NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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Serial

JAMES WHITE

Field Hospital

Part One

BRIAN W. ALDISS

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BILL SPENCER

Guest Editorial

JOHN BRUNNER

Cover Painting

GERARD QUINN

★

A Nova Publication

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John Brunner

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One of the pleasant things about being an editor of a science fiction magazine—apart from seeing the continued success of that magazine—is to see the rise of many of the contributors from small beginnings to where Success can be spelled with a capital letter. Guest Editor John Brunner is one of our younger writers of whom we are justly proud, for he has moved on from the short story to novelettes, short novels and novels with an easy grace which puts many more experienced writers to shame.

Not only that but the ideas in many of his plots, especially his fantasy stories, are as fascinating as the thoughts of space travel (stories about which he also does exceptionally well). Where the basis for many of those plots comes from he explains all too simply in his editorial and would-be writers could well take good notice of the examples he mentions.

While readers may disagree (including John himself) we think that his greatest literary effort to date is the delightful short novel "Earth Is But A Star" which was published in *Science Fantasy* No. 29. We could use more stories of that calibre.

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

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TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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Guest Editorial

Fourth in our series of controversial Guest Editorials, John Brunner points out that despite manned spaceflight there are more than enough plot ideas to keep us going for the next century or so.

Our Present Requirements

by JOHN BRUNNER

Gagarin was up and Titov was up and Shepherd and Grissom were up though rather less so, and I've been reading. Rattray Taylor's *Sex in History* and Levinsohn's *History of Sexual Customs* and his *Prophets and Prediction*, and Douglas Reed's *All Our Tomorrows* (which is not science fiction, alas, but regrettably true), and his *Insanity Fair*, and Herman Kahn's *On Thermonuclear War*, and C. Wright Mill's *Listen, Yankee* !, and the daily papers.

The daily papers are chiefly responsible for the mood of depression in which this article is written but a contributing factor has been the arrival of a couple of rejection slips. The particular slips I have in mind say approximately, " Thank you for submitting the enclosed but unfortunately it does not suit our present requirements." (You know the ones. Most people who read science fiction have had a bash at writing at least once, and most of them have had a slip like that).

What the heck are our present requirements, anyway ? As I said, Gagarin and the rest of them have been up. Muttniks and sputniks, phutniks and luniks, and all sorts of knack-

knicks, are making nearer space look like a bric-a-bracnik shop. The other day they demonstrated a cheap automated device which can be adapted to make more of itself. A firm has produced an electric truck-and-trailer system for intra-factory transport of goods which does not require a driver, but follows a wire laid in the floor and opens and shuts doors for itself. Et cetera.

Some years ago, when the foregoing gadgets were on the horizon and people were still busy ignoring the fact that the Russians had actually said they were going into space because the Americans were saying it louder (this is a phenomenon known to psychologists as " selective inattention "), a kind of wave of straightened backs and proud smiles went through the ranks of the science fiction enthusiasts (fans plus writers plus editors). Science fiction is getting mature, was the okay phrase—or coming of age, or becoming adult or respectable or *something*. Remember ?

So from where I'm sitting it doesn't seem to have been so.

To those ignoramuses who ask what I'm going to do for a living now it's all coming true, I curtly respond that I have more plots on the file than I know what to do with ; seven novels awaiting completion, thirty short stories in draft, and as many more ideas lined up behind them. The evening after Gagarin's flight my wife and I had a friend round from the Soviet Embassy to drink a toast to the bloody Russians who were trying to put us poor s-f writers out of a job—but it wasn't said seriously. S-f has plenty of life in it yet.

Provided !

And here we come to the serious beef. So we lose a plot or two about early spacemen and basic-type robots and so on. So there are entire sciences (and I mean sciences, not pseudo-sciences like parapsychology) which we have barely touched vast areas of human experience waiting to be explored in the unique fashion of s-f writers, and too darned many of them are labelled untouchable, or controversial, or unpopular. I don't believe it.

This is a guest editorial. I specifically except my host editor (yes, J.C., it's you I mean) from what I'm about to say,

Continued on Page 119

Author James White expands the scope of his "Sector General" characters in this new novel of the giant hospital in space, as the Monitor Corp discover a distant world in urgent need of medical aid and Dr. Conway is sent to assess the requirements.

FIELD HOSPITAL

by JAMES WHITE

Part One of Three Parts

one

Far out on the galactic Rim, where star systems were sparse and the darkness nearly absolute, Sector Twelve General Hospital hung in space. In its three hundred and eighty-four levels were reproduced the environments of all the intelligent life-forms known to the Galactic Federation, a biological spectrum ranging from the ultra-frigid methane life-forms through the more normal oxygen- and chlorine-breathing types up to the exotic beings who existed by the direct conversion of hard radiation. Its thousands of viewports were constantly ablaze with light—light in the dazzling variety of colour and intensity necessary for the visual equipment of its extra-terrestrial patients and staff—so that to approaching ships the great hospital looked like a tremendous, cylindrical Christmas Tree.

Sector General represented a two-fold miracle of engineering and psychology. Its supply and maintenance was handled by

the Monitor Corps—the Federation's executive and law enforcement arm—who also saw to its administration, but the traditional friction between the military and civilian members of its staff did not occur. Nether were there any serious squabbles among its ten thousand-odd medical personnel, who were composed of over sixty different life-forms with sixty differing sets of mannerisms, body odours and ways of looking at life. Perhaps their one and only common denominator was the need of all doctors, regardless of size, shape, or number of legs, to cure the sick.

The staff of Sector General were a dedicated, but not always serious group of beings who were fanatically tolerant of all forms of intelligent life—had this not been so they would not have been there in the first place. And they prided themselves that no case was too big, too small or too hopeless. Their advice or assistance was sought by medical authorities from all over the Galaxy. Pacifists all, they waged a constant, all-out war against suffering and disease whether it was in individuals or whole planetary populations.

But there were times when the diagnosis and treatment of a diseased interstellar culture, entailing the surgical removal of deeply-rooted prejudice and unsane moral values without either the patient's co-operation or consent could, despite the pacifism of the doctors concerned, lead to the waging of war. Period.

Senior Physician Conway sat uncomfortably in a very comfortable chair and watched the square, craggy features of the hospital's Chief Psychologist across an expanse of cluttered desk. Conway had been in Major O'Mara's office many times for re-assignment and to take physiology tapes, and he knew that being given the comfortable chair meant that O'Mara was feeling favourably disposed towards him, but a peremptory summons over the PA could mean *anything*.

" How would you like to get away from the hospital for a few months, Doctor ?" O'Mara said suddenly, without looking up from the report he was studying. " It would be in the nature of a holiday, practically."

Conway felt his initial unease grow rapidly into panic. He had urgent personal reasons for *not* leaving the hospital for a few months. He said, " Well . . ."

The psychologist raised his head and fixed Conway with a pair of level grey eyes which saw so much and which opened into a mind so keenly analytical that together they gave O'Mara

what amounted to a telepathic faculty. He said drily, " Don't bother to thank me, it is your own fault for curing such powerful influential patients."

He went on briskly, " This is a large assignment, Doctor, but it will consist mainly of clerical work. Normally it would be given to someone at Diagnostician level, but that EPLH, Lonvellin, has been at work on a planet which it says is urgently in need of medical aid. Lonvellin had requested Monitor Corps as well as hospital assistance in this, and has asked that you personally should direct the medical side. Apparently a Great Intellect isn't needed for the job, just one with a peculiar way of looking at things . . ."

" You're too kind, sir," said Conway.

Grinning, O'Mara said, " I've told you before, I'm here to shrink heads, not inflate them. And now, this is the report on the situation there at the moment . . ." He slid the file he had been reading across to Conway, and stood up. ". . . You can brief yourself on it when you board ship. Be at Lock Sixteen to board *Vespasian* at 2130, meanwhile I expect you have loose ends to tidy up. And Conway, try not to look as if all your relatives had died. Very probably she'll wait for you. If she doesn't, why you have two hundred and seventeen other female DBDGs to chase after. Good-bye and good luck, Doctor."

Outside O'Mara's office Conway tried to work out how best to tidy up his loose ends in the six hours remaining before embarkation time. He was scheduled to take a group of trainees through a basic orientation lecture in ten minutes from now, and it was too late to foist that job on to someone else. That would kill three of the six hours, four if he was unlucky and today he felt unlucky. Then an hour to tape instructions regarding his more serious ward patients, then dinner. He might just do it. Conway began hurrying towards Lock Seven on the one hundred and eighth level.

He arrived at the lock antechamber just as the inner seal was opening, and while catching his breath began mentally checking off the trainees who were filing past him. Two Kelgian DBLFs who undulated past like giant, silver-furred caterpillars ; then a PVSJ from Illensa, the outlines of its spiny, membranous body softened by the chlorine fog inside its protective envelope; a water-breathing Creppelian octopoid, classification AMSL, whose suit made loud bubbling noises. These were followed

by five AACPs, a race whose remote ancestors had been a species of mobile vegetable. They were slow moving, but the CO^2 tanks which they wore seemed to be the only protection they needed. Then another Kelgian . . .

When they were all inside and the seal closed behind them Conway spoke. Quite unnecessarily and simply as a means of breaking the conversational ice, he said, " Is everyone present?"

Inevitably they all replied in chorus, sending Conway's Translator into a howl of oscillation. Sighing, he began the customary procedure of introducing himself and bidding his new colleagues welcome. It was only at the end of these polite formalities that he worked in a gentle reminder regarding the operating principles of the Translator, and the advisability of speaking one at a time so as not to overload it.

On their home worlds these were all very important people, medically speaking. It was only at Sector General that they were new boys, and for some of them the transition from acknowledged master to lowly pupil might be difficult, so that large quantities of tact were necessary when handling them at this stage. Later, however, when they began to settle in, they could be bawled out for their mistakes like anyone else.

" I propose to start our tour at Reception," Conway went on, " where the problems of admittance and initial treatment are dealt with. Then, providing the environment does not require complex protective arrangements for ourselves and the patient's condition is not critical, we will visit the adjacent wards to observe examination procedures on newly-arrived patients. If anyone wants to ask questions at any time, feel free to do so.

" On the way to Reception," he continued, " we will use corridors which may be crowded. There is a complicated system of precedence governing the rights of way of junior and senior medical staff, a system which you will learn in time. But for the present there is just one simple rule to remember. If the being coming at you is bigger than you are, get out of its way."

He was about to add that no doctor in Sector General would *deliberately* trample a colleague to death, but thought better of it. A great many e-ts did not have a sense of humour and such a harmless pleasantry, if taken literally, could lead to endless complications. Instead he said, " Follow me, please."

Conway arranged for the five AACPs, who were the slowest-moving of the group, to follow himself and set the pace for the others. After them came the two Kelgians whose undulating gait was only slightly faster than the vegetable life-forms preceeding them. The chlorine breather came next and the Creppelian octopoid brought up the rear, the bubbling noise from its suit giving Conway an audible indication that his fifty-yard long tail was all in one piece.

Strung out as they were there was no point in Conway trying to talk, and they negotiated the first stage of the journey in silence—three ascending ramps and a couple of hundred yards of straight and angled corridors. The only person they met coming in the opposite direction was a Nidian wearing the arm-band of a two-year intern. Nidians averaged four feet in height so that nobody was in any danger of being trampled to death. They reached the internal lock which gave access to the water-breather's section.

In the adjoining dressing room Conway supervised the suiting-up of the two Kelgians, then climbed into a lightweight suit himself. The AACPs said that their vegetable metabolism enabled them to exist under water for long periods without protection. The Illensan was already sealed against the oxygen-laden air so that the equally poisonous water did not worry it. But the Creppelian was a water-breather and wanted to take its suit off—it had eight legs which badly needed stretching, it said. But Conway vetoed this on the grounds that it would only be in the water for fifteen minutes at most.

