better have one of these with your salad—they say the hydroponic stuff is vitamin-deficient," Barriman said, and shoved a dry biscuit at Greville. " I'll fix a room for you overnight, lay on transport to the airport for you in the morning, fix everything as soon as you've eaten."

Fix everything? thought Greville, and remembered the glassy sound of Leda's laughter.

" The change in Tootsie," said Kathy meditatively, sipping her beer. " It's incredible, you know ? It didn't show till this morning. She didn't object to the test on her spinal fluid. That was the first sign."

" She generally kicks up merry hell, doesn't she ?" agreed Barriman, indicating a seat for Greville in an armchair facing Kathy. He lowered himself to an upright chair and continued around a mouthful of salad, " And this evening . . ."

" Is this what happens to human addicts in the end ?" Greville said. Kathy looked at him.

" Presumably. As far as we can tell, happy dreams has the same effect on the central nervous system of all highly organised mammals." She put down her beer and folded her hands on her lap, closing her eyes again.

" Is this the first series of experiments you've carried clear to the crisis point ?" Greville pursued. Barriman gave a harsh laugh.

" Not exactly. Didn't you hear about the first series ?"

" I don't think so."

" It was weird," Kathy said in a musing voice, keeping her eyes shut. " We lost the subjects. All of them. It was about —oh—four or five months ago. We were using rats. Selected ones, of course, bred for sheer genius as genius goes among rats."

" You lost them ? You mean they died ?"

" Died hell !" said Barriman shortly. " Someone turned them out of their cages. One morning Kathy went down to the lab—and they weren't there. We never did find who was responsible, though we had our suspicions, and I got the most likely culprit transferred to the West Coast. We haven't lost any animals since . . . That's why we're running this series of tests in the sterile labs, not because they're sterile but because they have alarms that work both ways—inside to outside and *vice versa*."

" This can't be only the second set of tests you've run."

"Oh, but it is. And that's your fault, blast you." Barriman's voice was neutral, belying his words. " I mean, it's the fault of your section, in New York and elsewhere. There must be—oh, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say a ton or more—of happy dreams in circulation all the time. And this lot you've brought is the first batch we've been given to work with for almost six months. Mark you, it's a good big batch, bigger than the previous ones put together. But it's hardly adequate for extensive research, you know."

Greville shifted in his chair. " What do your tests aim at ?" he said. " A—a cure, I suppose."

" Well, of course, we are looking for a way to break the habit ultimately. But so far we haven't got past studying it—we want clues to its origin, its precise mode of operation, and complete details of its action on the living metabolism. You saw the setup we have for those monkeys in the lab—we have a record of all their excretions and secretions, we take daily blood and spinal fluid samples, we run encephalograph tests, and the idea is also to film the activity-pattern just prior to the crisis point." He frowned. " Tootsie really caught us short there ! We use ultrafast infra-red film to avoid disturbing the environment unnecessarily at night, and it's in hellish short supply."

A gentle snore followed his last word. They glanced at Kathy, and saw that she had fallen fast asleep in her chair. Barriman chuckled.

" As usual !" he said, putting down his empty plate and removing the beer-can from the arm of Kathy's chair. " She's been getting about four hours' sleep a night for the past few weeks, the poor kid."

" Shall I help you get her back to her quarters ?" Greville suggested.

" Why disturb her ?" shrugged Barriman. " More beer ?"

" Thanks, I will." Greville accepted a second can, and Barriman poured the rest of Kathy's into his own empty one.

" Shame to waste it . . ." he said thoughtfully. " Shame to waste anything, isn't it? I wonder where the hell happy dreams *comes* from !"

" Some people say it must be synthesised in a secret factory somewhere," Greville said. " But I can't swallow that. Where would you hide a factory that big !"

" Exactly. I've been coming around to the conclusion that happy dreams is a naturally occurring compound. Its extraordinary degree of purity led us to assume at first that it must be synthetic, but it's more conceivable that you could hide some sort of refinery for the stuff than that you could keep secret a vast synthetics plant. I might say that we've tried to synthesise it ourselves, and we can't. The chain of compounds which leads to happy dreams includes several hundreds of others which are statistically more likely. Only a living process could concentrate such a pure form of it."

With an effort—more to keep the conversation flowing and stop himself thinking about Leda than for any other reason—Greville said, " Where would it occur in nature ? Could it be concentrated by a bacterium, perhaps ?"

Barriman shook his head. " I doubt it. Even a plant seems improbable in some respects. I mean, this is a compound so complex that its possible range of biological functions is extremely limited. It's electrochemically active in the nervous system, of course, but it's very readily broken down into simpler units, and we think that only about a tenth of what's injected into the thigh by an addict ever reaches the brain. We give it to our experimental animals by injection through the orbit of the eye, to economise, but even so a lot is destroyed before it affects the brain. That was how we came to gauge the dose-rate wrong, as Kathy mentioned. We assumed that eighty per cent of the orbital injection would affect the brain ; in fact, the amount is closer to forty or fifty per cent."

" Then where *would* you find such a compound in nature ? I'm sorry to ask so many questions, but I'm just a policeman when it comes to happy dreams."

Barriman looked at him strangely. " All right," he said after a pause. " There seems to be only one conceivable place. And that's in the central nervous system of a highly organised mammal, such as an ape, or a whale, or a man."

" But—"

" I'll go further than that," Barriman said inexorably. " I'll say dogmatically that the only function it seems ideally suited to perform in nature is what it does when it combines with cephaline to form noetine in the cells of the brain. It is specifically and uniquely fitted to serve as cell-material for the fore-brain of highly organised mammals."

He gave a sour little grin and drained his can of beer before rising to his feet.

" Chew on that one !" he said. " I'll go and organise accommodation for you. Don't you have any baggage, by the way ?"

" I—I was expecting to be back in New York tonight," said Greville. The words reminded him of the vision he had had while dozing on Lumberger's bed—the vision of Leda with her white thighs scarred from happy dreams injections.

Barriman nodded judiciously. " Well, in this heat you'll only need toilet things," he said. " I can get you a fresh shirt from stock in the morning. And I'll check the times of planes ; they'll be crowded after today's cancellations, but I can manage a priority reservation if you want to get back in a hurry."

" Don't put yourself out," said Greville. Barriman shot him a shrewd glance.

" Trouble ?" he suggested sympathetically.

" I was supposed to be home tonight, because I'd promised my wife we'd celebrate our anniversary tomorrow in style. Only—well, from the way things have turned out, it wouldn't have been much of a celebration anyway."

" I'm sorry," said Barriman, sounding genuinely concerned. " It's hard on UN agents when they marry outside the business, isn't it ? Well, I'll make that call."

He went into the minuscule bedroom adjacent, leaving the door half open. The phone was there, presumably, in case he was needed in the middle of the night. Sounds of dialling, and then blurred words, reached Greville's ears.

" No," he said to the air. " It wouldn't have been much of a celebration, I guess. There isn't a lot left to celebrate."

As though the words had broken through her slumber, Kathy Pascoe moved in her chair with a sigh. She slid forward an inch or two, and let her right arm fall over the side of the chair.

The movement caused her skirt to ride up her legs. From where Greville was sitting he could see her bare thighs plainly.

He had been staring for what seemed like a long time when he realised with a shock that he hadn't just been looking with ordinary masculine interest at the legs of a pretty girl. He had been looking for happy dreams scars.

Why did they always do it on the thighs, anyway? Only because the thighs were usually covered? And more accessible for a self-administered injection than the buttocks?

Why was there this rigid code among happy dreamers, which maintained that ridiculous fixed price?

Why, if there was a ton of the stuff in circulation, could the best efforts of the police forces and the UN agencies in every country on Earth not contrive to seize more than an occasional batch of it?

And where was it from?

Barriman came back from the phone saying something about the times of planes in the morning. Suddenly very tired, and acutely depressed, Greville was glad to be taken to his room.

seven

The insistent buzzing of a phone fetched him out of nightmare. Greville rolled over, finding that the single sheet which was the only covering he had been able to bear when he came to bed, had tangled itself around his legs. He kicked himself free of it, reached for the phone, and turned off the camera in case his caller was a woman.

It wasn't a woman. It was Barriman, and his picture froze on the screen in an expression of dismay.

"Can you get over to the sterile lab right away?" he said harshly. Greville blinked.

"Sure! What's happened? Something gone wrong?"

Barriman didn't answer for a few seconds. Then he said, his voice pregnant with utter disbelief, "Tootsie—the chimp you saw last night—she's disappeared . . ."

The phone went dead. In the instant before Barriman's face faded from the screen altogether, Greville found his imagination twisting the features to resemble those of Lumberger, as they had been yesterday afternoon in Isolation at the moment when his sceptical voice said, "Into thin air?"

A chill shiver crawled down his spine.

The fresh shirt Barriman had promised had not yet been delivered, and the one he had worn yesterday was still damp

and clammy. He dragged it on regardless, zipped up his pants, shoved his feet into shoes and ran for the biology lab.

A lot of people seemed to have got there before him. He dodged between two Security cars parked all anyhow in front of the building, and came upon Barriman, Kathy Pascoe and a tall, tanned man of forty in Security uniform shouting at one another. They had to shout because the doors of the lab were both open while technicians checked the alarm circuits ; every few moments an alarm sounded as its circuit tested out, and the shrill sounds startled the experimental monkeys into high chattering cries of complaint.

Barriman broke off from his discussion and swung round. " This is Joe Martinez, our Security chief—Nick Greville, Joe. You haven't met ?"

" No, but I know Mr. Greville from his file," said Martinez, putting out a hard-palmed hand and smiling with a flash of teeth in his brown face. " Glad to meet you. Sorry to drag you from bed, but you may have some ideas for us."

" What sort of ideas ?" countered Greville. " I only got what I was told on the phone—that this chimpanzee has disappeared."

" Right," said Kathy, thrusting back untidy hair from her forehead. She had obviously come direct from bed to the lab ; she was wearing a knee-length kimono and her feet were bare. " Gone. Out of a locked cage of stainless steel bars, out of a sterile lab with no windows. Without tripping any of the alarms, which seem to be in perfect working order." She gave Joe Martinez a defiant glare. " Fair enough, Joe ?"

" Fair enough," said the Security chief. " The technicians have already been over the circuits once, but they're double-checking to make perfectly certain. If the alarms are working, we're compelled to assume that someone used the correct keys to gain access to the lab, took Tootsie from her cage, locked the cage and the lab behind him , and got away without anyone noticing."

" It's insane !" said Barriman vehemently. " There are two keys to the sterile lab—mine and Kathy's—not counting the one in the watch-house which is for use in case of fire. My key is on my ring, and I found it this morning by my bed where I'd left it last night."

" And here's mine," said Kathy, drawing up a fine gold chain she wore around her neck. Instead of a pendant, there

were three keys on it. " Believe me, I'd have known if anyone tried to get at *my* lab key ! I don't even take this chain off in the shower."

" Mike's idea," said Martinez after a pause, " is that there may be an agent of the happy dreams peddlers here at the Institute, who burgled the lab last night."

" That's why I called you over, Nick," Barrington put in. " The chances are that such an agent would himself be an addict—wouldn't you say ? And addicts come into your province, not ours."

While Greville was hesitating, shaping a reply, Martinez said, " We lost a whole bunch of experimental animals some months ago—you heard about that ? We thought we knew who was responsible ; either we were wrong, and the same person has done the trick twice, or we've got a successor to him now. Greville, how do you spot a happy dreamer ?"

" In the first place," said Greville flatly, " a peddler is usually not himself addicted—but let that pass ; happy dreams aren't like ordinary dope. In the second—well, I know of only one way to spot a happy dreamer, and that's by the scar patterns on the inside of the thighs. You find parallel lines of scar tissue dots, then old scabs, then new ones. A confirmed addict who's been on the stuff for a year or so—they don t seem to last much past a year, on average—will probably have started on the first thigh a second time."

As he spoke, he could see again the thighs of the girl in Isolation. He had guessed at six months addiction in her case ; now, so vivid was the recollection, he could almost count the dots on her skin. Not six months ; more like ten. There were marks on both her legs.

Martinez bit his lip. " I've seen the pictures," he said. " But is there no other way ? I don't look forward to making the entire Institute staff parade through my office with their pants down. Excuse me, Kathy."

" She has nothing to worry about," said Greville, to his own surprise. And to Kathy's ; the green eyes regarded him in puzzlement, and then twinkled as she put two and two together.

" Nice to have an independent witness to vouch for me," she said sardonically. " I hope I didn't embarrass you, falling asleep like that in the middle of a conversation."

Martinez glanced at her. " Well—I don't keep tabs on the personal habits of everyone, not in my head. But I can't think off-hand of anyone who doesn't use the swimming-pool

occasionally. And I've never seen any happy dreams scars at the pool."

" I don't think it's essential to use the thigh for the injection," said Greville. " It seems to be just a habit."

" It also seems to be just a habit to swim raw in the pool here," said Martinez dryly. " We all do it."

The technicians working in the airlock of the lab swore loudly and in unison. Martinez swung on them. " Finished?"

" Finished, and how !" answered one of the men. " The alarms are in perfect working order, chief. They haven't been touched since the last quarterly inspection."

" And that includes the night alarm," said his companion significantly.

" But—" began Martinez, and broke off, biting his lip again —it seemed to be a nervous habit with him. " Kathy, were you very tired last night ? Could you have forgotten to switch on the night alarm when you were locking up ?"

Barriman answered while Kathy was still frowning to remember. " She could have, but she didn't. I saw her turn the switch myself. And presumably the duty watchman turned on his switch in the watch-house."

" That's right," Kathy confirmed. " Because I called up the watch-house to say I was coming to the lab when I woke up. The watchman said he'd switch off before I got here."

" This night alarm—what is it ?" Greville put in.

" A circuit running through the actual lock of the door," said Martinez. " Whoever is last out of the lab—that's usually Kathy Pascoe here—calls up the watchman and tells him to close another switch at his end. This means that even if the door is opened with a key, the night alarm sounds. And if you don't have a key, you sound *four* alarms."

Into thin air . . . Lumberger's apparently meaningless words had suddenly acquired a terrifying actuality for Greville. He fought down a reaction of incredulous disbelief, and said calmly, " Then all I can suggest is spinal fluid tests, the same as you run on your experimental animals. How about the man you suspected before, though ? What made you think he was responsible for turning out the animals ?"

The other three looked at one another, as though mutely requesting each other to answer first. Martinez sighed. " He's definitely out of the question," he said.

" Who was he ?" Greville persisted. Kathy gave ground.

" A man called Franz Wald. He disagreed with Mike's ideas ; he had a theory about the action of happy dreams on the brain, and Mike was afraid he took his theory seriously."

" That's oversimplifying," Barriman objected, his face oddly hard. " Let's face it, Kathy ! He was more interested in making happy dreams generally available to the public than he was in studying its effects."

" Was he addicted himself ?" Greville asked.

" Nobody ever proved anything about him." Joe Martinez gave an expressive shrug. " And he was transferred to the Coast. He hasn't been back." He broke off, struck by a sudden thought. " Mike, what happened to that consignment of happy dreams you said was arriving yesterday ? Is it safe ?"

Barriman went pale. " I hope so ! It's in a person-keyed case, so at worst it's gone up in smoke, but—I'd better go make sure."