The lock opened into the main AUGL ward, a vast, shadowy tank of tepid green water two hundred feet deep and five hundred hundred feet across. Conway quickly discovered that moving the trainees from the lock to the corridor entrance on the other side was like trying to drive a three dimensional herd of cattle through green glue. With the single exception of the Creppelian they all lost their sense of direction in the water within the first few minutes. Conway had to swim frantically around them, gesticulating and shouting directions, and despite the cooling and drying elements in his suit the interior soon became like an overheated turkish bath. Several times he lost his temper and directed his charges to a place other than the corridor entrance.

And during one particularly chaotic moment an AUGL patient—one of the forty-foot, armoured, fish-like natives of Chalderescol II—swam ponderously towards them. It closed

to within five, causing a near panic-among the AACPs, said " Student !" and swam away again. Chalders were notoriously antisocial during convalescence, but the incident did not help Conway's temper any.

It seemed much longer than fifteen minutes later when they were assembled in the corridor at the other side of the tank.

Conway said, " Three hundred yards along this corridor is the transfer lock into the oxygen section of Reception, which is the best place to see what is going on there. Those of you who are wearing protection against water only will remove their suits, the others will go straight through . . ."

As he was swimming with them towards the lock the Creppelian said to one of the AACPs, " Ours is supposed to be filled with superheated stream, but you have to have done something very bad to be sent there." To which the AACP replied, " Our Hell is hot, too, but there is no moisture in it at all . . ."

Conway had been about to apologise for losing his temper back in the tank, fearing that he might have hurt some sensitive extra-terrestrial feelings, but obviously they hadn't taken what he'd said very seriously.

two

Through the transparent wall of its observation gallery, Reception showed as a large, shadowy room containing three large control desks, only one of which was currently occupied. The being seated before it was another Nidian, a small, humanoid with seven-fingered hands and an overall coat of tight, curly red fur. Indicator lights on the desk showed that it had just made contact with a ship approaching the hospital.

Conway said, " Listen . . ."

" Identify yourself, please," said the red teddy-bear in its staccato, barking speech—which was filtered through Conway's Translator as flat, toneless English and which came to the others as equally toneless Kelgian, Illensan or whatever. " Patient, visitor or staff, and species ?"

" Pilot, with one passenger-patient aboard," came the reply. " Both human."

There was a short pause, then ; " Give your physiological classification, please, or make full-vision contact," said the

Nidian with a very Earth-human wink towards the watchers in the gallery. " All intelligent races refer to their own species as human and think of all others as being non-human. What you call yourself has no meaning so far as preparing accommodation for the patient is concerned . . ."

Conway muted the speaker which carried the conversation between ship and receptionist into the gallery and said, " This is as good a time as any to explain our physiological classification system to you. Briefly, that is, because later there will be special lectures on this subject."

Clearing his throat, he began, " In the four-letter classification system the first letter indicates the level of physical evolution, the second denotes the type and distribution of limbs and sense organs and the other two the combination metabolism and pressure and gravity requirements, which in turn give an indication of the physical mass and form of protective tegument possessed by the being. I must mention here, in case any of you might feel inferior regarding your classification, that the level of physical evolution has no relation to the level of intelligence . . ."

Species with the prefix A, B and C, he went on to explain, were water-breathers. On most worlds life had originated in the sea and these beings had developed high intelligence without having to leave it. D through F were warm-blooded oxygen-breathers, into which group fell most of the intelligence races in the galaxy, and the G and K types were also oxygen-breathing but insectile. The Ls and Ms were light-gravity winged beings.

Chlorine-breathing life-forms were contained in the O and P groups, and after that came the more exotic, the more highly-evolved physically and the downright weird types. Radiation-eaters, frigid-blooded or crystalline beings, and entities capable of modifying their physical structure at will. Those possessing extra-sensory powers sufficiently well-developed to make walking or manipulatory appendages unnecessary were given the prefix V, regardless of size or shape.

Conway admitted to anomalies in the system, but these could be blamed on the lack of imagination by its originators. One of the species present in the observation gallery was a case in point—the AACP type with its vegetable metabolism. Normally the A prefix denoted a water-breather, there being nothing lower in the system than the piscatorial life-forms. But the AACPs were vegetables and plants had come before fish.

". . . Great stress is laid on the importance of a rapid and accurate classification of incoming patients, who very often are in no condition to furnish this information themselves," Conway went on. " Ideally, you should reach a stage of proficiency which will enable you to rattle off a classification after a three-second glimpse of an e-t foot or section of tegument.

" But look there," he said, pointing.

Over the control desk three screens were alight, and adjacent indicators added detail to the information contained in the pictures. The first showed the interior of Lock Three, which contained two Earth-human orderlies and a large stretcher-carrier. The orderlies wore heavy duty suits and anti-gravity belts, which didn't surprise Conway at all because Lock Three and its associated levels was maintained at five Gs with pressure to match. Another screen showed the exterior of the lock with its transfer servo-mechanisms and the ship about to make contact, and the third picture was being relayed from inside the ship and showed the patient.

Conway said, " You can see that it is a heavy, squat life-form possessing six appendages which serve both as arms and legs. Its skin is thick, very tough and pitted all over, and is also incrusted in places with a dry, brownish substance which sometimes flakes off when the patient moves. Pay particular attention to this brown substance, and to features which seem to be missing from the body. The tell-tales show a warm-blooded, oxygen-breathing metabolism adapted to a gravity pull of four Gs. Would one of you like to classify it for me ?"

There was a long silence, Then the Creppelian AMSL twitched a tentacle and said, " FROL, sir."

" Very close," said Conway approvingly. " However, I happen to know that this being's atmosphere is a dense, nearly opaque soup, the resemblance to soup being increased by the fact that its lower reaches are alive with small airborne organisms which it feeds upon. You missed the fact that it has no eating mouth but absorbs food directly via the pittings in its skin. When travelling in space, however, the food has to be sprayed on, hence the brownish incrustation—"

" FROB," said the Creppelian quickly.

" Correct."

Conway wondered whether this AMSL was a little brighter than the others or just less shy. He made a mental note to keep

an eye on this particular batch of trainees. He could use a bright assistant in his own wards.

Waving goodbye to the furry receptionist, Conway gathered his flock about him again and headed them towards the FGLI ward five levels below. After that came other wards until Conway decided to introduce them to the complex, far-flung department of the Hospital without whose constant and efficient working the tremendous establishment of Sector General could not have functioned and the vast multitude of its patients, staff and maintenance personnel could not have lived.

Conway was feeling hungry, and it was time he showed them where they all ate.

AACPs did not eat in the normal manner but planted themselves during their sleep period in specially prepared soil and absorbed nutriment in that way. After seeing them settled he deposited the PVSJ in the dim, noisome depths of the hall where the chlorine-breathers ate, leaving him to dispose of the two DBLFs and the AMSL.

The largest dining hall in the hospital, the one devoted to oxygen-breathers, was close by. Conway saw the two Kelgians placed with a group of their own species, then with a look of hungry yearning towards the Senior's enclosure he hurried out again to take care of the Creppelian.

To reach the section catering for the water-breathers necessitated a fifteen minute walk along some of the busiest corridors of the hospital. Entities of all shapes and sizes flapped, undulated and sometimes walked past them. Conway had become inured to being jostled by elephantine Tralthans and having to step carefully around the fragile, diminuitive LSVOs, but the Creppelian was like an armour-plated octopus walking on eggs—there were times when the AMSL seemed afraid to move. The bubbling sounds from it suit had increased noticeably, too.

Conway tried to make it relax by getting it to talk about its previous hospital experience, but without much success. Then suddenly they turned a corner and Conway saw his old friend Prilicla coming from a side ward.

The AMSL went " Wheep !" and its eight legs thrashed frantically into reverse. One of them swung heavily into the back of Conway's knees and he sat down violently. The octopoid took off down the corridor, still wheeping.

" What the blazes . . .!" said Conway, with what he thought later was commendable restraint.

" This is my fault entirely, I frightened it," said Prilicla as it hurried up. " Are you hurt, Doctor ?"

" *You* frightened it . . .!"

Prilicla was a GLNO ; insectile, exo-skeletal and possessing six fragile, pipe-stem legs. A native of Cinrus, whose high rate of spin gave it a surface gravity of one quarter G, Prilicla had to wear gravity nullification devices at all times or have its egg-shell body mashed flat by the conditions which most of its colleagues considered normal. It also possessed the empathic faculty—the ability to detect emotional radiation—which meant that it *had* to be the most gentle and considerate being in the whole hospital.

" Yes," said Prilicla. " The combination of surprise and what seems to be a deeply-rooted xenophobic neurosis caused a panic reaction. It is badly frightened but not completely out of control. Are you hurt, Doctor ?"

" Just my feelings," Conway growled, scrambling to his feet and going after the fleeing Creppelian, who was now out of sight and very nearly out of earshot.

His progress in the wake of the AMSL became a rapid zigzag that was half sprint and half waltz. To his superiors he called " Excuse me !" and to equals and inferiors he bawled " Gangway !" Almost at once he began to overtake the AMSL, proving once again that as an efficient means of locomotion two feet were much better than eight, and he was just drawing level when the being trapped itself neatly by turning into a linen storeroom. Conway skidded to a halt outside the still open door, went in and closed it firmly behind him.

As calmly as shortage of breath would allow he said, " Why did you run away ?"

Words poured suddenly from the AMSL. The Translator filtered out all the emotional overtones but from the sheer rapidity of its speech he knew that the Creppelian was having the equivalent of hysterics, and as he listened he knew that Prilicla's emotional reading had been right. Here was an xenophobic neurosis and no mistake.

O'Mara will get you if you don't watch out, he thought grimly.

Given even the highest qualities of tolerance and mutual respect, there were still occasions when inter-racial friction occurred in the hospital. Potentially dangerous situations

arose through ignorance or misunderstanding, or a being could develop xenophobia to a degree which affected its professional efficiency, mental stability, or both. An Earth-human doctor, for instance, who had a subconscious fear of spiders would not be able to bring to bear on a Cinrusskin patient the proper degree of clinical detachment necessary for its treatment. And if one of the Cinrusskins were to treat such an Earth-human patient . . .

It was O'Mara's job as Chief Psychologist to detect and eradicate such trouble—or if all else failed, to remove the potentially dangerous individuals—before such friction developed into open conflict. Conway did not know how O'Mara would react to a hulking great AMSL who fled in panic from such a fragile creature as Dr. Prilicla.

When the Creppelian's outburst began to ease off Conway raised his hand for attention and said, " I realise now that Dr. Prilicla bears a physical resemblance to a species of small amphibious predator native to your home world, and that in your youth you experienced an extremely harrowing incident with these animals. But Doctor Prilicla is not an animal and the resemblance is purely visual. Far from being a threat you could kill Prilicla if you were to touch it carelessly. Knowing this," Conway ended seriously, " would you be frightened into running if you were to meet this being again ?"

" I don't know," said the AMSL. " I might."

Conway sighed. He could not help remembering his own first weeks at Sector General and the horrible, nightmare creatures which had haunted his sleep. What had made the nightmares particularly horrifying had been the fact that they were not figments of his imagination but actual, physical realities which in many cases were only a few bulkheads away.

He had never fled from any of the nightmares who had later become his teachers, colleagues and eventually friends, *but* to be honest with himself this was not due so much to intestinal fortitude as the fact that extreme fear had a tendency to paralyse Conway rather than to make him run away.

" I think you may need psychiatric assistance, Doctor," he told the Creppelian gently, " and the hospital's Chief Psychologist will help you. But I would advise you not to consult him at once. Spend a week or so trying to adapt to the situation before going to him. You will find that he will think more highly of you for doing this . . ."

. . . *And less likely*, he added silently, *to send you packing as unsuited for duty in a multi-environment hospital.*

The Creppelian left the storeroom with very little persuasian after Conway told it that Prilicla was the only GLNO in the hospital at the moment and that their paths were very unlikely to cross twice in the same day. Ten minuted later the AMSL was settled in its dining tank and Conway was making for his own dinner by the fastest possible route.

three

By a stroke of luck he saw Dr. Mannen at an otherwise empty table in the Senior's enclosure. Mannen was an Earth-human who had once been Conway's superior and was now a Senior Physician well on the way to achieving Diagnostician status. Currently he was allowed to retain three physiology tapes—those of a Tralthan specialist in microsurgery and two which had been made by surgeons of the low-gravity LSVO and MSVK species—but despite this his reactions were reasonable human. At the moment he was working through a salad with his eyes turned towards Heaven and the dining hall ceiling in an effort not to look at what he was eating. Conway sat down facing him and made a sympathetic, querying noise.