" You do that !" Martinez snapped. " And then get it down to the safe in the watch-house ! If there's any risk at all of an addict on the Institute staff, that stuff stays under lock and key and you can draw on it when you need it."

Barriman nodded and thrust his way between them. For a few moments there was a pause, shattered by the irregular cries of the caged monkeys.

It came to Greville that it was still early enough to be cold ; he found himself shivering. He tensed himself against the chill air and said, " Well, I don't see I can be much help. This looks like a straight security problem, and that isn't my line. In any case, I don't specialise in happy dreamers, although they're our worst worry now. They seldom do anything more anti-social than retreat into isolation ; the really far gone addicts disappear "—and his mind glossed the words, ricidulously : *Isolation*, *Kansas*, and *disappear*, *from a burglar-proof building*. He kept his mind firmly on his line of thought.

" The old habits give us bad problems too, you know—opium, morphine, marijuana, straight alcoholism. We can't do much more about happy dreams than just try and nab the peddlers. And so far we—just try."

Martinez frowned. " I understood this consignment of the dust which was coming in was a big one—half a pound. Didn't you get that off a pedlar ?"

" Not at all," said Greville bitterly. " One of our New York men found it in his daughter's bedroom. The kid wasn't too

badly hooked, thank God, but they don't know when she'll be out of the sanatorium."

" How do people like that get by ?" Martinez asked. " I mean new addicts who get caught and cut off from their supply."

"Don't ask me—I'm just the dogcatcher," Greville answered. " Ask the expert." He gestured to Kathy, who spread her hands.

" After one or two shots, the habit breaks fairly easily—we imagine. Very few addicts have been caught after one or two shots, and a lot of those have relapsed later. After half a dozen shots, it breaks painfully, and you sometimes have to keep the victim in sedation for weeks on end. After twenty or more shots, there's little hope for the addict's sanity."

" A cure worse than the disease," quoted Greville sourly. " We're not going after addicts any longer. We're trying to catch up on the big boys, the peddlers ; till we cut the supply, the number of addicts will grow far faster than we can hope to control them."

" And how many shots does it take to—to finish the process ?" Martinez said.

" More than a hundred, wouldn't you say ?" Kathy said, with a questioning glance at Greville.

" The average is a shot every three days," Greville said. " And they seem to last about a year. Yes, more than a hundred shots. I suppose the half-pound I brought in is a complete course of treatment for one addict."

" That's assuming thigh-injection," Kathy commented. "I'm surprised they don't proceed to direct intravenous injection instead of subcutaneous. Injection into the carotid artery would seem a logical way to get more kicks for your money."

" There seems to be a kind of ritual about the method of taking it. And at this price which has stayed constant since we first ran into the stuff—five dollars, then two—there isn't much need to get more kicks for the money."

" I'll tell you something peculiar," said Kathy after a pause. " I always thought drug peddlers were in business to make money. But assuming that happy dreams occurs in nature and all you have to do is refine it, a conservative guess at the cost of preparing it ninety-nine per cent pure would be five or six thousand dollars an ounce. And synthesising it would cost twice that. Who makes a profit on it at two dollars a shot ? It's crazy !"

eight

Five or six thousand dollars an ounce—if all you have to do is extract it from some natural source, purify it and dry it to powder. And the cost to the customer, assuming a hundred shots from half a pound at two dollars a shot, is about twenty-five dollars an ounce. Kathy was right ; it added up to crazy.

And from what " natural source ?" If Barriman said that such a compound would occur in nature only in the fore-brain of a highly organised mammal, he wasn't guessing ; he was one of the dozen finest biochemists on Earth, and in his own speciality of the chemistry of the nervous system no one could touch him.

It almost seemed that someone was distributing it as a kind of charity.

That natural source—could it be somewhere off Earth ? Greville turned the idea over. But surely, someone would have thought of it already. It wouldn't be from Mars—the Fifth Mars expedition, when it returned last year, brought nothing but supplementary detail to add to the records of the previous trips. Mars was a dull planet. And the Second Venus expedition was still in orbit around the planet, mapping the surface beneath the clouds. And the highest form of life on the moon was the staff of Tycho Observatory . . .

As his plane's jets swung down to landing position, and the pilot waited for a clear drop to the field below, Greville's mind was a chaotic jumble of visualisations. Tootsie. The girl in Isolation, defiantly showing off her scarred legs. Kathy Pascoe, sleeping like a child in Barriman's chair.

And Leda. Six years ago. Glad—proud—to be the wife of a UN agent.

He was carrying a confidential report from Barriman about the disappearance of the ape. Thinking of the way the empty apartment would greet him—he didn't doubt that Leda had kept her promise and gone out on the town—he had consented to deliver the report even though he was officially on leave today. Now, when it was too late to draw back, thoughts gnawed at his mind.

Suppose she is at home after all ? Waiting !
That was six years ago. She got tired of waiting.
Just suppose, though . . .
Impossible !
The impossible happens. You've seen the proof today.

But he would not let himself even hope. His skin crawling with the summer heat—it was far worse in New York, muggy and close like a Turkish bath with twenty million patrons—he drove himself to endure the pressure of the evening crowds in the subway, the veiled, insulting glances at his uniform, the occasional loud obscenity which smarted on the raw wound of his pride although there had been hundreds before and would be hundreds afterwards.

Narcotics Department was in Queens, within tolerable walking distance of the UN housing development where Greville lived, but a long way in crowded streets and subways from everywhere else. Or it seemed so. Maybe that was an illusion. Maybe it came from the crushing awareness that a straight line drawn at random to the west or northwest of here would pass through a thousand human beings before crossing the state line.

Ants' nest ! said Greville under his breath, bobbing like a cork on the human stream that cascaded from the exit of the subway station.

When he had delivered the report, he decided to walk home. He told himself he could not face another subway crowd today, but he knew that that was a rationalisation. He was using the decision as a hair shirt for himself, a refusal to yield to hope, a determination to expect the worse and not be disappointed.

She wasn't waiting.

The apartment was dark when he let himself in. The air-conditioning was off, and the heat was like an oven. When he pressed the switch, the lights came on, but the air-conditioner didn't. Power-cut. God, what a world ! But the circuit on which the refrigerator ran was still getting current ; he took a cold beer, too fast so that gas distended his guts, and then a lukewarm shower. The head of water was poor. He couldn't face putting clothes on his body when he had towelled down, but walked around the apartment checking which of the ten electric circuits still had power in them. All these apartments had ten circuits, each with a different number of cycles per second ; ingenious fuses in the various appliances compelled them to be used on one or other particular circuit. Tonight he —and everyone else—had a refrigerator but no air-conditioning, TV but no phonograph, overhead lighting but not sidewall lighting. The electric clock was on the overhead

lighting circuit, and was working. It mocked him from its place on the wall.

So did the full-colour solido of himself and Leda on their wedding day, which Leda had taken down from its usual shelf and set on a low table in the middle of the lounge. He picked it up, half-hoping there would be a note underneath, and put it back in its usual place.

Where had *that* gone in six short years ?

He called down to the kitchens and ordered supper to be delivered. Supper for one. When it arrived, he couldn't eat it ; he took another beer instead and sat down in an armchair.

Where had that marriage gone? Where had that chimpanzee gone ? He tried to seize on the general problem instead of the personal one, and herded his thoughts back to the same question whenever they strayed. A sort of anaesthetic. He began to murmur the important words under his breath.

Escaped ? But teams of volunteers had been scouring the countryside before he left to catch the plane from Pueblo ; the whole Institute had been searched already. All the staff were accounted for. All the alarm systems were in order.

Into thin air . . .? Had the ape shrunk to molecular size and slithered away between the crystals of the walls like a migrating electron ? Had she acquired the faculty of teleportation ?

The recording devices had functioned perfectly all night. And according to them, Tootsie had been present until 0018—shortly after midnight. From then on there was nothing but circuit noise. Apparently Tootsie had ceased to exist.

I wish I could cease to exist.

The clock mocked him, ticking away ten p.m., then eleven, then midnight. Some time after that grey clouds rolled over Greville's mind, and he fell asleep in the chair where he sat.

For the time being, there was no available power. That would come. But there were plenty of natural resources—not unlimited ! That was to be remembered. Nonetheless, there were plenty of resources to draw on. Fire was the basic essential—that could be got by the savage's method, with the fire-stick of hard wood twirled between the hands in a piece of punk from a rotten stump.

After fire, the next stage logically would be pottery. A suitable clay occurred along the river-banks. Naturally, there was fish in the river—good eating, though monotonous. Meat was harder to come by ; fish could be got in a trap of rushes, but to trap an animal of decent size would involve a dead-fall or a pit in a game-trail, and that would be hard work without adequate tools. As for hunting, there would be spears, of course, but there was great risk attached. Bows and arrows would be better, but so far bow-strings weren't to be had. Still, they would come. Creepers broke too readily ; actual string or cord required spinning. Still there was time.

Arrowheads would be no trouble. Copper was the first metal ; shaping it called for hard work and much patience, using stones as hammers. But there would be proper forges eventually, and furnaces to smelt metal with charcoal, and then with coal ; there would be specialists, with specialised techniques, and a division of labour. In the meantime, the weather was good, there was adequate food, adequate water, adequate shelter. Men could live like this.

Somewhere at the back of Greville's mind, a spark of clear consciousness burned like a firefly. In the front of his mind there was a kind of panorama of landscape, to which the words formed a commentary. The rotten stump. The clay. The water of the river, with rocks breaking its flow. The veins of copper in the shattered rocks.

And there would be luxuries as well as basics, and for some of them one wouldn't have to wait. There were the fairy-flowers, for example, growing in clusters all along the river. They were unmistakable. Their blossoms were bright *varm.*

The shock was incredible. It jolted him from sleep, but he kept his eyes closed to try and hang on to the fading instant of vision. Varm ! A colour neither red nor blue nor yellow nor —nor anything !

A new colour !

" Well, Mister High-and-Mighty United Nations Narcotics Departments Agent Nicholas *Greville* ?" said a mocking, rising voice from somewhere beyond his eyelids. " Well ?"

Desperately, he struggled to ignore the words, ignore the tie dragging him back to a world where varm did not exist. But varm was a meaningless sound, and the colours behind his eyelids were ordinary, commonplace colours. He opened his eyes.

Leda sat opposite him, grinning. She was naked—not casually naked as though she had come from the shower without dressing, but deliberately naked like a strip-tease dancer, her face made up, still wearing a necklace, bracelets on each wrist, chrome-plated shoes with high glass heels. She had dipped one sweeping tress of her fair hair in bright green glorydust, and the light came back green from the sparkling granules. Her finger- and toe-nails were glorydusted as well.

Greville shook his head and forced himselfto amore upright posture. Leda's humourless grin remained on her face, as though painted there when she was making herself up. He thought of a hundred things to say to her. None of them seemed to mean anything of any importance.

She waited for him to speak, a malicious twinkle in her eyes. After a silence that lasted a small eternity, she said with false brightness. " Did you enjoy it ? I did !"

" Enjoy it !" said Greville violently. He glanced up at the clock on the wall, and saw that it was nearly seven o'clock. His eyes felt sore and bleary, as though he had not slept for a week.

" Enjoy it !" he said again. " Enjoy what ? Being stranded miles from anywhere, in baking heat, unable to get back as I promised I would—oh, I had a *swell* time !"

He tried to meet her eyes. Somehow, he failed, and found himself instead staring at the clothes she had discarded on the floor by her chair : a white and gold evening shirt, a calf-length white sheath skirt, a custom-moulded bra.

" If you're looking for my briefs," said Leda lightly, " I didn't have any on."

A kind of dizzying sickness flooded through Greville's mind. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, and buried his face in his hands.

" Oh, don't hide your eyes !" Leda said, and a note of triumph filled her voice. " I have something to show you, Narcotics Agent Greville ! Look here ! What do you think of that ?"

A hand slapped his. Sharp-nailed fingers clawed his palms away from his eyes. Leda had leapt from her chair and was standing before him, one leg thrown out to the side. She was panting with a violent excitement.

" Look !" she forced through clenched teeth, and thrust one finger down to mark a spot on her thigh.

For a moment the universe reeled around Greville, spinning as though that spot was the centre of all things, and alone remained still. Out of the chaos, Greville managed to claw the one essential, horrible truth.

" Oh, God !" he said very slowly, almost moaning the words. " You ? You too ?"

" What do you mean—' you too '?" said Leda, and stood up straight so that the little round stab-mark was hidden. " You, Mister Narcotics Agent Greville, owe me five bucks, which I hear is the regulation fee. That's why I asked if you enjoyed it !"

She threw her head back and laughed—artificially, dreadfully. With the manic sound in his ears, Greville found his gaze drifting downwards, as though of it own accord. His own thigh passed into his field of vision. His own thigh. Bearing a little round mark. Just one. But as deadly as the first scab on the skin of a newly-infected leper.

To be continued

Physically, despite all the hazards of spaceflight (as the Kenneth Johns' articles repeatedly point out) Man may well be able to adapt his body to the rigours of interplanetary spaceflight. But his mind . . .?

MORPHEUS

by ROBERT HOSKINS

This is the way it was. No great thrill. No lifting of the spirits to Heaven. Merely an overwhelming pain—pain beyond all conceivable imagination :

Mauling . . .

Twisting . . .

Crushing . . .

Breaking !

Gould tried to scream, but the pressure bearing down on his lungs was so great air was unable to make its way upward, through the vocal cords. A detached portion of his mind wondered why the sound was so long in coming.

An eternity of eternities passed while the casium clock inexorably ticked off the slow passage of the microseconds. Each tick drummed slowly, hung on with the tenacity of a year of misery ; each second brought him closer to the line dividing life from death.

The rocket thrusts pushed their decibles through the supposedly sound-proofed bulkheads, rising to a crescendo of pure *Noise* !

They passed beyond hearing, became supersonic and subsonic, leaving the body itching furiously under the felt but not-heard vibrations. Gould writhed under the constricting

restricting straps, summoning the last vestiges of strength from the innermost reservoirs.

Then . . .

Nothing.

As the rockets cut off, the small ship was set loose from its chemically fueled moorings to drift, a galleon becalmed on a sea of space. Gould stirred under his straps and a scream of intense pain finally burst from his lips as tortured muscles and nerve endings managed to send their messages of protest to the control centre of the brain. Cooling sweat flooded from his pores, nearly dehydrating his body. He screamed once more from pure reflex, then choked off further cries by biting down on his lips until the salt taste of blood trickled over his tongue.

Long moments passed while his maltreated body slowly relaxed under the wide straps. His eyes swept unseeingly across the panel of dials, guages, winking red, green and amber lights—then halted, and slowly made a return journey as his brain painfully assimilated the marching array of facts :

Temperature of hull : normal.

Final stage fuel consumption : nil.

Elapsed time since separation of third and fourth stages : four minutes, seventeen—eighteen—nineteen—the seconds clicked steadily off.

Estimated computed deviation from course : less than .0007 degrees.

A succesful shot in every way.

Gritting his teeth against the protest of his muscles, Gould flicked on the video. It showed only the blackness of unrelieved space, spangled by little silvery flecks haphazardly scattered across a background so lacking in colour, it hurt the eyes to watch. Setting his fingers on the dial, he rotated the view, bringing first into sight the globe the little ship had just left.

" My god !"