"I've had a Tralthan *and* an LSVO on my list this afternoon, both long jobs," Mannen said grumpily. " You know how it is, I've been thinking like them too much. If only these blasted Tralthans weren't vegetarians, or the LSVOs weren't sickened by anything which doesn't look like bird seed ! Are you anybody else today ?"

Conway shook his head. " Just me. Do you mind if I have steak ?"

" No, just don't talk about it."

" I won't."

Conway knew only too well the confusion, mental double vision and the severe emotional disturbance which went with a physiology tape that had become too thoroughly keyed in to the operating physician's mind. He could remember a time only three months ago when he had fallen hopelessly—but *hopelessly*—in love with one of a group of visiting specialists from Melf IV. The Melfans were ELNTs—six-legged, amphibious, vaguely crab-like beings—and while one half of

his mind had insisted that the whole affair was ridiculous the other half thought lovingly of that georgeously marked carapace and generally felt like baying at the moon.

Physiology tapes were decidedly a mixed blessing, but their use was necessary because no single being could hope to hold in its brain all the physiological data needed for the treatment of patients in a multi-environment hospital. The incredible mass of data required to take care of them was furnished by means of Educator tapes, which were simply the brain recordings of great medical specialists of the various species concerned. If an Earth-human doctor had to treat a Kelgian patient he took one of the DBLF physiology tapes until treatment was complete, after which he had it erased. But Senior Physicians with teaching duties were often called on to retain these tapes for long periods, which wasn't much fun at all.

The only good thing from their point of view was that they were better off than the Diagnosticians.

They were the hospital's *elite*. A Diagnostician was one of those rare beings whose mind was considered stable enough to retain permanently up to ten physiology tapes simultaneously. To their data-crammed minds was given the job of original research in xenological medicine and the diagnosis and treatment of new diseases in hitherto unknown life-forms. There was a well-known saying in the hospital, reputed to have originated with O'Mara himself, that anyone sane enough to want to be a Diagnostician was mad.

For it is not only physiological data which the tapes imparted the complete memory and personality of the entity who had possessed that knowledge was impressed on the receiving brain as well. In effect a Diagnostician subjected himself or itself voluntarily to the most drastic form of multiple schizophrenia, with the alien personality sharing his mind so utterly *different* that in many cases they did not have even a system of logic in common.

Conway brought his thoughts back to the here and now. Mannen was speaking again.

" A funny thing about the taste of salad," he said, still glaring at the ceiling as he ate, " is that none of my alter egos seem to mind it. The sight of it yes, but not the taste. They don't particularly like it, mind, but neither does it completely

revolt them. At the same time there are few species with an overwhelming passion for it, either. And speaking of overwhelming passions, how about you and Murchison ?"

One of these days Conway expected to hear gears clashing, the way Mannen changed subjects so quickly.

" I'll be seeing her tonight if I've time," he replied carefully. " However, we are just good friends."

" Haw," said Mannen.

Conway made an equally violent switch of subjects by hurriedly breaking the news about his latest assignment. Mannen was the best in the world, but he had the painful habit of pulling a person's leg until it threatened to come off at the hip. Conway managed to keep the conversation off Murchison for the rest of the meal.

As soon as Mannen and himself split up he went to the intercom and had a few words with the doctors of various species who would be taking over the instruction of the trainees, then he looked at his watch. There was almost an hour before he was due aboard *Vespasian.* He began to walk a little more hurriedly than befitted a Senior Physician.

The sign over the entrance read " Recreation Level, Species DBDG, DBLF, ELNT, GKNM and FGLI." Conway went in, changed his whites for shorts and began searching for Murchison.

Trick lighting and some really inspired landscaping had given the recreation level the illusion of tremendous spaciousness. The overall effect was of a small, tropical beach enclosed on two sides by cliffs and open to the sea, which stretched out to a horizon rendered indistinct by heat haze. The sky was blue and cloudless—realistic cloud effects were difficult to reproduce, a maintenance engineer had told him—and the water of the bay was deep blue shading to turquoise. It lapped against the golden, gently sloping beach whose sand was almost too warm for the feet. Only the artificial sun, which was too much on the reddish side for Conway's taste, and the alien greenery fringing the beach and cliffs kept it from looking like a tropical bay anywhere on Earth.

But then space was at a premium in Sector General and the people who worked together were expected to play together as well.

The most effective, yet completely unseen, aspect of the place was the fact that it was maintained at one-half normal gravity.

A half-G meant that people who were tired could relax more comfortably and the ones who were feeling lively could feel livelier still, Conway thought wryly as a steep, slow-moving wave ran up the beach and broke around his knees. The turbulence in the bay was not produced artificially, but varied in proportion to the size, number and enthusiasm of the bathers using it.

Projecting from one of the cliffs were a series of diving ledges connected by concealed tunnels. Conway climbed to the highest fifty-foot ledge and from this point of vantage tried to find a DBDG female in a white swimsuit called Murchison.

She wasn't in the restaurant on the other cliff, or in the shallows adjoining the beach, or in the deep green water under the diving ledges. The sand was thickly littered with reclining forms which were large, small, leathery, scaley and furry—but Conway had no difficulty seperating the Earth-human DBDGs from the general mass, they being the only intelligent species in the Federation with a nudity taboo. So he knew that anyone wearing clothing, no matter how abbreviated, was what *he* considered a human being.

Suddenly he caught a glimpse of white which was partly obscured by two patches of green and one of yellow standing around it. That would be Murchison, all right. He took a quick bearing and retraced his steps.

When Conway approached the crowd around Murchison, two Corpsmen and an intern from the eighty-seventh level dispersed with obvious reluctance. In a voice which, much to his disgust, had gone up in pitch, he said, " Hi. Sorry I'm late."

Murchison shielded her eyes to look up at him. " I just arrived myself," she said, smiling. " Why don't you lie down ?"

Conway dropped on to the sand but remained propped on one elbow, looking at her.

Murchison possessed a combination of physical features which made it impossible for any Earth-human male member of the staff to regard her with anything like clinical detachment, and regular exposure to the artificial but UV-rich sun had given her a deep tan made richer by the dazzling contrast of her white swimsuit. Dark auburn hair stirred restively in the artificial breeze, her eyes were closed again and her lips slightly

parted. Her respiration was slow and deep, that of a person either perfectly relaxed or asleep, and the things it was doing to her swimsuit was also doing things to Conway. He thought suddenly that if she had been telepathic at this moment she would be up and running for dear life.

" You look," she said, opening one eye, " like somebody who wants to growl deep in his throat and beat his manly, clean-shaven chest—"

" It isn't clean-shaven," Conway protested, " it's just naturally not hairy. But I want you to be serious for a moment. I'd like to talk to you, alone, I mean . . ."

" I don't care either way about chests," she said soothingly, " so you don't have to feel bad about it."

" I don't," said Conway, then doggedly ; " Can't we get away from this menagerie and . . . Oops, stampede !"

He reached across quickly and clapped his hand over her eyes, simultaneously closing his own.

Two Tralthans on a total of twelve elephantine feet thundered past within a few yards of them and ploughed into the shallows, scattering sand and spray over a radius of fifty yards. The half-G conditions which allowed the normally slow and ponderous FGLIs to gambol like lambs also kept the sand they had kicked up airborne for a considerable time. When Conway was sure that the last grains had settled he took his hand away from Murchison's eyes. But not completely.

Hesitantly, a little awkwardly, he slid his hand over the soft warm contour of her cheek until he was cupping the side of her jaw in his palm. Then gently he pushed his fingers into the soft tangle of curls behind her ear. He felt her stiffen, then relax again.

" Uh, see what I mean," he said dry-mouthed. " Unless you *like* half-ton bullies kicking sand in your face . . ."

" We'll be alone later," said Murchison, laughing, " when you take me home."

" And then what happens !" Conway said disgustedly. " Just the same as last time. We'll sneak up to your door, being very careful not to wake your room-mate who has to go on early duty, and then that damned servo will come trundling up . . ." Angrily, Conway began to mimic the taped voice of the robot as he went on, ". . . I perceive that you are beings of classification DBDG and are of differing genders, and note further that you have been in close juxtaposition for a period

of two minutes forty-eight seconds. In the circumstances I must respectfully remind you of Regulation Twenty-one, sub-Section Three regarding the entertaining of visitors in DBDG Nurses Quarters . . ."

Almost choking, Murchison said, " I'm sorry, it must have been very frustrating for you."

Conway thought sourly that the expression of sorrow was rather spoiled by the suppressed laughter preceeding it. He leaned closer and took her gently by the shoulder. He said, " It was and is. I want to talk to you and I won't have time to see you home tonight. But I don't want to talk here, you always head for the water when I get you cornered. Well, I want to get you in a corner, both literally and conversationally, and ask some serious questions. This being friends is killing me . . ."

Murchison shook her head. She took his hand away from her shoulder, squeezed it and said, " Let's swim."

Seconds later as he chased her into the shallows he wondered if perhaps she wasn't a little telepathic after all. She was certainly running fast enough.

In half-G conditions swimming was an exhilarating experience. The waves were high and steep and the smallest splash seemed to hang in the air for seconds, with individual drops sparkling red and amber in the sun. A badly executed dive by one of the heavier life-forms—the FGLIs especially had an awful lot of belly to flop—could cause really spectacular effects. Conway was threshing madly after Murchison on the fringe of just such a titanic upheaval when a loudspeaker on the cliff roared into life.

" Doctor Conway," it boomed. " Will Doctor Conway report at Lock Sixteen for embarkation, please . . ."

They were walking rapidly up the beach when Murchison said, very seriously for her, " I didn't know you were leaving. I'll change and see you off."

There was a Monitor Corps officer in the lock antechamber. When he saw Conway had company he said, "Doctor Conway? We leave in fifteen minutes, sir," and disappeared tactfully. Conway stopped beside the boarding tube and so did Murchison. She looked at him but there was no particular expression on her face, it was just beautiful and very desirable. Conway went on telling her about his important new assignment although he didn't want to talk about that at all. He

talked rapidly and nervously until he heard the Monitor officer returning along the tube, then he pulled Murchison tightly against him and kissed her hard.

He couldn't tell if she responded. He had been too sudden, too ungentle . . .

" I'll be gone about three months," he said, in a voice that tried to explain and apologise at the same time. Then with forced lightness he ended, " And in the morning I won't feel a bit sorry."

four

Conway was shown to his cabin by an officer wearing a medic's caduceus over his insignia who introduced himself as Major Stillman. Although he spoke quietly and politely Conway got the impression that the Major was not a person who would be overawed by anything or anybody. He said that the Captain would be pleased to see Conway in the control room after they had made the first jump, to welcome him aboard personally.

A little later Conway met Colonel Williamson, the ship's Captain, who gave him the freedom of the ship. This was a courtesy rare enough on a government ship to impress Conway, but he soon discovered that although nobody said anything he was simply in everyone's way in the control room, and twice he lost himself while trying to explore the ship's interior. The Monitor heavy cruiser *Vespasian* was much larger than Conway had realised. After being guided back by a friendly Corpsman with a too-expressionless face he decided that he would spend most of the trip in his cabin familiarising himself with his new assignment.

Colonel Williamson had given him copies of the more detailed and recent information which had come in through Monitor Corps channels, but he began by studying the file O'Mara had given him.

The being Lonvellin had been on the way to a world, about which it had heard some very nasty rumours, in a practically unexplored section of the Lesser Megellanic Cloud when it had been taken ill and admitted to Sector General. Shortly after being pronounced cured it had resumed the journey and a few weeks later it had contacted the Monitor Corps. It had stated that conditions on the world it had found were both sociologi-

cally complex and medically barbaric, and that it would need advice on the medical side before it could begin to act effectively against the many social ills afflicting this truly distressed planet. It had also asked if some beings of physiological classification DBDG could be sent along to act as information gatherers as the natives were of that classification and were violently hostile to all off-planet life, a fact which seriously hampered Lonvellin's activities.