He gasped, and shut his eyes tight. Seemingly straight overhead, bulking so large that the screen could not encompass the entire picture, the world was falling, falling . . .

And he was right underneath !

Blindly groping, his fingers again touched the dial and spun it half around. Opening his lids slightly, he saw that the screen was once more filled with the earlier view. He sighed, and switched it off.

" They never told me it'd be like that," he said aloud, resentfully. " The least they might do is give a man warning."

" *Luna Prime* ! *Luna Prime* ! *Come in, Luna Prime* ! *This is Edwards Control. Do you read me, Luna Prime* !"

Gould pulled the mike into position before his lips. " Luna Prime to Edwards Control. I read you loud and clear."

" Thank God ! This is Major Kasloski, Gould. How does it feel to be the first man on his way to the moon ?"

" Damn painful," said Gould. " I ache in muscles that I'm sure the bio-lab boys didn't even know I had."

" Telemetering shows you healthy as a horse," said Kasloski. " Uh, inasmuch as this is an event of historical importance, Gould, you are on a world wide radio and video hookup. Posterity is waiting for your words."

" Posterity be damned !" said Gould, grinning through his aches as he visualized the network censors tearing their hair. " Ask that broad from the base canteen how she feels after last night. Boy, did we . . ."

" Uh, Captain Gould !" interrupted the Major, nervously, " apparently you didn't understand me. You are on a world-wide hookup this very minute. Your words are being heard all over the world. Uh . . ."

In the background, Gould could make out mutterings of angry voices. The Major answered them in whispered tones, then came back. " Uh, Captain, what's it like up there ?"

" Frightening," said Gould, deciding to behave.

" The immensity of things, eh ?" asked Major Kasloski. " You realize how insignificant a man really is, compared with the universe."

" No," said Gould. " I'm just plain scared. The earth is hanging right over my head, only its falling right on me !"

He closed his eyes, trying to wipe the memory of that horrible sight away, but it refused to go. The cloud-shrouded discoloured globe seemed, in his recalling, to take on features much as legend had through history ascribed to the moon.

Unlike that jovial satellite, however, the thing overhead was a creature of pure, unadulterated malevolence.

" Uh," said Kasloski's voice, " you're not, uh . . ."

" Nothing's wrong with me," said Gould. " You just said the telemetering equipment showed that. Nothing wrong that a little sleep and a lot of liniment wouldn't cure."

" Well, yes, of course. But the equipment can't show everything. How do you, uh, *feel* ?"

" If you mean am I going nuts, the answer is no. Not yet, at least," he added, crossing his fingers. The movement was less painful than it would have been a few minutes earlier. Some of the tension was draining from his body.

" How was the trip ?" asked Kaloski.

" Bad," said Gould. " Damn bad. The human body wasn't designed for that sort of punishment. The gee-tests, the centrifuge—hell, they're only a mockery of the real thing."

" Your peak was seventeen gees. How is the freefall ?"

" Restful. I haven't unstrapped yet, but already much of the soreness has left my body." He yawned, deeply, nearly throwing his jaw out of joint. " What I need right now is sleep."

" Very well, Captain. We'll let you rest. Call us when you wake. This is Edwards Control, over and out."

" Luna Prime over and out."

Gould loosened the wide straps that held him to the couch, leaving just one for safety's sake. He stretched, groaning as still-sore muscles protested. Once more he glanced briefly at the control panel, noting air-pressure, generators, tracking—the hundred-and-one necessary and superfluous instruments one or more of the scientists up above had decided would be a help to this, man's first extended probe into space.

Silent except for the ticking, clicking, muttering of various instruments and machines, the little ship drifted towards a position in the sky that would later on hold the moon, even though the satellite was now invisible. Gould gave no thought to the absence of his target : his trust and faith were completely on the little ship that had, at first sight, reminded him of a coffin. He had to place his trust there : it was too late now to go back and start over.

Not that there wasn't considerable risk involved in his venture. A man had safely circled the Earth in orbit and returned, but a flight into actual space was something else again. But Billy Gould had an innate confidence in his own ability to travel safely through all of the pitfalls of life. Since the age of twelve he had been making his way alone most of the time. This late a date was no time to start worrying about inadequacies, whether his own or those of the men who had placed him in space.

Of course, Billy Gould—short, thin, washed-out brown hair and eyes, of Cornish extraction—Billy was not the living representation of the ideal heroic picture. He didn't fit in very well with the Anglo-Saxon half-god man that dreamers for years had visualized as man in space.

Instead, they had a wizened runt, scarce topping five feet and a hundred and ten pounds sopping wet. His hair refused to be ordered about by any mere comb or brush: it bristled wildly on a discoloured scalp while a dirty red moustache jutted out from beneath the mishapen and swollen crag that Gould called his nose.

No, no hero, Billy.

The sole reason for his selection was the fact that he numbered among the shortest and lightest jet jockeys available to the United States government. And then he was not first choice, or second, or even fifth. Only an improbable amount of ' accidents ' to his contemporaries had finally brought him to his present resting place on the form-fitted acceleration couch of the Luna Prime rocket.

No hero, Billy Gould. Just cheap.

The slipstick boys had figured out the bare minimums necessary to sustain him and the ship for the duration of the trip, and it had been supplied—that much and ten per cent safety margin, but no more. Economy was the keynote on a project that had already spent several thousand millions. With a certain amount of peace prevalent since the last change-over in the Communist leadership, the taxpayers were beginning to haggle and quibble over expenditures.

So Billy Gould, his skin-tight trunks soaked with sweat within his pressure-suit, had the honour of being the first man in space. (Mere orbiting of the planet no longer counted, now that it had been done).

Thinking of his costume and his discomfort within it, Billy stripped off the pressure-suit—a violation of regulations—and stuffed it in a convenient space underneath his couch. The sweat-soaked trunks followed: he sighed, and permitted himself the luxury of unrestrained scratching.

He yawned : the physical punishment of the past hours had tired him far more than any honest day's labour, although, to be honest, there hadn't been too many of those in his past. Most of the pain was now a memory, heightened by the still

present, still sharp aches that permeated his entire being. He yearned for the pleasantness of the rubdown room back at Edwards.

He yawned again, and closed his eyes. Unbidden, a face rose from the depths of memory. It was female, but nothing special in that line, no glamorous video star or fabulous socialite. Billy's tastes had been formed during his youth, among the lowest dregs of humanity.

Those tastes were reflected now, with this face : a waitress at the base canteen. Her body was pleasant enough to the roving eye although not capable of making the more epicurean such stop for a more searching examination. Her face was just plain enough to make the eye pass on to those more bountifully endowed.

Billy Gould was in love with her. In her presence, he felt a full man, for he topped her by two inches, except when she wore high heels. And she was just diplomat enough not to wear them on dates with him.

" Hot damn !" he said, licking his lips and unaware that he was speaking aloud. " Little Ellie won't be digging up objections to postpone our marriage any longer now, I'll bet !"

The face faded back into the cold grey of the bulkheads. Faded, and was replaced by a procession of luxuries that had been the innermost desires of the man throughout thirty-two years of life. Loud clothes, flashy convertibles, vulgar houses with tasteless furnishings. Nothing of true value—all of great expense.

Yes sir ! Things were going to pop for little William Leonard Gould, Captain, United States Air Force !

Then the future faded into thoughts of the past. Billy grimaced, shaking the unwanted memories away in an effort to clear a mental bad taste. What was done was all done, he decided. He had no desire to call past experiences back for an encore. The mists of youth were misty indeed, and it was Billy's intention to keep them just that way.

But the past was there, and refused to leave. Runaway at the age of twelve and following life in an orphanage. Enlistment in the Air Force at the age of seventeen and, two years later, the miraculous chance to become an Air Cadet. Pushing an F-84 over the 38th Parallel and being shot down.

Escaping from the Commies and getting back home. Becoming a test pilot : checking out in the X-2 and X-15.

Pushing a prototype B-70 around the world in just under eleven hours.

Montevideo in '63, and making Major, only to lose the long-sought rank in a brawl over a tramp in a now-forgotten bar in Cape Town. And, finally, being assigned to the Luna Prime project.

His eyes closed, and he slipped into the well of sleep.

He dreamed . . .

Summer. A warm, drowsy season the year after the end of the war. Little Billy Gould was twelve, although his stunted growth easily permitted him to pass theatre ticket-holders and ushers as eight or nine. Twelve, a lurid comic book shoved into hip pocket, and playing out back of the tarpaper shack in Watertown, New York, that was his home.

Twelve, and hated by adults and children alike.

" That whelp of your's is just no damn good !"

The voice, harsh with adult anger cut through the summer heat. Billy had only half-heard the car pull up outside the bedspring and junk fence around the front yard. Even the slamming of its door had passed unnoticed. But the voice, quivering with unrepressed violence, brought him up sharp.

He stopped teasing the kitten and it began licking at the many scratches and cuts inflicted by the barbed tip of the fishing spear. The spear was a trophy of an early-morning raid on the neighbourhood hardware store, and the kitchen his first opportunity of testing its unintended hellishness.

Creeping cautiously along the side of the shack, the spear dragging from his hand, he peered through the chokecherry bush at the corner.

Old man Tanner, the hardware store owner !

" Two of my clerks saw that brat swipe a fishin' spear this mornin'," Tanner said. He had his hat off and was wiping away the sweat with an old railroad bandanna. He stuffed the handkerchief in his hip pocket. " Cold rolled steel, three ninety eight it cost. Best one in stock. I want my money or I go to the police !"

" Now just you hold on there a minute, Mister," said Billy's Father. The normally surly voice sounded even meaner than usual. The elder Gould was inside the house, speaking through the much-patched screen of the door. The boy couldn't see him, but he knew the man's fists would be working slowly, clenching and unclenching, as he tried hard to keep from

Billy was two hundred yards away. He leaped across the tracks and climbed a fence, running into the freight yards. Stopping to catch his breath, he could still hear his father shouting warnings of punishment to come.

Night came, black and damp. Ominous clouds barred off the heavens, foretelling a nasty storm on its way. Billy crossed the tracks and took up a position where he could watch the shack. A dim light shone from the back ; the man must have tapped the power lines again. Billy hoped he would be caught. The inspector had warned him the next offence would bring six months in the workhouse. To Billy's childish mind, the threatened sentence was an eternity.

Up the track, the late train for New York slowly made its way out of the city, steam engine hooting a mournful serenade to the night. The lighted windows were filled mainly with soldiers from Camp Drum. Just as the last car passed Billy, the light in the shack winked out.

Cautiously approching the shack, the boy took up a position beneath the window of his parents' room. The place was quiet, except for occasional creaks of the old double bed a few feet from his head. Soon even they stopped, to be replaced by the low, rumbling snores of the woman. He knew that the man always slept quietly.

Forcing himself to wait until hunger pangs rumbled his stomach, Billy stepped softly along the wall towards the front. Gingerly mounting the steps, he tried to remember the placement of the boards most likely to creak. The door was unlatched ; he opened it slowly, carefully, a full minute passing before there was space enough to permit him slipping through. He closed it with equal care.

Dirt from the filthy linoleum gritted into the bare soles of his feet. Once he stepped on the jagged edge of a beer bottle cap, gritting his teeth to keep from crying out. He strained his eyes, but the darkness that enveloped the room was impenetrable. Listening for sounds from the bedroom, he edged his way towards the kitchen table. Bread would be filling before he went to bed. Maybe by morning the old bastard . . .

" Ugh !"

He had bumped into something soft and yielding. Fear took hold : he choked back an involuntary scream.

The light snapped on.

" So," said Gould. " You decided to come home, you stinkin' little obscenity !"

The man had been drinking : the alcohol shone evilly from bloodshot eyes. A wide leather belt was wrapped around his hand, the metal buckle hanging free. It caught the rays of the lone bare bulb swinging over the table, vibrating in tune to the tenseness of the man. Gould raised it and swung down on the boy.

" You . . . stinkin' . . . little . . . brat . . ."

Each word was punctuated by a slap of leather and the bite of metal as Gould put all his strength behind the blows.

" I'll teach you to go stealin' out of stores, bringin' the cops down on me ! When I'm done with you, you won't so much as take a breath without first askin' my permission !"

Billy screamed, his shrill young voice echoing from the dark corners of the shack and out into the dreary night. He tried to writhe away from the blows, but Gould followed after him, relentlessly raining them down.

" No !" he begged. " Please, Pa ! Don't hit me ! Don't hit me !" The words were forced out between sobs and gasps for breath. " Please don't !"

He tried to grab the man's leg, but Gould brought his knee into Billy's stomach, forcing the boy away.

" Don't hit me, Pa," mimicked the man. " I'm sorry, Pa, that I bring you trouble. I won't do it no more, Pa. Well, let me tell you somethin', boy : you're damn tootin' you won't do it again. You won't do nothin', when I get done with you !"

The belt slapped once more, then was tossed aside. Gould puffed from the exertion. He dragged a chair away from the table and sat down heavily.

" All right. Where is it ?"

" Un . . . under the house." Dry sobs wracked his body ; he had been drained of tears.

" Go get it."

Billy hugged the floor for a moment, gathering strength. Gould drew back his foot and kicked out. The heavy, steel-capped shoe caught the boy's side. Ribs cracked clearly.

" I said get it ! When I speak, boy, you move !"

Billy pulled himself painfully erect, the tears coursing down his face. He tasted the salt of them mingled with the salt of blood as he stumbled from the shack into the cool night air. Rain had begun to drizzle ; he felt his way blindly around the side of the house, his eyes stinging. Broken branches of the chokecherry bush raked his cheek. He sank to his knees and felt for the gap in the wicker.

those smart kids with all their fancy store toys that they ain't so smart after all." The words flooded out as he tried, frantically, to say something that would make the man leave him alone.

" I *had* to have it, Pa !"

" I *had* to have it, Pa !" Gould mimicked the boy again, his voice slipping into falsetto, then back into its normal range. " A stinkin' little brat like you doesn't *have* to have a damn thing, 'cept maybe a good beatin'." He stared disgustedly at the boy. " All I gotta say is, thank God I'm not your real father !"

" Pa !"

The boy looked despairingly towards the woman, but she didn't stir from her slouch, lost in apathy.

" You don't like hearin' that, eh ?" said Gould. " You don't want to know what your ma was—what she would be right now, if she wasn't so blame ugly even the drunks in the gutter won't look at her.

" Look at her, boy !"

He laughed, a humourless sound that rasped the ear. " No, boy, I guess a liar like you wouldn't like the truth. Just the same, some rail-walkin' gandy-dancer or mebbe a white trash bean picker is your real old man—or mebbe some nigger from the camp ! No man with sense would go near her."

" Please, Pa !"

The words hurt, lashing down even sharper and heavier than the wide leather belt. He couldn't—wouldn't let himself believe them.

" Please, Pa ! Don't say such things. You know Ma would never do nothin' like that !"

" Yeah, she just come out of a convent."

" You're just sayin' that for spite, Pa !"

" Spite, huh ? Well, here's somethin' else for spite." He lifted his leg and started to bring the shaft of the spear down across it.

" No, Pa !" Billy lunged against him, knocking the man off balance. Gould crashed to the floor and lay silent for a moment, stunned. The boy backed away, afraid of what he had done.

" Ma ! He . . . he ain't dead, is he ?"

Gould groaned. His mouth lolled open as he gasped for breath. The boy stared with fright as the man struggled to his feet.

" Why, you . . ."

Words refused to come through his rage. He steadied himself against the table. Sweat dripped from his chin ; his eyes bulged, nearly popping from their sockets. Holding the spear tightly, he licked his lips and advanced on the boy.

" Pa !"

Billy stumbled backwards, retreating from the thrusting barbs. The steel glinted evilly in the pale light, seemed tinged with red—the red of evil incarnate ; the red of blood . . .

Blood of the kitten . . .

Blood of the man . . .

Blood of . . .

" No, Pa !"

Terror froze him in his tracks. Time slowed to a parody of slow-motion ; an eternity passed while the miniature trident probed closer. Scene and actors moved through a field of viscous invisible mud.

The shock of contact came almost as a relief.

Gould yanked the spear free from his side, twisting the barbs as they came. Billy stared down at the red stain flooding out over his shirt. Strength evaporated from him : his legs turned to rubber. He stumbled, catching himself against the table. Turning, he stared at the man in disbelief. Slowly he slid down, the rough splintered edge of the table tearing at his back.

" Pa . . ."

His head cracked the table's edge.

His head hurt. Horribly. Pain spread out like a spider weaving an all-encompassing web . . .

No. That was wrong. The pain was wrong. It came from the front of his skull. It had been the back of his head that had hit the table . . .

What ?

Slowly, reluctantly, he opened his eyes. A red haze danced briefly before him, shot through with sparks of fire. A ringing buzzed deep within his ears : he clamped his hands tight in a futile effort to shut it out. Slowly the haze cleared.

The control panel hovered a few inches in front of his nose, features blurred by its proximity. He rubbed the bump on his forehead and twisted around, hip banging the edge of the panel and knocking him towards the couch below. Quickly it came up to meet him ; he hit the padding and bounced back upwards, careening off the panel again.

" If I thought you could hit the target from there, I'd say go ahead," said Andersen, with a chuckle. " As it is, I guess I'll have to wait until they get the wheel up and operating. Okay, this is Ascension Control, over to Countdown."

Andersen's voice crackled out, to be replaced a moment later by one more impersonal : " Two minutes, thirty seconds." It was a young voice ; behind the professional calm, Gould could imagine a youthful airman fighting to keep expression hidden.

" Two minutes."

Time to think, time to wonder. He twisted around under the straps, suddenly aware that the pressure suit was off. He started to pull it out, then realized that time was too short. Shoving it back into the niche, he relaxed, hoping that the designers were right in their braggings about the couch.

Time to think : but the only thought in his mind was the dream—nightmare.

Time to wonder : memories long buried in the safety of the distant and undesired past had suddenly bubbled out. Moving his hand under the straps, he felt the jagged holes in his side where the spear had entered, twenty years earlier. The holes were long, ragged, but well-defined. He could still recall the sledgehammer blow that had driven the tines in, and the evil twist with which they had been yanked out.

" One minute, thirty seconds."

A bad taste crept over his mouth. The past . . .

Damn it to hell !

What was happening to him ? He was Billy Gould—about to go down in history as the first real *spaceman* ! His niche in the future was assured, secure : why was he suddenly having doubts about the whole damn affair ?

There had been earlier doubts of course, when first he had been tapped for the assignment. But they had been safely explained away by the slipstick boys and—finally—by himself Why were they returning ?

" One minute."

Suddenly Billy wished that he could somehow stop : turn around : be back home safe on solid ground.

" Fifty seconds . . ."

What the hell did he have to be afraid of ? Here he had a gold-plated, copper-clad pass straight into eternity, and the punch hadn't been made strong enough to cancel it out. A

billion people were following the events going on around him : everything he had ever desired would be his the minute he got back to earth.

So what was he worrying about ?

" Forty seconds."

Here he was, on a perpetual motion roller coaster with a brass ring waiting around every bend and corner—waiting to drop into his hand the minute he reached out. Carloads of goodies were waiting his request.

What was he worrying about ?

" Thirty seconds."

Sweat beaded out on his brow, then flooded from his pores, soaking his naked skin. The temperature in the cabin seemed to be building up, up . . .

" Twenty seconds."

My God ! What have I done ? Where are you, God ? *Where the hell are you* ?

" Ten seconds."

" *Don't desert me, God* !"

" Five seconds . . .

" Four . . .

" Three . . .

" *Two* . . ."

Nightmare !

Billy jerked away from the torturous barbs. Red flooded over his shirt. He tried to scream as his legs turned to rubber . . .

" Ascension Control to Luna Prime. How do you read me, Luna Prime ?"

Nightmare washed slowly away. The man lay, eyes open but unseeing as they stared up at the bulkhead.

" Come in Luna Prime ! Come in ! This is Ascension Control to Luna Prime ! Answer me, Luna Prime ! Answer me !"

" Uhhhh . . ."

The man grunted, twisting under the straps.

" Gould ! Answer me ! Answer me ! This is Ascension Control to Luna Prime !"

Awareness slowly returned. Eyes blinked while ears assimilated unrelated noises, breaking them apart and splitting them into components that finally made sense.

" Ohhhh. God, God, God, God, God."

" Luna Prime ! *Will you answer me* ? *Luna Prime* !"

" Uh, Luna Prime to Ascension Control."

" Thank God !" Andersen's voice cracked with relief. " What happened, Gould ?"

" Uh, happened ?" He licked cracked lips with a tongue suddenly dry. " I . . . I don't know. Blacked . . . blacked out, I guess."

" Our instruments went crazy," said Andersen. " We thought you were dead ! How do you read ?"

Gould let his eyes sweep across the panel, calling off the readings. " Seems normal," he finished.

" It is normal," said Andersen. " You're tracking right on course. How do you feel ?"

Pain suddenly washed over him. He raised his arm, nearly screaming with the effort, and unloosened the straps from where they had dug deep into his flesh. His skin was raw, bleeding in places, where the straps had cut in.

" I'm alive," he said. " I guess. I'm speaking, anyhow—aren't I ?"

" You're speaking," said Andersen, hysteria creeping into his voice in the form of a giggle. " Loud and clear. But how do you feel ?"

" I . . . There's no way to describe it," he said. " I feel like I'm living—was living—a nightmare."

" Nightmare ? Are you sure you didn't overdo it a bit last night ?"

" Maybe I did," he said. " I don't know. Something was overdone sometime. It just might have been last night."

" What . . . Oh, just a minute." Mutterings in the background, then a different voice came on.

" Captain Gould ? This is Colonel Stein. Can you describe your, uh, nightmare for us ?"

" I don't know," said Billy, thoughtfully.

" What do you mean ?" asked the Colonel. "Please explain. Don't you recall the details ?"

" It isn't that, Sir. It's just that, well, it was sort of on the personal side."

" I'm a psychiatrist, Captain. I can assure you that you need have no fear of telling me your, uh, secrets. I will have the room cleared."

" That's all very fine, Sir," said Billy. " Can you clear the world, too ?"

" What do . . . Oh. I see," he finished lamely. "Perhaps you're right, Captain. Radio is not a very private means of communication. Very well. Perhaps you can give me your impressions ?"

" Well," he said, slowly, " like I said : it was a nightmare. A very bad one. I don't like to even think about it when I'm awake."

" Ummm. Well, then. What do you think caused it ?"

" I don't know," he replied. " You people have the instruments. What do you think ?"

" Uh, I'm afraid that we are as much in the dark as you, Captain," he admitted. " Our instruments are quite excellent when it comes to checking on your physical condition. Unfortunately, science has yet to devise an instrument capable of reading and making sense of the mind."

" I was afraid of that."

" You must realize, Captain, that no one has ever been in quite your position before."

" Oh, I do, Colonel," he said, sarcastically. " Indeed I do. Which is a big help right now, isn't it ?"

" Of course, I do find it somewhat odd that we found no similar effects among the men who have orbited the world. The psychological factors however, don't seem to be at all the same. Do I make myself clear, Captain ?"

" If you're expecting me to understand what the hell you're talking about, no. On the other hand, if you mean you think I'm batty, why not check through the psych tests again, Colonel ? Maybe your boys read them wrong the first time. Maybe I should never have been here in the first place."

" Ah, you, ah, volunteered, didn't you, Captain ?"

" Oh I volunteered, all right," said Billy. " Although I can't for the life of me remember why. All I want to know, Colonel, is just what the hell are you people going to do for me now ?"

" I, ah, don't see, Captain, where there is much that we can do ? Do you ? I mean, after all, you are rather beyond our reach at the present, don't you see ? If you have any suggestions, by all means please make them. But as it is, until your, ah, uh, journey is over . . ."

" I get you," said Billy, bitterly. " Why don't you sing me some lullabies, Colonel, Sir ?"

" Really, now, Captain !" he protested. " I must say such actions as that will certainly never help your situation. We must, ah, keep calm at, ah, times like these. Recriminations help no one."

" Uh, is there anything I can do, Billy ? You've got nearly three hours yet before you go into orbit around target."

" I don't know what."

" Maybe just talk. Idle chitchat to pass the time a little quicker."

" Thanks, but right now I'm not in the mood for idle chitchat, Joe. I want to do some thinking."

" Okay. But remember, if you want company all you have to do is holler once. This is Ascension Control, over and out."

" Luna Prime out."

For the first time since the beginning of the trip, Billy missed the comforting pull of gravity. Knowledge that he was so far from the mother planet had dug in for the first time. He started to turn on the video, then drew back his hand, remembering the shock of the first look. Steeling himself, he switched on the screen and rotated the view until the Earth was floating in the centre of the picture.

He let his breath out in a long sigh, unaware that he had been holding it back. The globe swam there, features obscured by gigantic cloud banks but otherwise much like he had imagined it would be.

He sighed again. Things were back in their proper prospective. He tried to relax.

Despite his long earlier sleep, he was still dead tired. Almost all of the soreness had now left his muscles, replaced by a stiffness that only exercise would properly remove. He rubbed his legs, wincing as he touched the places cut raw by the straps.

His lips were dry again. He pulled the water bottle from its niche and sucked it dry. He started to get up and take it to the reservoir, but decided that it could wait until later. His stomach rumbled ; he pulled a tube of food paste from beneath the couch and squeezed some into his mouth, making a face as the unpalatable stuff hit his tastebuds. His hunger evaporated.

The slipstick boys had permitted him to bring a pair of paperbacked books to combat possible boredom, but the thought of reading had tortured eye muscles protesting before the act could be started. He slipped his hands under his head and stared at the featureless bulkhead above the control panel.

There was much for him to think about. Despite that, the nightmare kept rising to the foremost. So real had it seemed, it was as if he had been living the event instead of dreaming it.

At that, how was a man to tell the difference ? And what difference did it actually make ? It seemed real ; it was real.

The kitten tried to bat the tormenting thing away, cowering into the corner. Billy giggled, only half-hearing the car that drove up out front of the shack. But the angry voice quickly brought him to full awareness.

" That whelp of your's is just no damn good !"

He peered cautiously through the branches of the choke-cherry bush, sizing up his opponent.

Old man Tanner !

He fingered the light-weight fishing spear. The old bastard must have found out about his swiping it this morning . . .

But of course he had found out. Billy could still remember the licking his father had given him : his side still ached. He glanced down, almost expecting to see . . . What ?

Billy shook his head, puzzled. There could be something on the shirt, but there wasn't, outside of the usual accumulation of filth. He fingered the spot nervously. Something was wrong, missing.

But what ?

Red stain . . .

But there was no red stain.

And the licking. The old man hadn't given him a licking for nearly a week, and that had been just a couple of ineffectual swipes while drunk. He had just swiped the spear this morning So how could his father know about it.

The belt swinging down . . .

The light snapped on.

" So you decided to come home."

The shock of contact came almost as a relief. He stared down at the spreading red stain. His legs turned to rubber.

He cracked his head.

Anticlimax. The moon shot could no longer mean a thing to the quivering, terrified shell of a man. Somehow the hours passed and he managed to stay awake. The ship made its scheduled spiral orbit around the satellite and corrective firing set it on the homeward orbit, but Gould was not really aware of the fact.

Even the task of guiding the ship down into the atmosphere and the expulsion of the capsule over the predetermined spot in the Pacific—all passed in a haze. He practically fell into the arms of the men in the launch. Their welcomes and congratulations went unnoticed. Words were unheard, refused to

impinge on his consciousness. Even the fact that he was now a full Colonel meant nothing.

At long last someone on the ship led him to a cabin. He shucked off the greatcoat some officer had placed over his nakedness and fell on to the bunk. Sleep took hold even before his back hit the mattress.

The kitten squirmed as the boy giggled . . .

And the man screamed.

Sound torn from the nethermost depths of hell poured out into the room, not stopping when the needle slid into his arm, not stopping until there was no more sound to be vibrated from the vocal cords.

The effort to scream did not cease until he was dead.

Little Billy Gould's pass to eternity had been voided.

The rockets cut off, and the impossible sound stopped tearing a path through his skull. Captain Allan Case took several deep breathes into his aching lungs, then forced tortured muscles to move his hand to where the straps could be loosened.

His eyes swept across the control panel, noting pressures, temperatures—the hundred and one useful and useless things the scientists had felt it necessary to install. Everything seemed normal.

" This is Edwards Control to Luna Secundus. Edwards Control to Luna Secundus. How do you read me, Luna Secundus ?"

Case pulled the mike down to his face. " Luna Secundus to Edwards Control. I read you loud and clear."

" Fine, Captain ! How do you feel ?"

" As though a giant had stepped on my guts. There isn't a nerve or muscle in my body that isn't screaming with pain."

" To be expected," said Edwards Control. " How do you feel mentally ?"

" I haven't cracked up yet," he said. " Feel fit as a fiddle."

" Fine ! Of course, it's a little early yet, to tell for sure. Colonel Gould didn't run into trouble until after he had slept. It's entirely possible that whatever happened to him was rooted in the sleep centres."

" Which means you want me to cork off for a while," said Case. " So you can see if I'm nuts when I wake up."

" Well, we have to consider all possibilities, Captain. Of course, as you were told, it was the opinion of the Psychiatric Board that Colonel Gould was, ah, unbalanced before he was ever selected for the trip. Screening has been tightened a great deal. The Colonel was the product of an unfortunate environment. You, on the other hand, come from the most stable environment we could find."

" Thanks. Heaps. I'll tell my grandchildren their old grandfather was famous just because he wasn't nuts."

" No need to be, ah, facetious, Captain," remonstrated the radio.

" Yessir," he said. " Sorry, Colonel Stein."

" Perhaps you can tell us your impressions, Captain. How does it seem, in space ? What does the planet look like ?"

" To tell the truth, Sir," he confessed, " I haven't taken my first look yet."

" Do so, please."

He reached up and switched on the video screens, rotating the view until the Earth swung into view.

" Oh my God !"

He shut his eyes tightly and spun the dial. When he opened them again it was to look at a background of star-spangled nothingness.

" What happened, Captain ?" demanded the radio. " You gasped."

" It's . . . all right, Sir," he said. " It's just that it was sort of . . . overwhelming."

" How ? What do you mean ?"

" It's . . . so *big*. It's hanging there, right over my head, with nothing to hold it up." He licked dry lips.

" Do you get the impression that the world is, well, falling on you, Captain ?"

" Falling ? ' He laughed. " Of course not, Sir. How could it be falling ? I'm moving away from it."