The fact of Lonvellin asking for help of any sort was surprising in itself. Lonvellin belonged to a species which was numerically very small but whose intelligence and grasp of the social and psychological sciences was enormous. Their life-span, lengthy to begin with, was extended artificially by a process of rejuvenation which rendered them well-nigh immortal. But the usual high price had been exacted for this longevity. Reproduction of their kind—the normal urge towards immortality of race in a species of mortal individuals —had ceased, and their original planetary civilisation had been forced apart into a mass of star-travelling rugged individualists.

The reason they avoided each other's company was because they had had too much of it. Century after century of each other's faces and voices and mannerisms.

But because of their tremendous minds and the longevity which brought with it a constant fight against boredom, and because basically they were very nice if over-powering people, they kept occupied by setting themselves vast sociological problems. They delighted in taking charge of backward planetary cultures and dragging them up by their bootstraps, and similar large-scale philanthropies. Their usual method of operation being first to become the supreme ruler of the world on which they were working, after which the century or so spent in moulding the culture into a more desirable form was a matter of routine. After the initial landing the first step was to use a combination of defensive science, psychology and sheer business acumen to begin amassing the wealth that would ultimately give the power required to make them a political and economic force. But on this occasion things had gone disastrously wrong, and Lonvellin had been kept too busy using its defensive science to use anything else.

According to Lonvellin's report it had begun by observing the planet from space during many rotations, monitoring the

radio transmissions through its Translator, and taking particular note of the low level of industrialisation which contrasted so oddly with the single, still functioning space port. When all the information which it had thought necessary had been collected and evaluated it chose what it considered to be the best place to land.

From the evidence at hand Lonvellin judged the world—the native's name for it was Etla—to have been a once-prosperous colony that had regressed for economic reasons until now it had very little contact with outside. But it did have some, which meant that Lonvellin's first and usually most difficult job, that of making the natives trust an alien and perhaps visually horrifying being who had dropped out of the sky, was greatly simplified. These people would know about e-ts. So it took the role of a poor, frightened, slightly stupid extra-terrestrial who had been forced to land to make repairs to its ship. For this it would require various odd and completely worthless chunks of metal or rock, and it would pretend great difficulty in making the Etlans understand exactly what it needed. But for these valueless pieces of rubbish it would exchange items of great value, and soon the more enterprising natives would get to know about it.

At this stage Lonvellin expected to be exploited shamelessly, but it didn't mind. Gradually things would change. Rather than give items of value it would offer to perform even more valuable services. It would let it be known that it now considered its ship to be irrepairable, and gradually it would become accepted as a permanent resident. After that it would be just a matter of time, and time was something with which Lonvellin was particularly well supplied.

It landed close to a road running between two small towns, and soon had the chance to reveal itself to a native. The native, despite Lonvellin's careful contact and many reassurances via the Translator, fled. A few hours later small, crude projectiles with chemical warheads began falling on his ship and the whole area, which was densely wooded, had been saturated with volatile chemicals and deliberately set alight.

Lonvellin had been unable to proceed without knowing why this race with experience of space-travel should be so blindly hostile to e-ts, and not being in a position to ask questions himself it had called for Earth-human assistance. Shortly afterwards Alien Contact specialists of the Monitor Corps had arrived, sized up the situation for themselves and gone in.

Quite openly, as it happened.

They discovered that the natives were terrified of e-ts because they believed them to be disease carriers. What was even more peculiar was that they were not worried by off-planet visitors of their own species or a closely similar race, members of which would have been more likely to be carriers of disease. Because it was a well-known medical fact that diseases which affected extra-terrestrials were not communicable to members of other planetary species. Any race with a knowledge of space travel should know *that*, Conway thought. It was the first thing a star-travelling culture learned.

He was trying to make some sense our of this strange contradiction, using a tired brain and some hefty reference works on the Federation's colonisation programme, when Major Stillman's arrival made a very welcome interruption.

" We'll arrive in three days time, Doctor," the Major began, " and I think it's time you had some cloak and dagger training. By that I mean getting to know how to wear Etlan clothes. It's a very fetching costume, although personally I don't have the knees for a kilt . . ."

Etla had been contacted on two levels by the Corps, Stillman went on to explain. On one they had landed secretly using the native language and dress, no other disguise being necessary because the physiological resemblance had been so close. Most of their later information had been gained in this way and so far none of the agents had been caught.

On the other level the Corpsmen admitted their extra-terrestrial origin, conversed by Translator, and their story was that they had heard of the plight of the native population and had come to give medical assistance. The Etlans had accepted this story, revealing the fact that similar offers of help had been made in the past, that an Empire ship was sent every ten years loaded with the newest drugs, but despite all this the medical situation continued to worsen. The Corpsmen were welcome to try to relieve the situation if they could, but the impression given by the Etlans was that they were just another party of well-intentioned bunglers.

Naturally when the subject of Lonvellin's landing came up the Corps had to pretend complete ignorance, and their expressed opinions leaned heavily towards the middle of the road.

It was a very complex problem, Stillman told him, and became more so with every new report sent in by undercover agents. But Lonvellin had a beautifully simple plan for clearing up the whole mess. When Conway heard it he wished suddenly that he hadn't tried to impress Lonvellin with his skill as a doctor. He would much rather have been back in the hospital right now. This being made responsible for organising the cure of an entire planetary population gave him an unpleasantly gone feeling in the region of his transverse colon . . .

Etla was beset with much sickness and suffering and narrow, superstitious thinking, their reaction to Lonvellin being a shocking illustration of their intolerance towards species which did not resemble themselves. The first two conditions increased the third, which in turn worsened the first two. Lonvellin hoped to break this vicious circle by causing a marked improvement in the health of the population, one that would be apparent to even the least intelligent and bigoted natives. It would then have the Corpsmen admit publicly that they had been acting under Lonvellin's instructions all along, which should make the e-t hating natives feel somewhat ashamed of themselves. Then during the perhaps temporary increase of e-t tolerance that would follow, Lonvellin would set about gaining their trust and eventually return to its original long-term plan for making them a sane, happy and thriving culture again.

Conway told Stillman that he wasn't an expert in these matters but it sounded like a very good plan.

Stillman said, " I am, and it is. If it works."

On the day before they were due to arrive the Captain asked if Conway would like to come to Control for a few minutes. They were computing their position in preparation for making the final jump and the ship had emerged relatively close to a binary system, one star of which was a short-term variable.

It was the sort of spectacle, Conway thought, awed, which makes people feel small and alone, makes them feel the urge to huddle together and the need to talk so that they might re-establish their puny identities amid all that magnificence. Conversational barriers were down and all at once Captain Williamson was speaking in tones which suggested three things to the listening Conway—that the Captain might be human

after all, that he had hair and that he was about to let it down a little.

" Er, Doctor Conway," he began apologetically, " I don't want to sound as if I'm criticising Lonvellin. Especially as it was a patient of yours and may also have been a friend. Neither do I want you to think that I'm annoyed because it has a Federation cruiser and various lesser units running errands for it. That isn't so . . ."

Williamson took off his cap and smoothed a wrinkle from the head-band with his thumb. Conway had a glimpse of thinning grey hair and a forehead whose deep worry lines had been concealed by the cap's visor. The cap was replaced and he became the calm, efficient senior officer again.

". . . To put it bluntly, Doctor," he went on, " Lonvellin is what I would call a gifted amateur. Such people always seem to stir up trouble for us professionals, upsetting schedules and so on. But this doesn't bother me either, because the situation Lonvellin uncovered here most definitely needs something done about it. The point I'm trying to make is that, as well as our survey, colonisation and enforcement duties, we have experience at sorting out just such sociological tangles as this one, although at the same time I admit that there is no individual within the Corps with anything like Lonvellin's ability. Nor can we suggest any plan at the moment better than the one put forward by Lonvellin . . ."

Conway began to wonder if the Captain was getting at something or merely blowing off steam. Williamson had not struck him as being the complaining type.

". . . As the person with most responsibility next to Lonvellin on this project," the Captain finished with a rush, " it is only fair that you know what we think as well as what we are doing. There are nearly twice as many of our people working on Etla than Lonvellin knows about, and more are on the way. Personally I have the greatest respect for our long-lived friend, but I can't help feeling that the situation here is more complex than even Lonvellin realises."

Conway was silent for a moment, then he said, " I've wondered why a ship like *Vespasian* was being used on what is basically a cultural study project. Do you think that the situation is more, ah, dangerous as well ?"

" Yes," said the Captain.

At that moment the tremendous double-star system pictured in the view-screen dissolved and was replaced by that of a normal G-type sun and, within a distance of ten million miles, the tiny sickle shape of the planet which was their destination. Before Conway could put any of the questions he was suddenly itching to ask, the Captain informed him that they had completed their final jump, that from now until touchdown he would be a very busy man, and ended by politely throwing him out of the control room with the advice that he should catch as much sleep as possible before landing.

five

Back in his cabin Conway undressed thoughtfully and, a part of his mind was pleased to note, almost automatically. Stillman and himself had been wearing Etlan costume—blouse, kilt and a waist-sash with pockets, a beret and a dramatic calf-length cloak being added for outdoor use—continually for the past few days, so that now he felt comfortable in it even while dining with *Vespasian's* officers. At the moment, however, his discomfort was caused solely by the Captain's concluding remarks to him in the control room.

Williamson thought that the Etlan situation was dangerous enough to warrant using the largest type of law enforcement vessel possessed by the Monitor Corps. Why? Where was the danger?

Certainly there was nothing resembling a military threat on Etla. The very worst that the Etlans could do they had done to Lonvellin's ship and that had hurt the being's feelings and nothing else. Which meant that the danger had to come from somewhere outside.

Suddenly Conway thought he knew what was worrying the Captain. *The Empire . . .*

Several of the reports had contained references to the Empire. It was the great unknown qunatity so far. The Monitor Corps survey vessels had not made contact with it, which wasn't surprising because this sector of the galaxy was not scheduled for mapping for another fifty years, and would not have been entered if Lonvellin's project had not come unstuck. All that was known about the Empire was that Etla was part of it and that it sent medical aid at regular if lengthy intervals.

To Conway's mind the quality of that aid and the intervals between its arrival told an awful lot about the people responsible for sending it. They could not be medically advanced, he reasoned, or the drugs they sent would have checked, if only temporarily, some of the epidemics which had been sweeping Etla at the time. And they were almost certainly poor or the ships would have come at shorter intervals. Conway would not be surprised if the mysterious Empire turned out to be a mother world and a few struggling colonies like Etla. But most important of all, an Empire which regularly sent aid to its distressed colony, whether it was large, medium or small as Empires went, did not seem to Conway to be a particularly evil or dangerous entity. To the contrary, on the evidence available he rather approved of this Empire.

Captain Williamson, he thought as he rolled into bed, was inclined to worry too much.

Vespasian landed. On the main screen in the Communications room Conway saw a cracked white expanse of concrete which stretched to the half-mile distant periphery, where the fine details of vegetation and architecture which would have made the scene alien were lost in the heat haze. Dust and dried leaves littered the concrete and small heaps of cloud were scattered untidily about a very Earth-like sky. The only other ship on the field was a Monitor courier vessel, grounded close to the block of disused offices that had been loaned by the Etlan authorities for use as the visitor's surface base.

Behind Conway the Captain said, "You understand, Doctor, that Lonvellin is unable to leave its ship, and that any physical contact between us at this stage would wreck our present good relations with the natives. But this is a big screen. Excuse me . . ."

There was a click and Conway was looking into the control room of Lonvellin's ship, with a life-size image of Lonvellin itself sprawling across most of the picture.