" Of course, Captain. Of course. It was just an idle thought. Every thing is under control, then ?"

" Yessir. And, if you don't mind, Sir, I'd like to test out your sleep theory now. I'm beat."

" Very well, Captain. This is Edwards Control, over and out."

" Luna Secundus, over and out."

Allan Case made himself as comfortable as possible. Some of the soreness was leaving his muscles. He unloosened all but the waist strap, then pulled the water bottle from its niche under the couch. Thirst slaked, he placed his hands under his head.

" Well, Al, baby, so far so good. That Gould character must have been nuts. This is a breeze."

Down there, he knew, everybody was following his progress with bated breath, waiting to see if he too would crack up. He was going to fool them, though. He was going to get back down in one piece, with all his faculties in full operation.

Of course, this wasn't all a peaches and cream deal. His first look at the planet from space had been, he admitted to himself, disquieting. But to think that it was falling—pipe dreams !

Just like that fairy tale they told kids—how did it go ? Oh, Yeah. Chicken Little was standing under a tree when an acorn fell on his head. So he went off to tell the King the sky was falling.

Hah ! The sky was falling !

Falling . . .

Falling . . .

The world was falling . . .

" How do you know ?" asked Henny Penny.

" Because it hit me on the head !" answered Chicken Little.

It did, too. He had seen it with his very own eyes.

The world was falling !

Nightmare !

Robert Hoskins

'Gone Away—No known address'

Subscribers are reminded to keep us informed of any change of address to ensure the safe delivery of their copies as far too many issues are returned by the Post Office marked as above. Overseas subscribers are particularly requested to let us know in good time.

The old system of trading beads and glass to the natives might still be a worthwhile project on alien worlds, as author Tubb points out, but a lot would depend on what the natives offered in trade.

JACKPOT

by E. C. TUBB

The sphere was two inches in diameter and of a blackness so intense it appeared a two-dimensional circle against the grey, crackle-finish of the test bench.

" Something new? "

McCarty crossed the compartment in three easy strides. He eased the pack from broad shoulders, took his pipe from his mouth and poked the sphere with the stem. The thing was solid but light; the thrust of the pipe sent it rolling across the bench.

" Careful! "

Larman grabbed a slide rule and erected a barrier. The sphere came to a halt. McCarty raised a bushy eyebrow.

" Dangerous? "

It was, Larman knew, a question tantamount to an insult. McCarty knew that Larman had better sense than to introduce anything dangerous into the ship. Only an idiot would deliberately court disaster and Larman was far from that.

" Not dangerous," he said stiffly. " Only curious."

" How can you be certain? "

McCarty squatted and examined the sphere, sucking at his pipe as he did so. He never smoked it, only sucked it, and

it was a habit which grated on his companion's nerves. It was odd, thought Larman, how hateful that pipe made McCarty. His own habit, that of chewing gum was, of course, nothing in comparison.

" I've tested it," said Larman. He stilled the unspoken protest. " Not in the ship. I assembled a test-rig outside and gave it the works. It's as dangerous as putty."

McCarty twitched his eyebrows.

" A native brought it," explained Larman. He had grown used to the others signals. " While you were away. How did you make out? "

" Nothing worth the trouble of hauling. Well? "

" He came about an hour after you'd gone. I took a chance and gave him a handful of beads for it." Larman drew a deep breath. This was his moment.

" A handful of beads! " McCarty almost exploded. " For something as valuable as putty! "

" No. For the Jackpot! "

Every trader dreamed of the Jackpot. Hard-bitten wanderers woke in their patched-up cans smiling like babies at the thought of it. Burned-out wrecks wept in their liquor and dragged themselves out for one more try at finding it. A few, a very few, had found it. The Jackpot! The thing which spelt fortune.

Glusky had found it on Eridani IV, a weed he had smoked in lieu of tobacco—and found he had stumbled on the secret of doubling the life-span. Hilbrain had, literally, fallen over it on Rigel VII, the ore he had sworn at now lined half the rocket tubes in the galaxy. Beesen, Kildare, a handful of others, all keeping alive the legend. One for ten thousand traders who died broke or simply vanished. It was enough.

" Are you sure? " McCarty didn't raise his voice but muscle made ridges along the line of his jaw. It was no time for joking.

" I'm sure." Larman reached out and picked up the sphere. He rolled it between his palms then threw it at the other man. " Catch! "

McCarty caught. He stared down at the pool of utter blackness cradled in his hands, then at Larman, then at the sphere again. When he put it down he was frowning.

" What is it? "

" I don't know."

" You don't know! "

McCarty was tired. He'd had a hard three days trading with the natives without financial success and his nerves were ragged with the effort of adhering to the complicated ritual governing such operations. His head ached, too, from the weight of the translator and he wanted a shower. With a visible effort he controlled himself.

" Listen," he said dangerously. " If you're playing some kind of stupid game—"

" You listen." Larman could afford to be curt. It was his turn to be dominant. " I told you that I'd tested it. Just in case you've forgotten I'm an engineer and a good one. I also know something about physics, chemistry, metallurgy and a few other subjects. I mention this in case you imagine that I'm a fool."

McCarty grunted. Larman knew no more than any good explorer-trader had to know but that didn't automatically absolve him from being an idiot. Who but a fool would continuously chew cud like a cow? Who, if it came to that, would be a trader in the first place if they had all their marbles?

Captains, of course, were different. McCarty was the captain.

" I've tested it," repeated Larman hastily. He had recognised McCarty's expression. " I don't know what it is but it's something new to modern science." Lovingly he picked up the sphere.

" It's the Jackpot! "

They tested it. They did everything Larman had already done and a lot more besides. It wouldn't cut, it couldn't be drilled, it couldn't be crushed, cracked or shattered. It resisted acid and alkali, heat and cold, vibration and radiation. It was an enigma and McCarty didn't like enigmas.

" It's light," he said. " If it's metal then it has to be hollow."

" It isn't metal." Larman pushed goggles up on his forehead, the searing blue-white flame of the atomic cutter dying as he flipped the switch. That cutter was designed to shear through inch-thick high temperature alloy. The sphere hadn't been affected.

" All right," snapped McCarty. " So it isn't metal. So how about you telling me what it is? "

"I don't know."

McCarty grunted. Gingerly he touched the sphere and found it, as usual, the same temperature as before. Said temperature being a few degrees lower than its immediate surroundings—in this case his own hand. The base on which it rested, a block of native wood, showed no sign of the fierce heat of the cutter.

Larman watched the gesture and pursed his lips.

"We can speculate," he said, "but we can't be sure. Our information, at this stage, is purely negative."

"We know what it isn't," said McCarty. "We don't know what it is." He replaced the sphere on its base, his fingers lingering the ebony surface. "Let's try an electric arc."

They tried an electric arc. They tried two focussed burners. They tried X-rays and ice and, from his expression, Larman had the suspicion that McCarty was trying prayer. The sun went down and they were still trying. Later, in the snug confines of the living compartment, Larman summed up what they had learned.

"It's indestructible, as far as we know, that is. It seems totally absorbent to all sources of energy. Light, radiation, even the friction-heat generated by attempting to penetrate it, all are absorbed. The thing must be soaking up energy all the time—the temperature differential tells us that."

"Like a sponge," said McCarty. He lay on his bunk, thoughfully sucking his pipe, the little burbling noises blending with the soft purr of the fan.

"Exactly!" Larman was triumphant. "A kind of static matrix of stress force capable of soaking up a tremendous amount of energy."

"Why tremendous?"

"Its weight for one thing, its bulk for another and look at the way we've poured energy into it without any kind of reaction. Anyway, my guess is that the thing was made to do just that."

McCarty nodded. Larman made sense. The sphere was obviously an artifact and yet . . .

He thought of the planet on which they had landed, the semi-tropical climate with the semi-tropical vegetation, the entire lack of any sign of civilisation. Kaldar II was a primitive world, the natives living a standard, pre-urban existence based on tribal culture, hunting and natural harvesting. They, certainly, hadn't manufactured the sphere.

But if they hadn't, who had?
And why?

Larman screwed a jeweller's glass into one eye, steadied the hair-fine probe in his right hand and stopped over the sphere. Minutely he examined, not for the first time, the area of blackness magnified in his vision. It was like staring into a bottomless pit.

Irritably he straightened and rubbed his eyes. He was alone in the ship, McCarty had gone down to the village to ask questions about the sphere and, knowing the intricate procedure adhered to by the natives, there was no telling how long he would be. In the meantime Larman was trying to solve a mystery.

The mystery being the sphere.

Nothing, he reasoned, and McCarty had agreed with him, was made without a reason. The sphere was an artifact, it had been manufactured, it must serve a purpose. Unless they discovered what that purpose was then the sphere, instead of being the Jackpot, was just a scientific novelty. True, they could take it back and have the scientists drool over it but while that might spell fame it didn't spell fortune. The cash would go to the bright spark who figured out a way to use it—not to the ones who didn't recognise its worth.

Grimly he replaced the glass and probed again at the sphere.

He was still probing when McCarty returned.

"Find anything?"

"No." Larman eased his aching back. "You?"

"Nothing that would hurt if you put it in your eye." McCarty helped himself to water, swallowing three measures before emptying the paper cup over his head. "Those natives!"

Larman nodded his sympathy. The natives were tall humanoids, blue-skinned and eight-fingered. They spoke a gushing sibilance with occasional grunts which the translators broke down into a weird kind of broken, disjointed English. They had a system of ritual symbolism which made the most rigid Earth Court Etiquette seem like a free-for-all at a teen-age banquet. And they smelt.

"So they don't know where the sphere came from?" Larman sighed his disappointment. McCarty surprised him.

"They know, all right," he said. "They dug it out of the ground. What it is and who made it is something else." He helped himself to more water, sat down and stretched. "It isn't indigenous to this culture that's for certain."

"A previous race?"

"Perhaps. Or visitors way back. Who can tell?"

Larman wasn't surprised. Kaldar II wouldn't be the first planet which had experienced the rise and fall of many civilisations, nor would it have been the first to have been visited by other races. He wasn't surprised but he was disappointed. If the sphere was a lone freak then hitting the Jackpot would be that much harder. He said so. McCarty shrugged.

"If we can't crack it then what's the difference?"

"A lot of difference!" Larman was annoyed. "Maybe they only do whatever the're supposed to do if paired or in series." He blinked. "Maybe that's it?"

"Maybe that's what?"

"The answer." Larman was excited. "Look at it in a logical way. We have something which soaks up energy, right?"

"So?"

"So maybe that's just what it is. A means of strong power. A battery!"

"Batteries are usually carried around," reminded McCarty. Larman waved aside the objection.

"What do you do with your dead flashlight cells? Toss them aside, that's what. Well perhaps whoever dumped this thing simply replaced it with another just as you do with your flashlight cells."

McCarty thought about it for a moment.

"But if it could be recharged?"

"Perhaps he was in a hurry, or careless, or simply didn't care. Perhaps anything." Larman screwed the glass back into his eye. "Shut up, now, and let me work!"

He didn't find what he was looking for but, as he pointed out, it didn't really matter.

"I was hoping to find a couple of minute openings," Larman explained. "Connections, sort of, but that would be silly. Whoever used it wanted to connect it up fast so they wouldn't have used tiny openings."

member of my audience, and he looked a trifle severely at the deep-voiced man as he said it. "Dr. Marksman, of course, is especially celebrated for his investigation of probabilities, the foretelling of natural events like weather patterns, earthquakes, crop harvests, etcetera, by mathematical means. He invented the Projective Calculus seven years ago, and in 1954 based his great Theory of the Causal Integration of Probables on it. It staggered the world, as we all know—or as those of us who were in a position to appreciate its significance know. It proved to have a high degree of accuracy in many of its applications. Has he been experimenting further, do you know? After all, he has been silent, mathematically speaking, for a long time."

"Not being a mathematician myself, no more than his son-in-law, in fact, I have no knowledge of his recent work," I said. "But there could be something in what you say."

"An air disaster is not a natural event, not in any mathematically predictable sense." It was the deep-voiced man's comeback. "No amount of further experiment, with or without the Projective Calculus, could make a thing like that predictable."

"Given enough data on the plane, I should think—"

"Given enough data on the plane he could have convinced the corporation that they shouldn't fly it. And even then he couldn't have known to the minute, to the second, or the total deathroll—minus two."

It seemed that I was guilty of still being alive. But the owl-spectacles didn't see it that way. He said: "Well, at any rate, I am certain there must be a perfectly rational explanation," and then, with a bright, toothy smile in my direction, went on: "Do you think Dr. Marksman would receive *me?* I have followed his work with great interest. He would be entirely comprehensible to me—"

"I'm sorry," I said.

A young, slick-looking type, who, I noticed, had been dropping his ash in a Chinese vase, said, "You actually saw the plane crash and explode, didn't you?"

"It happened as we were leaving the airport in Dr. Marksman's car. It was then that my wife fainted."

"Understandable," said the owl-spectacles.

"Good. Honeymoon angle," said another.

"And didn't you press Dr. Marksman for an explanation?" The deep-voice seemed to think that, besides being still alive, I was a touch imbecilic.

"There was a little matter of shock to get over first," I replied, as drily as I could. (It didn't register.) "When I did question Dr. Marksman, he said he would explain to me—later. And that, I'm afraid, is what I have to tell you, gentlemen."

"It's going to have to be some explanation, since I don't believe in fortune-telling," said the deep voice. And the slick type tossed his burning cigarette end in the Chinese vase saying: "Tell us what your emotions were at seeing the plane you should have been on crash in flames."

So I told them, as dramatically as I could under the circumstances, to send them away with a bellyful of copy and no explanation. But even then they weren't disposed to go. The owl-spectacles wanted "one last word."

"It is possible that, using the Projective Calculus, or some augmented form of it, Dr. Marksman could have worked out the imminence of his own death. Do you think this might have been the case and that he kept you with him because—"

"And took sixty-four other people with him into Kingdom Come?" broke in the deep voice. "He would have really wanted company."

"Well, then," went on the owl-spectacles, undiminished, "could it have anything to do with the severe burns to the hand he received some time back? I understand it was completely paralysed, and was received through some experiment never specified. Did he, in fact, have a special electronic computer built?"

"I'm unaware of any connection between the burnt hand and this business—"

"Except sixty-four burnt-up bodies." The deep-voice type was offensively smelling murder somewhere.

"—but he did have a special electronic computer built. One of the finest in the world, I believe. It looks impressive, at any rate."

"Ah, so he *has* been experimenting. Would it be possible to see the computer now?"

It went on like that for another ten minutes, edging into information which each blind trail showed I didn't have. I only got rid of them then by promising more the next day at

a specified time. But they were to be back long before that, and for something I would have given my right hand rather than promise. As soon as I had seen the last one out I made for Dr. Marksman's laboratory.

It was away in the remotest part of his house, the famous Herenshaw, in Hertfordshire, Mecca to half the scientific world. Dr. Marksman had never been a poor man, always well-retained by industry or government in advisory posts, but I think his only reason for buying Herenshaw was to get isolation for work and experiment. He well-furnished the rest of the house but spent most of his time in the laboratory wing. And in the past couple of years he had startled everybody with some first class share-buying on the Stock Exchange, become independent of the fat retaining fees, but still kept like a hermit to his lab wing and filled the house with servants he rarely saw. I had married Anne for love, and would have been much more comfortable with a less wealthy father-in-law.

He was well-cushioned against the world in the lab wing. I knocked on the door of his study, and when there was no answer there had to go through and knock on the lab door. There was no answer there, either, so it was a case of continuing to the computer room door. He had to be there, for I knew that the computer was the end of the wing, no other way out. He unlocked to me.

"Hello, Phil. Come in," he said. Short and stocky, he was one of these people who stay solid even in old age without any exercise fit to justify it, but he had a dark, sleep-wanting look on his face. I suppose we both had. Tobacco ash was powdered down the cutaway suit they had fitted him out with for the wedding. He could never seem to avoid dusting himself with tobacco ash, even when he was dressed for dinner with the Royal Society.

"I'm tired, dead beat," I said, going in.

He said nothing; locked the door with his good right hand. The left, always pigskin-gloved since the accident, hung useless in his trouser pocket. He always kept it tucked away in some pocket. He came over and stood looking up at me, a tense kind of look even with his large blue eyes remaining as innocently angelic as ever and his too-long brush-back of grey hair still having the halo effect.

"Reporters have been," I said.

"And gone?"

I nodded.

"Thank you, Phil. Thank you, my boy. And Anne, how's Anne?"

"The Doctor's with her. She'll be all right."

He turned away to walk down the computer room. I followed, and the sound of our shoes on the linoleum parquet affronted the quiet, for it was a quiet room. Which is not to say that there was no sound sidling about in it. I mean by 'quiet' that there was no sound coming from outside. There were no windows nor access for outside noise, only a surround of grey, metallic panels lit by purple-white fluorescence. Sound there was, coming from some part of this enclosing mass of mechanism that it was impossible to distinguish; sound that seemed to insinuate itself into the listening brain and take on the effect of a headnoise.

It was like violins soft in high tremolo, making a silence by its sound, and the isolation of the room more sinister. I had been in the computer room once or twice before and had never liked it. It was no more than an unusually extensive system of electronic mechanism neatly functioning behind sheer, smooth panelling, discreet and speedily efficient, but its extent, occupying all four walls of the room and even arching over the only door, and its height, floor to ceiling, gave me, always, a feeling of being imprisoned and powerless. I think it was that the absence of windows was absence of any direct link with the various and faulty human world outside. I felt that Dr. Marksman made a mistake not to have had windows. I would have wanted windows.

I wondered why the thing was live like this when nothing seemed to be happening. What the Doctor did with it would have been beyond my understanding, but that he should have worked with it tonight, after what we had all been through, surprised me. Dials were registering, lights, red and yellow, some clustered into two large oblong panels, others at points round the room, were glowing. From between two narrow rollers at one end a tail of paper tape hung, seeming to be unfinished, waiting for more of whatever it was the thing had to say.

"I want you to have this, Phil." Dr. Marksman picked up a stiff-bound, black notebook from his desk. "You are

puzzled as to how I knew that plane was to crash, how it was to crash. Naturally you are. It's all in here. Read it in your spare time. Give it to the newspapers. They'll probably give it back to you without printing a word of it. Too hard for them to swallow. Hard for you to swallow, for that matter. But we'll see. In a few minutes we'll have proof one way or the other."

"But what is it?"

"It's a log I've kept of my transactions with this—the computer, Cassandra as I called it. A more or less unscientific log, pardonably unscientific at times, I think. But readily understandable, as a log should be."

"I should certainly like to read it," I said, "but won't you be able to tell me; in your own time, of course, no hurry. If you explained first the log would probably be easier going."

"I may not be able to," he said, looking round about at the computer. "It may not be possible. You see, what you'll find there will not be just an explanation of tonight. You'll find, as I found, that it's an account of a struggle, not a man-to-man struggle, but one of lure and trap, an encirclement."

I didn't know what to say. Who would?

"I closed the log tonight. Now to cut off the computer, cut it off and dismantle it, finally and for ever." And he turned towards the end of the room. Then, turning towards me again, he said:

"I'm thinking of what you said the first time you came in here. D'you remember? You quoted what they say of Sir Christopher Wren in St. Paul's Cathedral. You said: 'Si monumentum requiris, circumspice.' Now we'll see what the monument is."

He turned back and walked over to one of the grey panels. His shoulders were squared back like those of a man going defiantly out to meet some trial or some indignity. I had no idea what it was all about. He slid back the panel and reached in to a large, black cut-out switch I could see was in there. He began to tug at the switch. It seemed to be stiff, hard to throw. He suddenly shouted at the top of his voice:

"It's giving! It's giving! I'm winning!"

And then . . .

The explosion and blinding flash shocked me into a second's unconsciousness. But through it I heard the tremolo higher and higher to a scream and leaping, searing charges of electric destruction. When I came out of it there was silence, real silence, and Dr. Marksman was sagging down out of the open panel. He fell spread over on his back, and what I saw set me vomiting, there on the floor of the computer room. The whole front of him from the waist up was burnt black, the clothing charred away and the skin seared and blistered off him. He was dead; so obviously dead that my muddled feeling for heart, pulse and all the rest of it was so much useless, instinctive activity. The computer was dead, too. Whatever the wonder it had been, it was now nothing but the isolated tinkle of cracked, falling glass and the smell of burnt insulation.

There are several minutes during which I can't be certain what I did, except that I remember distinctly running to the door, getting it open and bellowing for somebody. I don't suppose anybody heard me, we were too well padded away, isolated. Perhaps that was why I rushed to open the door, even uselessly; the instinct to self-preservation, reaching out to touch the world. Then my intelligence got the upper hand again and I used the computer room telephone. By degrees I pieced together assistance, ambulance, police, fire, and got them converging on Herenshaw.

It was a day or two before I found time to read the log, and it would have probably been weeks had I not had a nagging desire to know what had saved Anne and me from violent death and brought about Dr. Marksman's own; for I was certain they were connected. The coroner's jury brought in a verdict of misadventure, and the papers, full of this, let go the airport story, so I was able to devote my time to the log without being nagged one way or the other.

It started out with many pages devoted to the arrangement and design of the computer and its special adaptation to use with Dr. Marksman's own Projective Calculus. He had had it made to his own specifications by the biggest and most experienced firm in the business, being certain that extant computers were not getting the best out of his mathematical discoveries. He wanted accuracy in predicting natural phenomena from a minimum of feed-in and was going to experiment until he got it. I did not follow all the tech-

nological data very clearly, but it was clear that not only programming, but distribution of data to several different programmers was done electronically, for the purpose, as he wrote, of minimising feed-in.

Then the entries began. There were plenty of them, beginning as careful notations of fact and result, but gradually taking on an emotional tone; and I could see why. For out of these pages of entries a story was extracting itself; a story I could not have believed had it not been written by Dr. Marksman himself, a man of science if ever there was one, and had I not seen its culmination with my own eyes and as a near victim.

Most of the entries are irrelevant to the story, but since this is the fifth time I have read the log from cover to cover I think I can trust myself to extract those that matter. The first entry is dated the second of December, 1961.

Beginning Log of Computer, Cassandra.

Object: Prediction of Natural Phenomena having Measurable Present Causes by Application of Projective Calculus to Causes and Precise Definition of their Integration.

Test: Weather Conditions, Lower Thames Valley, November, 1961.

Data: Met. Office. World Conditions prevailing 1.11.61.

Results: Encouraging, but not satisfactory. Tape appended, not as triumph but as curiosity.

27.1.62

Test: Oceanic Conditions, N. Atlantic, Dec. 1961.

Data: From 15 points, as listed. Highly Reliable.

Results: Wide of the mark. Cassandra efficient, but one fault in calculations can lead anywhere.

1.2.62

Test: Burgundy Vine Harvest, 1961.

Data: Vine Growers Association, France. Reliable. Conditions prevailing 1.3.61.

Results: Close to results which actually obtained, but misleading. The Projective Calculus is not enough. It needs augmenting. Further experiment with Cassandra useless. I shall go to work on the Calculus.

3.9.62
Calculus augmentation staring me in the face for six months. Grasped it today. Demands modification to Cassandra. Not too long I hope.

Here, there were two long notes; one on the discoveries he had made which enabled him to augment the Calculus for greater efficiency and the other on the adjustments it required in the computer. One abstrusely mathematical and the other forbiddingly technical, both were incomprehensible to me. I could not help wondering why Dr. Marksman should have entrusted all this to me, an ignoramus in face of it. The log continued with the new tests.

20.10.62
Augmented Calculus with Modified Cassandra tested today.
Retest: Burgundy Vine Harvest, as above 1.2.62.
Results: Perfect accuracy.
Retest: Project Oceanic Conditions, as above 27.1.62.
Results: Perfect accuracy.
Ernie Leydenham complains he has not seen me for six months. Dear old Ernie. At this rate he won't see me for another six years!

21.10.62
Test: Projected weather conditions Lower Thames Valley to Jan. 1968.
Data: Met. Office. World Conditions prevailing 1.10.62.
Results: Every promise perfect accuracy.
Tape too long to be appended. Filed 4/1. I feel like a five year-old, but must think about preparing paper for publication.

22.10.62
Test: Projected weather conditions Eastern Japan to Jan. 1968.
Data: Met. Office. World Conditions prevailing 1.10.62.
Results: Extremely promising, and they look as if they are in for some vicious typhoons Sept. 63. We shall see.

1.12.62
Cassandra not built for share speculation, but accurate enough for more gains than losses. I grow rich. Ernie Leydenham for Bermuda. Wanted me to go too. I couldn't leave this, now.

5.1.63
Cassandra is a glutton for work. Won't be switched off. Cut-out seems to be wedged and no other way. But data to feed her with limited so she must just buzz away empty. When the world knows what I have here the data will soon be forthcoming.

7.1.63
Something strange happened today. Cassandra sent out tape predicting bad fogs for 29th. (Tape appended.) But I had fed in nothing. Must be duplication from Met. predicition 21.10.62. But how, I can't imagine.

8.1.63
Cassandra going berserk. Brought out prediction of shipping disaster for 30th. (Tape appended.) Again, no feed-in of data, and anyway, such things are quite unpredictable. Wish I could switch off. Yet everything appears normal technically.

31.1.63
I have never experienced fright like it in my life before, queer, horrible fright. A ship *was* lost yesterday, a Danish ship, and Cassandra was accurate as to name, position and loss of life. *I knew this three weeks ago.* And there are still more predictions; deaths and disasters, the unexpected. Are these going to happen, too? I can't believe it! I think of hallucinations. I think I have been working here too long and wish I had gone to Bermuda with Ernie Leydenham. I wish I could switch this thing off. And yet I wouldn't if I could. I can feel the awful fascination of it growing on me. Am I suffering from—overwork?

15.2.63
I have always avoided things I could not hope to understand, as if they were vices. This I cannot understand

and it has me like a vice. It has me mesmerised, impotent. I couldn't think it absurd now, even if I wanted to. I know I am not going off my head. I haven't fed a thing into Cassandra for a month and the predictions are coming out at the rate of two or three a day, and, one by one, as the date and the time approaches they come true. I feel I should warn people, but I should bring the world to a standstill if I did that! If I did that, should I be tampering with Fate, something in which I have never believed? I am trying to rationalise the thing, going over the blueprints of the machine, re-examining the Calculus for its potentialities, but always I am back at the simple fact that *Cassandra is working alone*, with no help from me. Is this natural, capable of a scientific explanation, or supernatural? Do the gods work through a computer? What else am I to think? I find I have become morbidly apprehensive of one possibility—that I should find my own name on one of the tapes.

25.3.63

The appended tape reads: 63 06 11 14 27 32—06 00 00 E 43 50 05 N CATAST AUTO DEAD DEREK EX LEYDENHAM ERN and it is not going to happen. This is one prediction which Cassandra, the Fates, God or whoever it is is not going to reap. Derek, son of Ernest Leydenham is not going to be killed in a car accident at six degrees somewhat east, forty-three degrees somewhat north at 14 hours 27 minutes 32 seconds on the 11th June, 1963. He is not going to be in the south of France on the 11th June, if I have to chain him down to keep him here; first, because he is the son of his father, my best friend, and second, because he is the most brilliant young nuclear physicist we have and he can't be spared. I hadn't realised that here is one experiment left to me since Cassandra got out of control —modification of the future.

11.6.63

I had to work hard to do it but I kept Derek away from the south of France, though he was intending to go. I had to bait the hook with two particularly interesting Americans from the Massachusetts Institute, and at 14

sat there wondering how I knew. For I did not accuse him, only brought out facts and figures, and I think they made him as scared as they made me sick a couple of days ago. When I told him to get out of the country *without* telling his father a thing, he understood. Neither I nor his father will ever see him again.

26.6.63

What a soulless, faithless cur this Leydenham has turned out to be. I would have put M.I.5 on him but for his father. And now he has killed his father by turning up in Asia chirping his ideology. I know he has killed Ernie. Ernie would have got over a road death in the south of France. He'll never get over this. What is this thing I have here, this electronic thinking machine that can be so subtle, whining about eternally? But I am going to put a stop to it. I am going to switch off Cassandra and dismantle it. I've been thinking on unaccustomed lines lately, and I am quite certain that had the first dim human creature had a gift of accurate prophecy he would not, he could not, have evolved into what we are. We are what we are because the future is black or blinding as the case may be. So Cassandra can stop thumping out tapes. If the cut-out won't budge I shall take out the tape reel and it can thud on nothing like a tongueless old Fate. I shall be able to do it, for even my fascination has become one of fear. I shall do it now. This closes the log.

20.7.63

Of course, I tell myself it was pure accident, that in reaching in to take off the reel of tape I touched a lead or a terminal which burnt my hand to a cinder and laid me in a hospital bed for three weeks. But no matter what I tell myself, I *know* that it was no accident. For the second time I meddled and for the second time I was struck down. Once by the heart and once by the hand. There is a truly mathematical consistency about Cassandra. I won't pretend I am not frightened by this thing I have created. I am. The only thing I have now on my left arm to steady this log as I write is a dead weight which feels less a part of my body than the pen in my other hand. Chastisement like that does frighten. And

no hope of the tape running out. All the time I was in hospital only two miserly predictions, both alarming enough to society in general but of no consequence to me: an earthquake in America and a general election in England. One ray of sunshine to help me out of hospital and give me something unalarming to occupy myself with: Phil and Anne are being married in the autumn.

4.11.63

This is the last entry in the log and the end of my experiments with Cassandra. The appended tape reads: 63 11 04 21 17 33—51 27 03 N 00 27 10 W CATAST AVIA DEAD TOTAL INTER DEAD ANN EX MARKSMAN ERIC DR and it was given out shortly after eight o'clock tonight, well after the bride and bridegroom had left for the airport, timed to make me helpless even before the worst disaster that could strike me. But I was not helpless, I saved them. I should have liked to save the plane too, but that was impossible. Nobody would have believed me, a schedule being a schedule and prediction being quite outside the bounds of possibility. So I concentrated on my own and saved them. It has been a bitter silent duel between Cassandra and me these last few months, both of us watching the wedding date and Cassandra seeing it as clearly as if it were in the past, watching for tragedy, ready to make tragedy. And Cassandra has been watching me, too. I know it, because the moment I put down the telephone tonight, having stopped Anne and Phil from boarding the plane, a second tape came out. I know it is the very last and I know what is on it. But I have refused to read it. It is still there in the computer and nobody in the world has read it. When Phil comes in I shall give him this log and I shall go and switch off Cassandra for good. Perhaps, if I go in ignorance of the future, it will not happen.