Lonvellin was classification EPLH, its mass about one thousand pounds and physically it resembled a giant upright pear. Five thick, tentacular appendages grew from its narrow head section and a heavy apron of muscle at its base gave it a snail-like but by no means slow method of locomotion. Five mouths were situated below the root of each tentacle, four being supplied with teeth and one housing the vocal apparatus. The tentacles were specialised at their extremities, three being

manipulators, one carrying the being's visual organs and the remaining member terminating in a horn-tipped, boney mace which was a carryover from a less civilised stage of its evolution. The head was featureless, being simply an osseous dome that housed Lonvellin's quite extraordinary brain.

" Greetings, friend Conway," the EPLH's voice boomed from the speaker. " Thank you for coming so quickly. It is a great pleasure to see you again."

" A pleasure to be here, sir," Conway replied. " I trust you are in good health . . .?"

The enquiry was not merely a polite formality. Lonvellin's earlier stay at Sector General had been caused by a misunderstanding on the cellular level between itself and its personal doctor which Conway had helped to resolve.

Somewhere in its travels the EPLH had found itself the ultimate in personal physicians, an intelligent, organised virus-colony which dwelt within its patient-host's body and both maintained it at peak efficiency and kept it free from all infection or disease. The trouble had arisen when Lonvellin's resident physician, in an over-zealous attempt to maintain the status quo, had caused its host to retain a large area of tegument which at that stage in its biological life-time should have been discarded.

Quite a stir had been created at Sector General by the discovery of Lonvellin's personal physician. They were still arguing as to whether it should be classified as a doctor or a disease . . .

" My health is excellent, Doctor," Lonvellin replied, then straightaway got down to the business in hand. Conway hastily returned his mind to present time and concentrated on what the EPLH was saying.

Conway's own instructions were general. He was to co-ordinate the work of the data-gathering Corps medical officers on Etla and, because the sociological and medical aspects of the problem were so closely connected, he was advised to keep abreast of the developments outside his speciality. With the arrival of the latest reports the sociological problem seemed more confusing, and it was Lonvellin's hope that a mind trained for the complexities of a multi-environment hospital would be able to establish a sensible pattern among this welter of contradictory facts. Dr. Conway would no doubt appreciate

the urgency of the matter, and wish to begin work immediately . . .

". . . And I would like data on the Earth-human Clarke who is operating in District Thirty-five," Lonvellin went on without a pause, " so that I may properly evaluate the reports of this being . . ."

As Captain Williamson was giving the required information Stillman tapped Conway's arm and nodded for them to leave. Twenty minutes later they were in the back of a covered truck on the way to the perimeter. Conway's head and one ear had been swathed in bandages, and he felt anxious and a little stupid.

" We'll stay hidden until we're clear of the port," Stillman said reassuringly, " then we'll sit with the driver. Lots of Etlans travel with our people these days, but it might arouse suspicion for us to be seen coming from the ship. And we'll head straight for town instead of calling at ground headquarters. I think you should see some of your patients as soon as possible."

Seriously, Conway said, " I know the symptoms are purely psychosomatic, but both my feet seem to be in an advanced stage of frost-bite . . ."

Stillman laughed. " Don't worry, Doctor," he said. " The translator bandaged to your ear will let you know everything that goes on, and you won't have to speak because I'll explain that your head injury has temporarily affected your speech centres. Later, however, when you begin to pick up a little of the language a good tip is to develop a stutter. An impediment of this kind disguises the fact that the sufferer does not have the local idiom or accent, the large fault concealing all the smaller ones.

" Not all our undercover people have advanced linguistic training," he added, " and such ruses are necessary. But the main thing to remember is not to stay in any one place long enough for the more definite oddities of behaviour to be noticed . . ."

At that point the driver remarked that they were coming level with a blonde with whom he could cheerfully stay near for the rest of his life. Stillman went on, " Despite the coarse suggestions of Corpsman Briggs here, perhaps our best protection lies in our mental approach to the work, to the fact that our intentions towards these people are completely

honourable. If we were hostile agents intent on sabotage, or gathering intelligence for a future act of war, we would be much more likely to be caught. We should be tensed up, trying too hard to be natural, too suspicious and more inclined to make mistakes because of this."

Conway said drily, " You make it sound too easy." But he felt reassured nevertheless.

The truck left them in the centre of town and they began to walk around. The first thing Conway noticed was that there were very few large or new-looking buildings, but that even the oldest were very well kept, and that the Etlans had a very attractive way of decorating the outside of their houses with flowers. He saw the people, the men and women working, shopping or going about businesses which at the present moment he could not even guess at. He *had* to think of them as men and women, as being he and she rather than a collection of coldly alien ' its.'

He saw the twisted limbs, the crutches, the disease-scarred faces, his analytical eye detecting and isolating conditions which had been stamped out among the Federation citizenship over a century ago. And everywhere he saw a sight familiar to anyone who had ever been to or worked in a hospital, that of the less sick patient freely and unselfishly giving all the aid possible to those who were worse off than himself.

The sudden realisation that he was not in a hospital ward where such sights were pleasantly normal but in a city street brought Conway physically and mentally to a halt.

" What gets me," he said when he could speak again, " is that so many of these conditions are curable. Maybe all of them. We haven't had epilepsy for one hundred and fifty years . . ."

" And you feel like running amuck with a hypo," Stillman put in grimly, " injecting all and sundry with the indicated specifics. But you have to remember that the whole planet is like this, and that curing a few would not help at all. You are in charge of a very big ward, Doctor."

" I've read the reports," Conway said shortly. " It's just that the printed figures did not prepare me for the actuality . . ."

He stopped with the sentence uncomplete. They had paused at a busy intersection and Conway noticed that both pedestrian and vehicular traffic had either slowed or come to a halt. Then he saw the reason.

There was a large wagon coming along the street. Painted and draped completely in red it was, unlike the other vehicles around it, unpowered. Short handles projected at intervals along each side and at every handle an Etlan walked or limped or hobbled, pushing it along. Even before Stillman took his beret off and Conway followed suit he knew that he was seeing a funeral.

" We'll visit the local hospital now," Stillman said when it had gone past. " If asked, my story is that we are looking for a sick relative called Mennomer who was admitted last week. On Etla that is a name like Smith. But we're not likely to be questioned, because practically everybody does a stint of hospital work and the staff are used to the part-time help coming and going all the time. And should we run into a Corps medical officer, as well we might, don't recognise him.

" And in case you're worried about your Etlan colleagues wanting to look under your bandages," Stillman went on, practically reading Conway's mind, " they are far too busy to be curious about injuries that have already been treated . . ."

They spent two hours in the hospital without having once to tell their story about the ailing Mennomer. It was obvious from the start that Stillman knew his way about the place, that he had probably worked there. But there were always too many Etlans about for Conway to ask if it had been as a Corpsman observer or an undercover part-time nurse. Once he caught a glimpse of a Corpsman medic watching an Etlan doctor draining a pleural cavity of its empyema, his expression showing how dearly he would have liked to roll up his dark green sleeves and wade in himself.

The surgeons wore bright yellow instead of white, some of the operative techniques verged on the barbaric and the concept of isolation wards or barrier nursing had never occurred to them—or perhaps it had occurred to them, Conway thought in an effort to be fair, but the utterly fantastic degree of overcrowding made it impracticable. Considering the facilities at their disposal and the gigantic problem it had to face, this was a very good hospital. Conway approved of it and, judging from what he had seen of its staff, he approved of them, too.

" These are nice people," Conway said rather inadequately at one point. " I can't understand them jumping Lonvellin the way they did, somehow they don't seem to be the type."

" But they did it," Stillman replied grimly. " Anything that hasn't two eyes, two ears, two arms and two legs, or that has these things but happens to have them in the wrong places, gets jumped. It's something drummed into them at a very early age, with their ABCs, practically. I wish we knew why."

Conway was silent. He was thinking that the reason he had been sent here was to organise medical aid for this planet, and that wandering in fancy dress over one small piece of the jigsaw was not going to solve the big puzzle. It was time he got down to some serious work.

As if reading Conway's mind again Stillman said, " I think we should go back now. Would you prefer to work in the office block or the ship, Doctor ?"

Stillman, Conway thought, was going to be a very good aide. Aloud he said, " The office block, please. I get lost too easily in the ship."

Conway was installed in a small office with a large desk, a button for calling Stillman and some other less-vital communications equipment. After his first lunch at the officers' dining quarters he ate all his meals in the office with Stillman. Sometimes he slept in the office and sometimes he didn't sleep at all. The days passed and his eyes began to feel like hot, gritty marbles in his head, from reading reports and more reports. Stillman always kept them coming. Conway reorganised the medical investigation, bringing in some of the Corps doctors for discussions or flying out to those who could not for various reasons get in.

A large number of the reports were outside his province, being copies of information sent in by Williamson's men on purely sociological problems. He read them on the off-chance of them having a bearing on his own problem, which many of them did. But they usually added to his puzzlement.

Blood samples, biopsys, specimens of all kinds began to flow in. They were immediately loaded on to a courier—the Corps had put three of them at his disposal now—and rushed to the Diagnostician-in-Charge of Pathology at Sector General. The results were sub-radioed back to *Vespasian*, taped, and the reels dumped on Conway's desk within a few days. The ship's main computer, or rather the section of it that wasn't engaged on Translator relay, was also placed at his disposal, and gradually the vaguest suggestion of a pattern seemed to be emerging out

of the flood of related and unrelated facts. But it was a pattern which made no sense to anyone, least of all Conway. And although he was nearing the end of his fifth week on Etla there was still very little progress to report to Lonvellin.

But Lonvellin wasn't pushing for results. It was a very patient being who had all the time in the world. Sometimes Conway found himself wondering if Murchison would be as patient as Lonvellin.

six

In answer to his buzz Major Stillman, red-eyed and with his usually crisp uniform just slightly rumpled, stumbled in and sat down. They exchanged yawns, then Conway spoke.

" In a few days I'll have the supply and distribution figures needed to begin curing this place," he said. " Every serious disease has been listed together with information on the age, sex and geographical location of the patient, and the quantities of medication calculated. But before I give the go ahead for flooding the place with medical supplies I'd feel a lot easier in my mind if we knew exactly how this situation came about in the first place.

" Frankly, I'm worried," he went on. " I think we may be guilty of replacing the broken crockery while the bull is still loose in the china shop."

Stillman nodded, whether in agreement or with weariness Conway couldn't say.

On a planet that was an absolute pest-hole why were infant mortality figures so low, or deaths arising from complications or infections during childbirth? Why was there a marked tendency for infants to be healthy and the adults chronically ill? Admittedly a large proportion of the infant population were born blind or were physically impaired by inherited diseases, but relatively few of them died young. They carried their deformities and disfigurements through to late middle age where, statistically, most of them succumbed.

And there was also statistical evidence that the Etlans were guilty of gross exhibitionism in the matter of their diseases. They ran heavily to unpleasant skin conditions, maladies which caused gradual wasting or deformity of the limbs, and some pretty horrible combinations of both. And their costume did nothing to conceal their afflictions. To the contrary, Conway

had the feeling sometimes that they were like so many small boys showing off their sore knees to their friends . . .

Conway realised that he had been thinking aloud when Stillman interrupted him suddenly.

" You're wrong, Doctor !" he said, sharply for him. " These people aren't masochists. Whatever went wrong here originally, they've been trying to fight it. They've been fighting with very little assistance, for over a century and losing all the time. It surprises me they have a civilisation left at all. And they wear an abbreviated costume because they believe fresh air and sunlight is good for what ails them, and in most cases they are quite right.

" This belief is drilled into them from an early age," Stillman went on, his tone gradually losing its sharpness, " like their hatred of e-ts and the belief that isolating infectious diseases is unnecessary. Is dangerous, in fact, because they believe that the germs of one disease fight the germs of another so that both are weakened . . ."

Stillman shuddered at the thought and fell silent.

" I didn't mean to belittle our patients, Major," Conway said. " I have no sensible answers to this thing so my mind is throwing up stupid ones. But you mentioned the lack of assistance which the Etlans receive from their Empire. I would like more details on that, especially on how it is distributed. Better still, I'd like to ask the Imperial Representative on Etla about it. Have you been able to find him yet ?"

Stillman shook his head and said drily, " This aid doesn't come like a batch of food parcels. There are drugs, of course, but most of it would be in the form of the latest medical literature relevent to the conditions here. How it reaches the people is something we are just now finding out . . ."

Every ten years an Empire ship would land and be met by the Imperial Representative, Stillman went on to explain, and after unloading and handing over what were presumably dispatches it left again within a matter of hours. Apparently no citizen of the Empire would stay on Etla for a second longer than was necessary, which was understandable. Then the Imperial Representative, a personage called Teltrenn, set about distributing the medical aid.

But instead of using the mass distribution media to bring local medical authorities up to date on these new methods, and

allow local GPs time to familiarise themselves with the theory and procedures before the medication arrived, Teltrenn sat tight on all the information until such times as he could pay them a personal visit. Then he handed everything over as being a personal gift from their glorious Emperor, accruing no small measure of glory himself by being the middleman, and the data which could have been in the hands of every doctor on the planet within three months reached them piecemeal in anything up to six years.

" Six *years* !" said Conway, startled.

" Teltrenn isn't, so far as we've been able to find out, a very energetic person," Stillman said. " What makes matters worse is that little or no original medical research is being done on Etla, due to the absence of the researcher's most vital tool, the microscope. Etla can't make precision optical equipment and apparently no Empire ship has thought to bring them.

" It all boils down to the fact," Stillman ended grimly, " that the Empire does all of Etla's medical thinking for her, and the evidence suggests that medically the Empire is not very smart."

Conway said firmly, "I'd like to see the correlation between the arrival of this aid and the incidence of disease immediately thereafter. Can you help me in that ?"

" There's a report just in which might help you," Stillman replied. " It's a copy of the records of a North Continent hospital which go back past Teltrenn's last visit to them. The records show that he brought on that occasion some useful data on obstetrics and a specific against what we have called B-Eighteen. The incidence of B-Eighteen dropped rapidly within a few weeks there, although the overall figures remained much the same because F-Twenty-one began to appear about that time . . ."

B-Eighteen was analogous to a severe influenza, fatal to children and young adults in four cases out of ten. F-Twenty-one was a mild, non-fatal fever that lasted three to four weeks during which large, crescentric weals appeared all over the face, limbs and body. When the fever abated the weals darkened to a livid purple and remained for the rest of the patient's life.

Conway shook his head angrily. He said, " One of the main things wrong with Etla is its Imperial Representative !"

Standing up, Stillman said, " We want to ask him a few questions, too. We've advertised that fact widely by radio and print, so much so that we are now fairly certain that Teltrenn

is hiding from us deliberately. Probably the reason is a guilty conscience over his mismanagement of affairs here. But a psych report, based on what hearsay evidence we have been able to gather about him, has been prepared for Lonvellin. I'll have them send a copy from the ship."

" Thank you," said Conway.

Stillman nodded, yawned and left. Conway thumbed his communicator switch, contacted *Vespasian* and asked for an audio link with the fifty miles distant Lonvellin. He was still worried and wanted to get it off his chest, the only trouble being he did not know exactly what ' it ' was.

". . . You have done very well, friend Conway," Lonvellin said when he had finished speaking, in fulfilling your part of the project so quickly, and I am fortunate indeed in the quality and eagerness of my assistants. We have now gained the trust of the Etlan doctors in most areas and the way will shortly be open to begin full-scale instruction in your latest curative techniques. You will therefore be returning to your hospital within a few days, and I urge that you do not leave with the feeling that you have not performed your assigned task in a completely satisfactory manner. These anxieties you mention are groundless.

" Your suggestion that the being Teltrenn should be removed or replaced as part of the re-education programme is sound," Lonvellin continued ponderously, " and I already had this step in mind. An added reason for removing it from office being the well-documented fact that it is the being largely responsible for keeping alive the widespread intolerance of off-planet life-forms. Your other suggestion that these harmful ideas may originate, not with Teltrenn but in the Empire, may or may not be correct. This does not, however, call for an immediate search and investigation of the Empire which you urge."

Lonvellin's Translated voice was slow and necessarily emotionless, but Conway seemed to detect a hardening in its tone as it went on. " I perceive Etla as an isolated world kept in quarantine. The problem can therefore be solved without bringing considerations of Empire influences or understanding fully the various inconsistencies which puzzle us both. These will become plain after its cure has been effected, and the answers we seek are of secondary importance to the planet-wide relief of suffering.

" Your contention that the visits of the Imperial ship," it went on, " which occur every ten years and last only a few hours, is a major factor in this problem is invalid. I might even suggest that, unconsciously perhaps, you are laying too much stress on this point merely that your curiosity regarding this Empire might be satisfied."

You're so right, Conway thought. But before he could reply the EPLH went on, " I wish to treat Etla as an isolated problem. Bringing in the Empire, which itself may or may not be in need of medical aid also, would enlarge the scope of the operation beyond managable limits.

" However, and purely to remove your evident anxiety," Lonvellin ended, " you may tell the being Williamson that it has my permission to scout for this Empire and report on conditions within it. In the event of it being found, however, no mention of what we are doing here on Etla is to be made until the operation is completed."

" I understand, sir," Conway said, and broke the connection. He thought it decidedly odd that Lonvellin had pinned his ears back for being curious, then almost with the same breath given him permission to indulge that curiosity. Was Lonvellin more concerned about the Empire's influence here than it cared to admit, or was the big beastie just going soft in its old age ?

He called Captain Williamson.

The Captain hemmed a couple of times when Conway had finished speaking and there was a distinctly embarrassed note in his voice when he replied. He said, " We've had a number of officers, both medical and cultural contact people, searching for the Empire for the last two months, Doctor. One of them has been successful and sent in a preliminary report. It comes from a medical officer who was not attached to the Etla project, and knows very little of what has been happening here, so it may not be as informative as you might wish. I'll send you a copy with the material on Teltrenn."

Coughing slightly, Williamson ended, " Lonvellin will have to be informed of this, naturally, but I must leave it to your discretion *when* you tell it."

Suddenly Conway laughed out loud. " Don't worry, Colonel, I'll sit on the information for a while. But if you *are* found out you can always remind Lonvellin that the function of a good servant is to anticipate the wishes of his master."

He continued laughing softly after Williamson signed off, then all at once the reaction set in.

Conway hadn't laughed much since coming to Etla, even though Stillman and the other Corpsmen were nice people. And he had not been guilty of over-identifying with his patients —no half-way decent doctor with the good of his charges at heart would commit that crime. It was just that nobody laughed very much on Etla. There was something in the atmosphere of the place, a feeling comprised both of urgency and hopelessness which seemed to intensify with each day that passed. It was rather like the atmosphere in a ward where a patient was going to die, Conway thought, except that even in those circumstances people found time to make cracks and relax for a few minutes between crises . . .

Conway was beginning to miss Sector General. He was glad that in a few days he would be going back, despite his feeling of dissatisfaction over all the loose ends he was leaving untied. He began to think about Murchison.

That was something he had not done very often on Etla, either. Twice he had sent messages to her with the Etlan specimens. He knew that Thornnastor in Pathology would see that she got them, even though Thornnastor was an FGLI with only the barest of passing interests in the emotional involvements of Earth-human DBDGs. But Murchison was the undemonstrative type. She might consider that going to the trouble of smuggling back a reply would be giving him too much encouragement, or maybe that kiss and run episode at the airlock had soured her on him completely. She was a peculiar girl. Very serious-minded, extremely dedicated, absolutely no time for men.

The first time she agreed to date him it had been because Conway had just pulled off a slick op and wanted to celebrate, and that previously he had worked with her on a case without once making a pass. Since then he had dated Murchison regularly and had been the envy of all the male DBDGs in the hospital. The only trouble was that they had nothing to be envious about . . .

His lugubrious train of thought was interrupted by the arrival of a Corpsman who dropped a folder on to his desk and said, " The material on Teltrenn, Doctor. The other report was confidential to Colonel Williamson and has to be copied by his Writer. We'll have it for you in fifteen minutes."

" Thank you," said Conway. The Corpsman left and he began to read.

Being a colony world which had not had the chance to grow naturally, Etla did not have national boundaries or the armed forces which went with them, but the police force enforcing the law on the planet were technically soldiers of the Emperor and under the command of Teltrenn. It had been a force of these policemen-soldiers who had attacked, and were still attacking, Lonvellin's ship. At first appraisal, the report stated, the evidence pointed to Teltrenn having a personality which was proud and power-hungry, but the cruelty usually found in such personalities was absent. In his relations with the native population—the Imperial Representative had not been born on Etla—Teltrenn showed fairness and consideration. It was plain that he looked down on the natives—' way down, almost as if they were members of a lower species. But he did not, openly, despise them, and he was never cruel to them.

Conway threw down the report ; this was another stupid piece of an already senseless puzzle, and all at once he was sick of the whole silly business. He rose and stamped into the outer office, sending the door crashing against the wall. Stillman twitched slightly and looked up.

" Dump that paperwork until morning !" Conway snapped. " Tonight we are going to indulge shamelessly in pleasures of the flesh. We're going to sleep in our own cabins . . .'

" Sleep ?" said Stillman, grinning suddenly. " What's that?"

" I don't know," said Conway, " I thought you might. I hear it's a new sensation, unutterable bliss and very habit-forming. Shall we live dangerously . . .?"

" After you," said Stillman.

Outside the office block the night was pleasantly cool. There was broken cloud on the horizon but above them the stars seemed to crowd down, bright and thick and cold. This was a dense region of space, a fact further proved by the meteorites that made white scratches across the sky every few minutes. Altogether it was an inspiring and calming sight, but Conway could not stop worrying. He was convinced that he was missing something, and his anxiety was much worse out here under the sky than it had been at any time in the office. Suddenly he wanted to read that report on the Empire as quickly as possible.

To Stillman, he said, " Do you ever think of something, then feel horribly ashamed for having the kind of dirty mind which thinks thoughts like that ?"

Stillman grunted, treating it as a rhetorical question, and then continued walking towards the ship. Abruptly they stopped.

On the Southern horizon the sun seemed to be rising. The sky had become a pale, rich blue which shaded through turquoise into black, and the bases of the distant clouds burned pink and gold. Then before they could appreciate, or even react to this glorious, misplaced sunrise it had faded to an angry red smudge on the horizon. They felt a tiny shock transmitted through the soles of their shoes, and a little later they heard a noise like distant thunder.

" Lonvellin's ship !" said Stillman.

They began to run.

seven

The communications room on *Vespasian* was a whirlwind of activity with the Captain forming its calm and purposeful centre. When Stillman and Conway arrived orders had gone out to the courier ship and all available helicopters to load decontamination and rescue gear and proceed to the blast area to render all possible aid. There was, of course, no hope for the Etlan force that had been surrounding Lonvellin's ship, but there were isolated farms and at least one small village in the fringe area. The rescuers would have to deal with panic as well as radiation casualties, because the Etlans had no experience of nuclear explosions and would almost certainly resist evacuation

Out on the field, when Conway had seen Lonvellin's ship go up and had realised what it meant, he had felt physically ill. And now, listening to Williamson's urgent but unhurried orders going out, he felt cold sweat trickle down his forehead and spine. He licked his lips and said, " Captain, I have an urgent suggestion to make . . ."

He did not speak loudly, but there was something in his tone that made Williamson swing round immediately.

" This accident to Lonvellin means that you are in charge of the project, Doctor," Williamson said impatiently. " There is no need for such diffidence."

" In that case," said Conway in the same low, tense voice, " I have orders for you. Call off the rescue attempts and order everyone back to the ship. Take off before we are bombed, too . . ."

Conway saw them all looking at him, at his white, sweating face and frightened eyes, and he could see them all jumping to wrong conclusions. Williamson looked angry, embarrassed and completely at a loss for a few seconds, then his expression hardened. He turned to an officer beside him, snapped an order, then swung to face Conway again.

" Doctor," he began stiffly, " I have just put out our secondary meteor shield. Any solid object greater than one inch in diameter approaching from any direction whatever will be detected at a distance of one hundred miles and automatically deflected by pressors. So I can assure you, Doctor, that we are in no danger from any hypothetical attack with atomic missiles. The idea of a nuclear bombardment here is ridiculous anyway. There is no atomic power on Etla, none whatever. We have instruments . . . You must have read the report.