This time it was indeed the last entry, and I think I saw why Dr. Marksman had given this log to me, who had a bond of affection with him but no bond of intellect. His

Women writers of science fiction are not internationally scarce—there are at least a dozen in USA—but in Britain they are rare. Which makes us more than pleased that Kathleen James has found us and offered an alien-contact story with a neat twist in it.

MANTRAP

by KATHLEEN JAMES

Leyoti was dead. Dead at the ultimate minute and second ; dead just as it had seemed that they must gain the final information at last. The doctor jerked the stethoscope away from his ears and let it drop round his neck. He turned away, a brief shake of the head telling them that further effort was useless. The last screen blanked out as the reflexes died and the cells of the brain lapsed in final dissolution ; the great banks of blinking lights which had recorded the process of interrogation darkened one by one as the disgusted operator killed the switches. On the table the body imperceptibly cooled and stiffened.

But they hadn't finished with him yet. In another room, on another level, another man lay on a table. This one was still warm ; a meter by his side recorded the slow rise and fall of his breathing. Superficially, and with his head disguised by the metal helmet, he looked a little like Leyoti. He had the same slender build, the same pale skin, the same delicate hands. Soon, plastic surgeons would be at work making the resemblance closer; copying with minute exactness the scars and birthmarks of the cold carcass in the interrogation room ;

adjusting the colour of hair and eyes ; altering the features, adding here and paring away there, until the man was Leyoti's twin in every detail ; transplanting the skin of hands and feet to make the likeness perfect.

At the moment they were perfecting him in other ways. Lying still on his table, breathing quietly under the helmet, he was absorbing Leyoti's mind from the memory banks of the interrogator—or as close an approximation to Leyoti's mind as a copy could ever achieve ; his memories, his mannerisms, his likes and dislikes ; everything that went to make the man recognisable.

Leyoti had died as the descending sun touched the horizon behind the interrogation block, reddening the sky with the kind of sunset that he had gloried in and would never see again. As the first cold light of the following dawn filtered through the wide windows of the theatre, a red-eyed surgeon turned away from the table and gratefully pulled off his mask. The job was done.

General Marko inspected the spy up, down and sideways. He grilled him with an eye of hard, suspicious criticism. He smiled.

" His own mother wouldn't know the difference," he said, with jovial satisfaction.

It was a long time since the first star-ship had left the Solar System with its load of hard-faced colonisers, and in that time many a new civilisation had grown up. People settled on alien planets far beyond hope of return to their original homes ; they adapted themselves to the conditions they found there and created new societies for themselves. Some were like the old society of Earth, and some were not. Some died out altogether after a short time, or lapsed into something that wasn't human at all. Others grew and prospered, became planet-wide, made inventions and sent out expeditions of their own. And others still developed in ways that had not been foreseen.

When the faster-than-light drive was discovered, Earth set about contacting and organising her colonies. By this time many of them had their own customs and traditions and were not eager to resume the yoke of a Central Government light-years away. Such societies had to be persuaded ; and Earth had the equipment to do the persuading. Those planets and systems most like Earth in their organisation joined the growing

As smiling and silent as the others, they cheerfully submitted to the testing of their powers. A telepath could obtain nothing but a normal run of stream-of-consciousness and a certain amount of static ; a teleport declared that all their power was in their muscles, and a psychokinetic said that the only way they'd ever get anywhere was by walking. And all five smiled cheerful agreement. Two days later they were dead—and this time the mere sight of the machines had been sufficient.

After that a technique was evolved. The next lot of prisoners (the authorities had to wait five years for them) were injected with heavy sedatives immediately on capture and were submitted to the interrogator unconscious. All of them died without regaining consciousness before the deeper regions of their minds had been touched. The following batch died as soon as the injection was given. As did all succeeding batches —and there weren't many of them.

In the twenty-five years since the capture of the first ship, not a single prisoner had confessed a single fact of value. In the meantime the interrogating machines had been improved beyond recognition and if only a prisoner could be kept alive long enough to reach them, the inventors were convinced that the truth could be extracted.

Leyoti had been a break. The general shape and appearance of the Soltan ships were now known, and the particular ship on which he was travelling had been disabled in the act of materialising off Clissold I, having had the bad luck to do so in the immediate vicinity of a Union battle-cruiser, which had immediately opened fire. Most of the crew had died at once from the blast of the shell or the resulting loss of air from the vessel's hull, but Leyoti—evidently the astrogator—had been found unconscious in a sealed compartment forward, having apparently struck his head on the instrument panel of his own computer.

He had been submitted to the interrogator at once, and his protective conditioning perhaps disturbed by the head injury, had revealed a great deal of his personal life and character. The only thing that he had not revealed had been the important one ; how the Soltans managed to do all the things that they did do. It was in attempting to probe into this region of his mind that they had incautiously reactivated his conditioning ; and his body was on its way to the crematorium.

But there was still the spy.

* * *

The scout-ship drifted through space, forlornly, its blackened and twisted exhaust-tubes telling their own story. Around it the scattered stars of the Rim glittered, cold and distant. On one side, the bright concentration of the Milky Way showed the direction of the Galactic Centre, from which it had come.

It had been drifting now for several days as men measured time ; ever since the disastrous blowout which had crippled the overloaded engine and blasted it back into normal space a good ten light-years from its objective. The only good thing in the situation was that it had lost its pursuers in the frantic chase which had brought it half across the Galaxy from Clissold, and in the course of which its engines had been strained past endurance. But that was not likely to help the man inside for long. This long steel cylinder had been a scout-ship ; for the moment it was a bivouac ; without help, it would shortly become a coffin.

He lay motionless on his back, staring up at the metal bulkhead above him. The lights were dim, and with the hours grew imperceptibly dimmer. One day soon they would go out and leave the ship in darkness. But, the man reflected, that probably wasn't going to worry him. The blowout which had jerked the ship off-course and set it on its present crazy orbit among the stars had also damaged the generator, and with it all the functions of the interior. Already the air was thick and foul-smelling, making him cough and retch when he tried to move about, bedewing everything with running moisture. It was evident that there was some failure in the water reclamation plant, for the liquid from the galley tap stank its foulness from the first drop. Up till now he had existed on the relatively pure water in the emergency tank, but even that was running low and he had been forced to ration himself rigorously. Now, dull and drowsy from the bad air, he was wondering vaguely if it was worth the effort.

Under him, the ship gave a slight jerk and seemed to quiver. He turned his head slowly on the soaked pillow. Nonsense, he thought. Hallucinations. We're on our way for a round trip of the Galaxy and nothing is going to stop us. Any more for the Skylark ? He giggled crazily. Then the giggle turned into a cough, and for a minute or two he was shaken by a paroxysm of retching and choking as he drew the stinking gases into his lungs.

The ship jerked again, paused, and seemed to make up its mind. Then, with an acceleration that slammed the man

back into his mattress, it bounded forward. A familiar sick dizziness seized him. Outside, the stars blinked and went out. The man lost consciousness.

" Leyoti," the voice was saying distantly, over and over. " Leyoti."

He sighed and stirred. That was his name. Or was it? Confused, he struggled for consciousness. There were lights, he saw, and faces ; faces which seemed dimly familiar. They swirled and loomed in shadowy mists. He closed his eyes again, trying to organise his swimming senses.

When he opened them the world had steadied. He was lying in the cabin of a spaceship, very much like the one in which he had spent a large part of his career as astrogator of *Vonad.* But this wasn't *Vonad* ; for some reason of which he was obscurely certain he knew that it couldn't be. He knew the people, though ; old Doc Varty, who was bending over him with a worried expression, red-haired Lefty in the background, and that girl with the black hair—what was her name? He smiled at them, weakly, and they smiled back looking relieved. He had every reason to know them ; they all worked for the same line. But none of them belonged to *Vonad.*

" What happened ?" he asked, running a thick tongue over numbed lips.

" You tell us, boy," Varty told him, frowning slightly. " We found you in a wrecked scout-ship off Narbo, heading fast for nowhere in particular. A Union scout-ship," he clarified. " We picked you up, but don't ask us how you got there. Why didn't you call home ?"

Leyoti passed a weak hand over his aching head. Strange memories and associations were stirring in his mind, making him confused again.

" I don't know, Doc," he said frowning. " My head's kind of mixed up." He had a feeling that he had hit it on something, somewhere, but the circumstances eluded him.

Doc smiled. " Never mind, boy," he said kindly. " It'll come back to you later. Try and get some sleep."

" Yes," Leyoti said, closing his eyes. But nagging doubts still pulled at the back of his mind.

When he awoke things were clear in his head once more ; he knew exactly who he was and what he had to do. It was a momentary shock to realise that the character of Leyoti,

into which he had slipped so easily, was an illusion ; but in another way it was a comfort to realise that his conditioning really worked even under the most difficult circumstances. Still, it was hard to except that these people who, one part of his mind told him, were his friends, were in reality his enemies, whom he must destroy or be destroyed by. He saw that the job would have its complications.

After he had eaten Varty took him to the Captain, and there he told his story. The lies flowed out easily and fluently. *Vonad* had been hit by a shell, killing everyone but himself. He had been taken unconscious to Union headquarters and imprisoned there to await questioning. He had escaped in the night due to the carelessness of a guard and had stolen the patrol-ship from the very back yard of the Union buildings. He had been pursued by Union cruisers, but by whipping his engines to death had succeeded in leaving them behind. Ten light-years off Soltan his drive had finally packed up, and in the resulting blowout he was thrown back into normal space and sent flying off-course. The new course must have carried him almost to Narbo before the Soltan ship found him.

The Leyoti part of his mind was stricken by the ease with which this story was accepted. That he should lie to Sid Rigman, an old and respected acquaintance, would once have been unthinkable. Sid accepted his story unquestionably because there was no need for questions. If Leyoti said a thing was so, so it was.

The spy reminded himself sternly of his duty. If this Rigman believed him, that was a piece of good luck, for it would make his job easier. It was for the good of the Union. But that other part of his mind grieved, stricken with guilt.

That night, alone in his cabin, he made his report. The transmitter was planted in his throat, a small lump invisible to all but the trained eye that knew where to look. The receiver was an equally small lump under the left ear, connected directly to the auditory nerves. A practised contortion of the throat muscles activated them, and the spy whispered his call-sign.

" Come in, Leyoti, come in Leyoti," the staccato voice of the Union operator rapped in his head.

The spy wished that they had chosen some other form of identification. Leyoti's personality was already too obtrusive a part of his thinking.

" Come on, Ley, don't lose your nerve," he said. " You're the first man that ever came back from a Union interrogation centre, and they want you to know that they're happy, that's all. Come on and talk to them."

Reluctantly he moved forward, but before they could reach the group a slender figure had darted out of it and running up to him had thrown her arms about him, tears of joy in her eyes. A woman no longer young but fresh and vital, her still black hair wrapped sleekly about her elegant head, who stroked his face and hair with hands as delicate as his own. To his astonishment he found that he was embracing her in return, while unashamed tears ran down his own face.

Behind her hesitated a younger girl, brown-faced and shy, with braids of silvery hair down her back. Putting his mother gently aside Leyoti went to her and took her hands in his.

" Hello, Niel," he said. " You're still getting prettier every time I see you."

The girl blushed, but her dark blue eyes looked frankly up at him.

" Hello, Ley," she said. " I'm still waiting, you see."

And then the little crowd was on them, laughing, talking, congratulating, slapping him on the shoulder, asking questions, commenting on his appearance, trying to tell him what had happened while he was away.

" I've asked them all to our place for a party," Leyoti's mother shouted in his ear through the babel. She saw his expression and laughed. " I knew you wouldn't like it, Ley, but," she spread her hands, " what else are we to do ? Come on !"

And, laughing, talking, gesticulating, the whole party moved off into the forest, carrying the spy helplessly along with it.

Moonlight was flowing over the roof of the Keppel house in its clearing ; restricted to the roof, for the walls were still shaded by trees and it was held at bay in the central patio by the coloured glow of lanterns and the brighter flicker of the open fire over which the steaks and sweet potatoes had recently been cooked. The sound of human talk and occasional outbursts of laughter still came from the patio, although by now it was very late indeed.

Under the trees it was almost dark, with bright patches of light where the silvery glitter had penetrated the leaves. The ground was thickly covered with a carpet of moss and humus,

and the only sound, apart from the distant laughter from the house, was the cry of a night-hunting bird somewhere further off in the undergrowth.

The spy and Niel were sitting together on a fallen tree-trunk by the edge of a stream, watching the moon-patterns on the water and saying nothing. The place was intensely familiar to the Leyoti part of the spy's mind ; he knew that Leyoti and Niel had always come here to do their courting and had often sat like this, silently, watching the moonlight on the water.

Personally he found this custom infuriatingly inconvenient. He would much rather have been at the house, listening to the talk, ferretting for crumbs of information. But everyone had looked at him knowingly, and grinned, and winked, until somehow in the end he had found himself with Niel's hand in his, slipping quietly out of the house and along the woodland path to this favourite place of theirs.

He did not expect to get anything out of Niel. She was too young, too naive and, in some disconcerting way, too intelligent. His instinct told him to leave her alone ; she knew Leyoti too well and would feel any change in him.

Suddenly his hand tightened on the girl's arm. " Sh !" he whispered. " An otter ! Look !"

" Where ?" Niel breathed craning forward.

" There, by the tree-root." He pointed, cautiously.

" Oh, yes, I see it." She stared, entranced.

The spy, too, was held rigid. The words had come without his volition ; he had not consciously been looking at the stream, and the animal (not an otter, but some Soltan version of one) was one that he had never seen before. He wasn't even interested in otters, and hadn't known that Niel was. He had an uncanny feeling that for a moment Leyoti had assumed control, that he had actually been Leyoti. His scalp prickled.

He began to feel that Niel might be dangerous in a positive way ; it seemed that her company was too great a stimulus to the Leyoti feelings that had been implanted in his brain. He must not spend too much time with her.

Abruptly he rose and took her hand. " Come on, let's go back," he said.

She looked at him with an expression of surprise, but made no objection. They walked slowly back to the house, still silent.

" Neither do I !" Niel laughed.

Somewhere in the depths of the spy's clouded mind something was struggling to emerge. Firmly he thrust it down. He was Leyoti, and he loved Niel. Nothing else mattered. Did it?

Their walk had brought them back to the edge of the amphitheatre, and here Niel paused, her face growing momentarily serious again.

" Oh, dear," she sighed, " more work ahead. Have you heard, Ley ?"

He shook his head.

" There's another Union ship on its way—a battleship this time with all the latest armaments, Johnno says, so we've got to fix the warp again. It's due about Thursday, so they're starting Wednesday night, and it's our shift midnight to four Thursday morning, and the same Friday morning unless they call it off. And if it turns out to be a real emergency they may want us Saturday as well. Aren't they a nuisance ? You'd think they'd get tired and leave us alone." (He gathered that she was referring in this case to the Union). " Anyway, you'd better tell Mara and ask her to spread it to anyone else she meets. It'll be on the newscasts this evening, but you know how some people never look, and then come late and disturb everybody at the last minute."