" My *suggestion*," the Captain went on, in exactly the tone he used to suggest that the junior astrogator make an alteration in course, " is that we rush all possible help to the survivors of the blow-up, which must have been caused by a fault in Lonvellin's power pile . . ."

" Lonvellin wouldn't have a faulty pile !" Conway said harshly. " Like many long-lived beings it suffered from a constant and increasing fear of death the longer its life went on. It had the ultimate in personal physicians so that illness would not shorten its already tremendous life-span, and it follows that it would not have endangered itself by using a ship which was anything but mechanically perfect.

" Lonvellin was killed," Conway went on grimly, " and the reason they hit its ship first is probably because they dislike e-ts so much. And it's nice to know that you can protect the ship, but if we leave now they might not launch another missile at all, and our people out there and a lot more Etlans would not have to die . . ."

It was no good, Conway thought sickly. Williamson looked angry and embarrassed and stubborn—angry at being given apparently senseless orders, embarrassed because it looked as though Conway was behaving like a frightened old woman and

stubborn because he thought he and not Conway was right. *Get the lead out of your pants, you unprintable fool* ! Conway raged at him, but under his breath. He could not address such words to a Monitor Colonel surrounded by junior officers, and for the added reason that Williamson was not nor, ever had been, a fool. He was a reasonable, intelligent, highly competent officer. It was just that he had not had the chance to put the facts together properly. He didn't have any medical training, nor did he have a nasty, suspicious mind like Conway . . .

" You have a report on the Empire for me," he said intead. " Can I read it ?"

Williamson's eyes flickered towards the battery of view-screens surrounding them. All showed scenes of frantic activity—a helicopter being readied for flight, another staggering off the ground with a load obviously in excess of the safety limit, and a stream of men and decontamination equipment being rushed through the lock of the courier ship. He said, " You want to read it *now* . . .?"

" Yes," said Conway, then quickly shook his head as another idea struck him. He had been trying desperately to make Williamson take off immediately and leave the explanations until later when there was time to give them, but it was obvious now that he would have to talk first, and fast. He said, " I've a theory which explains what has been going on here and the report should verify it. But if I can tell you what I think is in that report before reading it, will you give my theory enough credence to do what I tell you and take off at once ?"

Outside the ship both 'copters were climbing into the night sky, the courier boat was sealing her lock and a collection of surface transport, both Etlan and Monitor, was dispersing towards the perimeter. More than half of the ship's crew were out there, Conway knew, together with all the land-based Corpsmen who could possibly be spared—all heading for the scene of the blow-up and all piling up the distance between themselves and *Vespasian* with every second that passed.

Without waiting for Williamson's reply, Conway rushed on, " My guess is that it is an Empire in the strict sense of the word, not a loose Federation like ours. This means an extensive military organisation to hold it together and implement the laws of its Emperor, and the government on individual worlds would also be an essentially military one. All the citizens

would be DBDGs like the Etlans and ourselves, and on the whole pretty everage people except for their antipathy towards extra-terrestrials, who they have had little opportunity of getting to know so far."

Conway took a deep breath and went on, " Living conditions and level of technology should be similar to our own. Taxation might be high, but this would be negated by government controlled news channels. My guess is that this Empire has reached the unwieldy stage, say about forty to fifty inhabited systems . . ."

" Forty-three," said Williamson in a surprised voice.

". . . And I would guess that everyone in it knows about Etla and are sympathetic towards its plight. They would consider it a world under constant quarantine, but they do everything they can to help it . . ."

" They certainly do !" Williamson broke in. " Our man was on one of the outlying planets of the Empire for only two days before he was sent to the Central World for an audience with the Big Chief. But he had time to see what the people thought of Etla. There are pictures of the suffering Etlans practically everywhere he looked. In places they outnumbered commercial advertising, and it is a charity to which the Imperial Government gives full support ! These look like being very nice people, Doctor."

" I'm sure they are, Captain," Conway said savagely. " But don't you think it a trifle odd that the combined charity of forty-three inhabited systems can only run to sending one ship every ten years . . .?"

Williamson opened his mouth, closed it, and looked thoughtful. The whole room was silent except for the muted, incoming messages. Then suddenly, from behind Conway, Stillman swore and said thickly, " I see what he's getting at, sir. We've got to take off at once . . .!

Williamson's eyes flicked from Conway to Stillman and back again. He murmured, " One could be temporary insanity, but two represents a trend . . ."

Three seconds later recall instructions were going out to all personnel, their urgency emphasised by the ear-splitting howl of the General Alarm siren. When every order which had been issued only minutes ago had been reversed, Williamson turned to Conway again.

" Go on, Doctor," he said grimly. " I think I'm beginning to see it, too."

Conway sighed thankfully and began to talk.

Etla had begun as a normal colony world, with a single spacefield to land the initial equipment and colonists, then towns had been set up convenient to natural resources and the planetary population had increased nicely. But then they must have been hit by a wave of disease, or a succession of diseases, which had threatened to wipe them out. Hearing of their plight the citizens of the Empire had rallied round, as people do when their friends are in trouble, and soon help began to arrive.

It must have started in a small way but built up quickly as news of the colony's distress got around. But so far as the Etlans were concerned the assistance stayed small.

The odd, un-missed pennies of a whole planetary population added up to a respectable amount, and when scores of worlds were contributing the amount was something that could not be ignored by the Imperial government, or by the Emperor himself. Because even in those days the Empire must have grown too big and the inevitable rot had set in at its core. More and more revenue was needed to maintain the Empire, and/or to maintain the Emperor and his court in the luxury to which they felt entitled. It was natural to assume that they might tell themselves that charity began at home, and appropriate a large part of these funds for their own use. Then gradually, as the Etlan charity was publicised and encouraged, these funds became an essential part of the administration's income.

That was how it had begun.

Etla was placed in strict quarantine, even though nobody in their right mind would have wanted to go there anyway. But then a calamity threatened, the Etlans through their own unaided efforts must have begun to cure themselves. The lucrative source of revenue looked like drying up. Something had to be done, quickly.

From withholding the aid that would have cured them it was only a matter ethically, the administration must have told itself, to keep the Etlans sick by introducing a few relatively harmless diseases from time to time. The diseases would have to be photogenic, of course, to have the maximum effect on the kind-hearted citizenry—disfiguring diseases, for the most

part, or those which left the sufferer crippled or deformed. And steps had to be taken to ensure that the supply of suffering natives did not fall off, so that the techniques of gynaecology and child care on Etla were well advanced.

At a fairly early stage an Imperial Representative, psychologically tailored to fit his post, was installed to ensure that the level of health on the planet was held at the desired point. Somehow the Etlans had ceased to be people and had become valuable sick animals, which was just how the Imperial Representative seemed to regard them.

Conway paused at that point. The Captain and Stillman were looking ill, he thought; which was exactly how he had felt since the destruction of Lonvellin's ship had caused all the pieces of the puzzle to fall into place.

He said, "A native force sufficient to drive off or destroy chance visitors is always at Teltrenn's disposal. Because of the quarantine all visitors are likely to be alien, and the natives have been taught to hate aliens regardless of shape, number or intentions . . ."

"But how could they be so . . . so cold-blooded?" Williamson said, aghast.

"It probably started as simple misappropriation of funds," Conway said tiredly, "then it gradually got out of hand. But now we, by our interference, have threatened to wreck a very profitable Imperial racket. So now the Empire is trying to wreck us."

Before Williamson could reply the Chief Communications officer reported both helicopter crews back in the ship, also all personnel who had been within earshot of the siren, which meant everyone in town. The remainder could not make it back to *Vespasian* for several hours at least and had been ordered to go under cover until a scoutship sneaked in later to pick them up. Almost before the officer had finished speaking the Captain snapped "Lift Ship" and Conway felt a moment's dizziness as the ship's anti-gravity grids compensated for full emergency thrust. *Vespasian* climbed frantically for space, with the courier vessel only ten seconds behind her.

"You must have thought me pretty stupid back there . . ." Williamson began, then was interrupted by reports from the returned crew-men. One of the helicopters had been fired on and the men from town had been ordered to stay there by the local police. These orders had come directly from the

Imperial Representative, with instructions to kill anyone who tried to escape. But the local police and Corpsmen had come to know each other very well, and the Etlans had aimed well above their heads.

" This is getting dirtier by the minute," said Stillman suddenly. " You know, I think we are going to be blamed for what happened around Lonvellin's ship, for all the casualties in the area. Everything we have done here is going to be twisted so that *we* will be the villains. And I bet a lot of new diseases will be introduced immediately we leave, for which *we* will be blamed !"

Stillman swore, then went on, " You know how the people of the Empire think of this planet. Etla is their poor, weak, crippled sister, and we are going to be the dirty aliens who cold-bloodedly assaulted her . . ."

As the Major had been talking Conway had begun to sweat again. His deductions regarding the Empire's treatment of Etla had been from medical evidence, and it had been the medical aspect which had most concerned him, so that the larger implications of it all had not yet occurred to him. Suddenly he burst out, " But this could mean a *war* !"

" Yes, indeed," said Stillman savagely, " And that is probably just what the Imperial government wants. It has grown too big and fat and rotten at the core, judging by what has been happening here. Within a few decades it would probably fall apart of its own accord, and a good thing, too. But there is nothing like a good war, a Cause that everybody can feel strongly about, to pull a crumbling Empire together again. If they play it right *this* war could make it stand for another hundred years."

Conway shook his head numbly. " I should have seen what was happening sooner," he said. " If we'd had time to tell the Etlans the truth—"

" You saw it sooner than anyone else," the Captain broke in sharply, " and telling the natives would not have helped them or us if the ordinary people of the Empire could not have been told also. You have no reason to blame yourself for—"

" Ordnance Officer," said a voice from one of the twenty-odd speaker grills in the room. " We have a trace at Green Twelve Thirty-one which I'm putting on your repeater screen Five. Trace is putting out patterned interference against

missile attack and considerable radar window, suggesting that it has a guilty conscience and is smaller than we are. Instructions, sir ?"

Williamson glanced at the repeater screen. " Do nothing unless it does," he said, then turned to Stillman and Conway again. When he spoke it was with the calming, confidence-inspiring tone of the senior officer who bears, *and* accepts, full responsibility, a tone that insisted they were not to worry because he was there to do it for them.

He said, " Don't look so distressed, gentlemen. This situation, this threat of interstellar war, was bound to come about sometime and plans have been devised for dealing with it. Luckily we have plenty of time to put these plans into effect.

" Spatially the Empire is a small, dense association of worlds," he went on reassuringly, " otherwise we could not have made contact with them so soon. The Federation, however, is spread thinly across half the Galaxy. We had a star cluster to search where one sun in five possessed an inhabited planet, their problem is nowhere near as simple. If they were *very* lucky they might find us in three years, but my own estimate is that it would be nearer twenty. So you can see that we have plenty of time."

Conway did not feel reassured and he must have shown it, but the Captain was trying to meet his objections before he could make them.

" The agent who made the report may help them," Williamson went on quickly. " Willingly, because he doesn't know the truth about the Empire yet, he may give information regarding the Federation and the organisation and strength of its Monitor Corps. But because he is a doctor this information is unlikely to be either complete or accurate, and would be useless anyway unless the Empire knows where we are. They won't find that out unless they capture an astrogator or a ship with its charts intact, and that is a contingency we will take very great precautions to guard against from this moment on.

" Agents are trained in linguistics, medicine or the social sciences," Williamson ended confidently. " Their knowledge of interstellar navigation is nil. The scoutship which lands them returns to base immediately, this being standard precaut-

ionary procedure in operations of this sort. So you can see that we have a serious problem but that it is not an immediate one."

"Isn't it?" said Conway.

He saw Williamson and Stillman looking at him—intently and cautiously as if he was some kind of bomb which, having exploded half an hour ago was about to do so again. In a way Conway was sorry that he had to explode on them again and make them share the fear and horrible, gnawing anxiety which up to now had been his alone. He wet his lips and tried to break it to them as gently as possible.