" Yes, okay, I'll tell her," Leyoti said.

In the depths of the spy's mind there was a swirling confusion. There was something—something he had to remember. What was it ? He groped after it, blindly, a feeling of paralysing helplessness pressing upon him. It was important. He had to remember. He seemed to touch it and it eluded him. What ?

Leyoti passed the rest of the walk in an exchange of tendernesses with his betrothed, to be overwhelmed on his arrival at Niel's home by the relieved congratulations of Janni and her husband. He stayed to drink, to joke, to take a lingering farewell of his love. When darkness began to fall he finally set out for home, the happy smile still on his bruised lips.

At the back of his mind confusion still raged. It was dark under the trees and the air felt thick and oppressive, catching at his throat. Something was wrong. He could feel it. A dreadful doubt rose out of the darkness to terrify him. Who was he ? Faint and dizzy, sickness gripping at the pit of his stomach, he stood still, clutching at a tree-trunk for support.

He was Leyoti. He was . . . His mind swirled. Then, in a moment of blinding pain, he knew the truth.

" Leyoti's dead !" he muttered to himself. " Leyoti's dead !"

Blind panic caught at his heart. He found that he was running, back to the safety of his house, back to his mother—his mother ! Leyoti's mother ! He fell on his knees among the rotting leaves, sobbing with terror. Leyoti's mother !

By the time he reached Mara Keppel's house his panic had abated a little, though a dreadful cold fear still gripped paralysingly at his stomach. Outwardly, however, he was calm ; calm enough to pass on Niel's message and tell her the news of his engagement with an attempt at registering the proper emotions.

Mara embraced him, but she looked at him narrowly. " You're sure you wanted this, Ley ?" she asked, her brows drawn together. " You're sure you're happy ?"

" I wanted it all right, mother," he assured her with ironic conviction.

She smiled sadly. " So long as you're sure, Ley," she said. " You've been . . . different since you came back this time. Sometimes you're so exactly the boy I know, and sometimes . . . you're almost like somebody I've never met before."

He tried to smile. " I'm sorry, mother," he said. " It's the knock on the head, I suppose. It does affect people, they say. I'll be all right. And he went quickly to his room, wanting nothing better than to be alone.

He had to report, that was certain. The Soltans were going to " fix the warp " on Wednesday night, and keep going until Saturday if necessary. With that information to help them, perhaps the Union could think up some way to overcome or outwit them. How the warp was to be " fixed " he still did not know, but that would come later. He gave his call sign.

" Come in, Leyoti, come in, Leyoti," the operator snapped. As his caller answered a faintly surprised expression passed over his face. Was that the spy's voice ? It seemed to have altered in some subtle way ; it sounded oddly relaxed, with some mysterious undertone to it. Amusement ? Surely not. What was there to laugh at ?

" Got bad news for you," the voice whispered. " I have some further information about the warp. Seems it really is natural ; the Soltans have trouble with it themselves. That's

while some of the older children acted as baby-sitters for the others. All activity was at a halt ; nobody could claim duties elsewhere.

Everybody had their favourite seats, and there was a brief whispered altercation when Janni found somebody sitting in one of theirs. Then he and his party had found their places on the hard stone benches, and settled down to wait.

The theatre was full except for one or two latecomers frantically pushing their way over other people's knees to their places. It was five minutes to midnight. There was an air of tension, and a hush had descended on the murmuring crowd. To the spy, it was incredible to see so many people sitting together, apparently with nothing to occupy their attention, in complete silence. Even the sound of breathing seemed hushed, and he found himself trying to draw his breath more softly so as not to disturb the stillness.

At the front a man stood up and mounted the tiny stage. The spy recognised Phil Grossard, the Mayor (though what his duties were he had never discovered). Grossard held a big old-fashioned watch in his hand, which he was regarding intently.

" Well, friends," he said calmly from the front, in a surprisingly everyday voice, " it's now one and a half minutes to twelve. At four I shall call you again. Will you please prepare to take over." And he stepped down from the stage and returned to his seat

To the spy's astonishment, everyone around him—Mara, Janni, Niel among the rest—began to shuffle their limbs into more comfortable positions, and closed their eyes as if to sleep. A swift glance round showed that everyone had done the same. Guiltily, like a small boy caught with his eyes open during prayers, he closed his too. As he did so, he wondered. The duty shift on the spaceship " worked " with their eyes closed. What did they do ?

There was no time to wonder. For a few moments, as one shift took over and the previous one released its hold, almost a third of the minds on the planet were concentrated on the one object, and his mind was snatched up with them and bent to the same purpose. And he knew, as if he had always known—as Leyoti always had known—what it was that they did.

They were twisting space, warping it with the united power of their group mind, so that the Union battleship would pass them harmlessly without finding them, and would—now, or

Saturday, or next week—have to return to its headquarters and report another failure. The people of Londonville were not alone ; they were only one of many centres all over the planet, all engaged on the same business. Six shifts, covering the whole of the twenty-four hours. If necessary they could go on for ever. But they wouldn't need to. The ship would go, quite soon.

And that explained the failure of the psi experts too, the spy thought, with the part of his mind that was still left to him for thinking. These people weren't teleports, for they couldn't move physical objects through space. They weren't psycho-kinetics, for they couldn't move their own bodies from one place to another. Individually their powers were non-existent. But as a group their powers were unmatched. It took seven of them to get a spaceship into and out of hyperspace, two to keep it going ; a sixth of the population of a planet to create a warp covering an entire system. He had a wry feeling that this was one engagement the Union was going to lose.

And then that thought, too, ceased, and the whole force of his mind was concentrated on the job in hand in a sudden surge of power which seemed to hurl his entire personality into space in the grip of the group-mind. Of course, Leyoti had been something special in the way of space-warpers. It took seven of the best to shift a loaded trader.

For the next four hours the silence was complete over the forest. The figures in the amphitheatre looked like a grotesque collection of statues as the changing angles of the moonlight slowly illuminated them and finally slipped off them, leaving them in darkness. The stars wheeled on their slow journey round the pole. The chilly night wind blew round the silent bodies, flapping their garments, but without inciting a single one of them to movement. They did not feel it. Their minds were out in space, working.

The chief notification of the end of the shift was the extra surge of power which informed them that the next shift was on duty ; then, as they slowly drew themselves back to the world of Soltan II, cold, stiff and weary, they heard the thin chimes of Phil Grossard's old repeater watch striking four from the platform. He grinned at them, stretching awkwardly.

" All right, friends, same time tomorrow," he said in his everyday voice.

And then everyone was moving again, stretching, talking, sucking hot drinks from flasks, exchanging rude jokes about the Union, laughing, turning towards home. Their return was as noisy as their coming had been grave and silent. They had done their work for tonight.

In the theatre, Niel and Mara were bending anxiously over the slumped body on the stone bench.

" I knew he shouldn't have come," Niel was wailing, her small brown face puckered with anxiety.

" Ley !" Mara shook her son forcibly by the shoulders, her voice sharp and alarmed.

The man moved, shaking his head slightly as if to rid it of the shreds of a dream. His eyes opened, clear and grey, an intelligent certainty in them. He straightened up wearily, smiling as he stretched his stiff back.

" I'm all right, mother," he said quietly. " A bit out of practice, that's all. Let's go."

And rising up, one arm thrown affectionately round his mother's neck and the other locked protectively about Niel's shoulders, Leyoti walked firmly and confidently into the forest.

As for the spy, his future had run out. It was his bad luck that the personality so confidently drained into him by the technicians of the Union Interrogation Service had turned out to be stronger than his own. Trapped in Leyoti's body, Leyoti's personality, he was lost. His freedom was a faint light far in the past, even now receding from him. He was almost submerged already, his existence as tenuous as the last faint moonglow that faded over the horizon. Leyoti had won.

Leyoti fingered his neck, absently. " You know, mother," he said, " I've been suspecting for some time that the Unionites might have planted recording equipment or something in me. I seem to have a lump, just here, that wasn't there before."

Mara touched the place with gentle fingers. " We'll see Doc Ringold in the morning," she said with decision. " If it's anything like that we'll soon get it shifted. Don't worry, Ley. The Union will never get you back. Never."

For a single moment, an uncontrollable shudder ran through the body of the man who walked with her. Then, with decision, he straightened his shoulders and walked on. Leyoti smiled.

Kathleen James

than average and increases their life span. At maturity (where the story unfolds) a group of nine-feet tall students of both sexes are studying (and being studied) at a University. Logically, they are resented by the normal " midgets "; logically, too, they become involved in an attempted social reconstruction, aggravated by one of their number planning to make the tetraploids (the giants) dominant over the diploids (the ordinary humans).

Blish constructs a well-planned plot with plenty of excitement in this unusual but extremely plausible story.

On the Bantam Books' front the top title is the new-type weird-horror novel heralded in by Orwell's 1984—the political " it-could-happen-tomorrow " theme of **When The Kissing Had To Stop** by Constantine Fitzgibbon, which will doubtless be classified as science fiction in the record books. We missed reviewing this title when it first appeared as a hard cover in Britain last year but its advent as a paperback will surely make it the top " must " to the masses ; certainly " required reading" to the pacifist-minded, the Ban-the-Bomb mooters, the " Yankee-go-home " factions, and anyone else who doesn't realise that the velvet glove covers a mailed fist.

Make no mistake, this book is anti-Russian propaganda of a high order—the subversive taking over of Great Britain by power-seeking puppets for personal gain in political tussles that leave one groping in fear at the plausible reality ; the ultimate setting up of concentration camps in Hyde Park, the degeneration of everything freedom-loving people have earned as a right and the moral degradation of the people themselves ; the descent of the final curtain over Democracy in the West and the ultimate retribution that overtakes the quislings involved all add up to one word—*horrific* ! (As in " Psycho.")

The final summary of this book can be taken from the first line of the Epilogue : " When the guillotine comes down, it comes down fast."

Still staying with the Bantam rooster, Frederic Brown's latest s-f novel **The Mind Thing** also has the word "terrifying" on the front cover as bait for the browser, but falls far short of the high level of story writing Mr. Brown was producing two or three years ago—and this particular statement is meant to cover his mystery novels as well. Few writers are lucky enough to completely miss that awesome " drying-up " period in their

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literary work, when ideas just won't come or the actual writing won't flow. Authors who have openly admitted this to me during the past eighteen months range from our own John Wyndham and Eric Frank Russell to America's Theodore Sturgeon and many others. In fact, the ' blight ' hit so many of them at the same time that Eric Russell inferred in a letter that it looked as though ' outside influences ' were at work creating havoc amongst the s-f writers.

The Mind Thing seems to suffer from the same blight, although Mr. Brown, like any well-running machine, can still make an average story out of a number of rather well-worn themes. Starting the plot along similar lines to Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers* (possession by an alien ' thing ') Mr. Brown astutely works out a restricted zone of operations for his entity-possessed human/animal/bird and confines the alien to one body at a time, requiring each body to die before the alien can possess another host. Which really keeps the plot going steadily as the 'thing' moves from one character to another. But the laws of coincidence in the plot are a little too remarkable for this hardened reader.

The final Bantam pick-of-the-paperbacks this month is James Gunn's **The Joy Makers,** which had the rather peculiar original presentation of appearing as three short novelettes in three different s-f magazines some seven years back. It now reads as three books in a novel of progression : the search for happiness ; happiness guaranteed ; happiness carried to its logical conclusion—death ! Happiness, that is, as opposed to pleasure.

Book one is set in the presentday with Hedonics Inc. offering guaranteed happiness in return for one half of the recipient's possessions. Book Two (by far the best part of the novel) is set some 75 years in the future when the Hedonic society is in full swing and human minds are subliminated to their enforced happiness (plenty of food for thought and discussion in this section) ; Book Three projects forward another indeterminate hundred years with the return of a colonist from Venus (where an off-shoot of hedonism had been founded) to discover the ultimate fate that overtook the human race.

For the uniniated like myself, the book defines *hedonics* as " Psychomedical science dealing with the nature and pursuit of happiness." For *hedonism,* " The doctrine that pleasure is the only good in life and that moral duty is fulfilled in the gratifica-

tion of pleasure-seeking instincts." James Gunn makes a fine novel out of the integration of those doctrines.

As many readers have already pointed out, Theodore Sturgeon left a lot of philosophical findings out of his recent book *Venus Plus X*. To clear some of them up he must have gone right ahead and written **Some Of Your Blood,** a new novel from Ballantine Books this time. Similar to the Fitzgibbon political novel reviewed earlier it really is outside the accepted framework of science fiction as we would like it—but how can you classify a modern vampire story based almost entirely upon the diagnosis of a mentally sick (or different) person ? If you accept psionics or even the psi powers as s-f you have to accept this one in the same category.

Written in a very different vein to normal—the exchange of correspondence between two Army doctors (who are also practising psychiatrists) plus the patient's own story—it commences with an accidental punch on the nose by the patient upon a superior officer ; with typical Army blockheadedness the patient ends up in a padded cell labelled " dangerous." Because of the blunder the authorities want him sent back to civilian life as quickly as possible, but before he goes the medics better make quite sure that he *is* sane—and that makes the story, because some very strange and creepy things begin to come to the surface of the patient's mind and tension begins to mount as Sturgeon deviously weaves a web of controlled horror and at times sadism (for a reason—but, oh, the reason !)

Ballantine have also acquired and published as a paperback that 1960 plum of the genre—Kingsley Amis's **New Maps Of Hell**—concerning which sufficient has already been written in this magazine. British readers, however, should not look for this cheap edition for another year or two as Victor Gollancz Ltd. have the sole rights in the UK for the time being.

Another good collection from Ballantine by a British anthologist is John Keir Cross's **The Other Passenger,** which was reviewed here last year when it appeared as a bound book from Faber & Faber Ltd. For the record it is a " weird " collection, or as the by-line terms it " terror in needlepoint."

One doesn't expect any of the leading US paperback publishers to present a shoddy book these days, but Pyramid's presentation of **The Unexpected,** a collection of eleven unusual tales compiled by the renowned Leo Margulies, is one of the worst pieces of layout and design I have seen for many years. It is an offence to the reader and sacrilege to anyone who loves cold print. Primarily, there were too many words for the 160

pages that comprise a standard paperback, so instead of deleting one story (probably because of editorial commitments) the entire contents have been squashed up so that captions, titles and stories run higgledy-piggledy from page to page.

What a pity, too, for this first-rate collection is one that I hope will be repeated by Leo Marguilies *ad infinitum*. All the stories are taken from *Weird Tales* between 1939 and 1951—the magazine which did more for producing the outstanding writers of today than any other in existence at that time. Here you can read Sturgeon, Brown, Bloch, Bradbury and others at their superlative best, as masters of the short story, so ,for the record, the contents : " The Professor's Teddy Bear,"—Sturgeon ; " Legal Rites,"—Asimov and Pohl; " The Strange Island Of Dr. Nork,"—Robert Bloch ; " Mrs. Hawk,"—Margaret St. Clair ; " The Handler,"—Ray Bradbury ; " The Automatic Pistol,"—Fritz Leiber; " The Unwanted,"—Mary Elizabeth Counselman ; " The Valley Was Still,"—Manly Wade Wellman ; " The Scrawny One," —Anthony Boucher ; " Come And Go Mad,"—Frederic Brown ; " The Big Shot," —Eric Frank Russell.

John Carnell