"Speaking personally," he said quietly, "I don't have the faintest idea of the co-ordinates of Traltha, or Illensa or Earth, or even the Earth-seeded planet where I was born. But there is one set of figures I do know, and any other doctor on space service in this Sector is likely to know them also. They are the co-ordinates of Sector General.

"I don't think we have any time at all."

To be continued

It isn't often that we publish a near-future political story but this one is so close to home that it could be a blood-brother of "When The Kissing Had To Stop" or Orwell's "1984."

BASIS FOR NEGOTIATION

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

one

The University College of East Lincoln is a muddle of buildings. In the centre stands the theatrically baroque pile still called Gransby Manor, while round it lie the pencil boxes of glass and cedar and cement that are our century's contribution to the treasury of world architecture. John Haines-Roberts and I walked round the grounds in agonised discussion viewing our conglomeration of a college from all its meaningless angles.

When I tell you the date was July 1st, 1971, you will know what was the subject under discussion.

"I tell you I cannot just stay here, John, idle, isolated, ignorant," I said. "I must go to London and find out what the devil the government are doing."

Most of the conversations that follow, I feel confident, are word for word what was said at the time. My memory is generally eidetic ; in times of stress such as this, it recorded everything, so that I see John Haines-Roberts now, his head thrust forward from those heavy shoulders, as he replied, "I will offer you no platitudes about considering your reputation at such a grave time. Nevertheless, Simon, you are a public

figure, and were before your knighthood. You have a foot in both worlds, the academic and the world of affairs. Your work on the Humanities Council and the Pilgrim Trust has not been forgotten. You stood as M.P. for Bedford. That has not been forgotten. At such a trying time, any untoward move by somebody of your stature may fatally prejudice the course of events, marring—"

"No, no, John, that's not it at all!" I stopped him with a curt movement of my hand. He talked that awful dead language of English newspaper leaders; with his evasions and euphemisms, his 'untoward moves' and 'trying times.' I could not bear to listen to him. He believed as I did on that one fundamental point, that the British Government had made the most fatal error any government could have done; but this apart we could have nothing in common. His woolly language only reflected the numbness of his intellect. At that terrible moment, one more prop fell away. I began to hate John. The man who had been my friend since I took the specially created chair of Moral History two years before suddenly became just another enemy of my country, and of me.

"We cannot discuss the problem in these terms," I told him. He stopped, peering forward in that intense way of his. In the distance, I saw some undergraduates bunched together in the tepid sunshine and watching us with interest. "The British have turned basely against their dearest friends and allies. Either this wounds you to the heart or it doesn't—"

"But the Americans can manage alone perfectly well—" he began, with all the patience and reason in the world in his voice. John Haines-Roberts was a saint; nothing in the world could ruffle him in debate. I knew he would be standing reasoning in some quiet corner of University College when the H-bombs fell.

"I'm sorry, John, I'm not prepared to go into it all again. The sands have run out—right out of the bottom of the glass. This is no time for talk. You don't think the Communists are standing talking, do you? I'm going to London."

He saw I was making to go and laid a placatory hand on my sleeve.

"My dear fellow, you know I wish you well, but you have a reputation for being over-hasty. Never, never let action

become a substitute for thought. You'll recall what that great and good man Wilberforce said when—"

" Damn Wilberforce !" I said. Turning away, I strode off. The undergraduates saw me coming and fanned out to intercept me on my way to Manor, pouring out questions.

" Is it true the Americans have cordonned off Holy Loch ? Sir Simon, what do you think of the news about the International Brigade ? Did you see C. P. Snow on TV, blasting poor old Minnie ?" ' Minnie ' was their nick-name for Sir Alfred Menhennick, the Prime Minister.

Behind my back, John was still calling " Simon, my dear fellow . . ." To my audience, I said, " Gentlemen, from this week onwards, only shame attaches to the name of England. You know how I feel on this subject. Please let me pass."

Their faces were before me, troubled, angry, or smiling. They began bombarding me with preposterous questions— " Who do you think will win, America or China ?" as if it were a boat race staged for their delight.

" Let me through !" I repeated.

" Why don't you join up, if you feel so strongly ?" " We don't owe the Americans anything." " We'll still be here when they're one big hole in the ground." And so on.

I said : " You had the police in here last night. Rowdyism will get you nowhere. Why don't you go somewhere quietly and consult your history books if you have no consciences to consult ?" I hated them, though I knew they half-sided with me.

" Consult our history books !" one of them exclaimed. " He'll tell us to cultivate our gardens next !"

Angrily I pushed through them, making my way towards my rooms. That last remark echoed through my head ; obviously many of them could not differentiate between my convictions and those of, say, Haines-Roberts'. In the final judgment, he and I would be lumped together as men who had sat by and let it happen—or, even worse, would be cheered as men who had not interfered.

With distaste I surveyed the comfortable room with Adam fireplace and white panelling that I had chosen in preference to an office in Whitehall, asking myself as I took in—through what a scornfully fresh vision !—the untidy book cases and neat cocktail cabinet, if there was still time left to do some-

thing effective. How terribly often in the past must Englishmen have asked themselves that !

Momentarily I surveyed myself in the looking glass. Grey-haired, long in the nose, clear of eye, neat in appearance. Not a don. More a retired soldier. Certainly—oh yes, my God, that certainly—a gentleman ! A product of Harrow and Balliol and a Wiltshire estate. With the international situation what it was, it sounded more like a heresy than a heritage. Nothing is more vile (or most eloquent of guilt) than to hate everything one has been : to see that you have contaminated the things that have contaminated you.

Taking a deep breath, I began to phone my wife at home. When her voice came over the line, I closed my eyes.

" Jean, I can't bear inaction any longer. I'm going up to London to try and get through to Tertis."

" Darling, we went over all this last night. You can't help by going to see Tertis—no, don't tell me you can't help by not going either. But it becomes more and more obvious each hour that public opinion here is with Minnie, and that your viewpoint . . ."

By ceasing to listen to her meaning, I could concentrate on her voice. Her " all " was pronounced " arl," her " either " was an " eether "; her tone had a soft firmness totally unlike the harshness of so many Englishwomen !—no, comparisons were worthless. It was stupid to think in categories. She was Lady Jean Challington, my beloved wife. When I had first met her in New York, one fine September day in 1942, she had been Jean Gersheim, daughter of a magazine publisher. At twenty-six, I was then playing my first useful role in affairs on the British Merchant Shipping Mission. Jean was the most anglophile, as well as the most lovely, of creatures ; I was the most americanophile and adoring of men. That hasty war-time wedding at least was a success ; no better Anglo-American agreement ever existed than our marriage.

This was the woman on whose breast I had wept the night before last, wept long and hard after the bleak TV announcement that in the interests of future world unity the British Government had declared its neutrality in the American-Chinese war. Last night I had wept again, when the USSR had come in on the side of the People's Republic and Sir Alfred Menhennick himself had smiled to viewers under his straggling moustache and reaffirmed our neutrality.

Now, with the phone in my hand and Jean's voice in my ear I could not but recall Menhennick's hatefully assured delivery as he said, "Let us in this darkest period of civilized history be the nation that stands firm and keeps its lamps alight. It is a difficult—perhaps you will agree that it is the most difficult—role that I and my government have elected to play. But we must never forget that throughout the quarter century of the Cold War Great Britain's path has been the exacting and unrewarding one of intermediary.

" We must remember, too, that the United States, in facing Communist China, faces an enemy of its own creating. One of the most fatal failures of this century was the failure of the U.S. to participate in world affairs during the twenties and thirties, when Britain and France strove almost single-handedly to preserve the peace. Despite constant warnings, the U.S. at that time allowed their enemy Japan to grow strong on the spoils of an invaded China. As a consequence, the broken Chinese peoples had to restore their position as a world power by what means they could. It is not for us to condemn if in desperation they turned to Communism. That their experiment, their desperate experiment, worked must be its justification. At this fateful hour, it behoves us to think with every sympathy of the Chinese, embroiled yet again in another terrible conflict . . ."

The hypocrisy ! The sheer bloody wicked hypocrisy, the lies, the distortions, the twists of logic, the contortions of history ! By God, I could shoot Menhennick !

" Darling, I hadn't mentioned Menhennick," Jean protested.

" Did I say that aloud ?" I asked the phone.

" You weren't listening to a word I said."

" I'll bet you were telling me to pack a clean shirt !"

" Nothing of the sort. I was saying that here in Lincoln there are some demonstrations in progress."

" Tell me about them."

" If you'll listen, honey. The best-organised procession carries a large banner saying ' Boot the Traitors out of Whitehall '."

" Good for them."

" My, yes, good for them ! The odd thing is, those boys look like exactly the same crowd we used to see marching from Aldermarston to Trafalgar Square shouting ' Ban the Bomb '."

" Probably they are. If you think with your emotions, slight glandular changes are sufficient to revise your entire outlook. In the Aldermarston days, they were afraid of being involved in war ; now that Russia has come in on China's side, they're afraid that the U.S. will be defeated, leaving us to be picked off by Big Brother afterwards. Which is precisely what will happen unless we do something positive now. What else goes on in Lincoln ?"

Jean's voice became more cautious. " Some anti-Americanism. The usual rabble with ill-printed posters saying ' Yanks Go Home ' and ' Britain For the British.' One of them spells Britain ' B-R-I-T-I-A-N.' So much for the ten thousand million pounds spent on education last year ! It feels funny, Simon—to be an alien in what I thought was my own country."

" It's not my country either till this is all put right. You know that, Jean. There's never been such a time of moral humiliation. I wish I'd been born anything but British."

" Don't be silly, Simon."

Foreseeing an argument, I changed the line of discussion.

" You've got Michael and Sheila and Adrian there with you ?"

" Oh yes, and Mrs. B. And a platoon or so of sheepish English soldiers drilling opposite the Post Office."

" Fine. You won't be lonely. I'll be back as soon as I can."

" Meaning just when ?"

" Soonest possible, love. 'Bye. Be good."

I put the phone down. I looked distractedly round the room. I put pipe and tobacco into one jacket pocket, opened a drawer, selected three clean handkerchiefs, and put them into the other pocket. I wondered if I would ever see the room—or Jean—again, and strove at the same time not to dismiss such speculations as simply dramatic.

London, I knew, could turn into a real trouble centre at any hour. Early news bulletins had spoken of rioting and arrests here and there, but these were mere five finger exercises for what was to come.

Until now, the sheer momentousness of world events had deadened reactions. After a month of mounting tension, war between the U.S. and China broke out. Then came Menhennick's unexpected tearing up of treaties and declaration

of neutrality. Initially, his action came as a relief as well as a surprise ; the great bulk of the electorate saw no further than the fact that an Armageddon of nuclear war had been avoided. The U.S.S.R.'s entry into hostilities was more a shock than a surprise, again postponing real thinking.

Now—as I foresaw the situation—a growing mass of people would come to see that if they were to have any hope for a tolerable future, it would be fulfilled only by throwing in our lot heart and soul with our allies, the Americans. We had behaved like vermin, deserting in an hour of need. Neville Chamberlain returning from Munich in 1938 and proclaiming " Peace in our time " had not brought the country into such disgrace as Minnie with his " nation that keeps the lamps alight."

Soon the English would realise that ; and I wanted to be there when trouble broke.

As I was heading for the door, David Woolf entered, quickly and without knocking. David was University Lecturer in Nuclear Physics, with a good but troubled record from Harwell. Three years back, he had run for Parliament, but an ill-timed tariff campaign had spoilt his chances. Though his politics were opposed to mine, his astute and often pungent thinking was undeniably attractive. Tall and very thin, with a crop of unbrushed hair, he was still in his thirties and looked what he undoubtedly was : the sort of man who managed always to be unhappy and spread unhappiness. Despite this —despite our radically different upbringings—his father had been a sagger-magger's bottomer in a Staffordshire pottery—David and I saw much of each other.

" What is it ?" I asked. " I can't stop, David."

" You're in trouble," he said clicking his fingers.

I had not seen him since the Chinese declaration of war forty-eight hours before. His face was drawn, his shirt dirty. If he had slept, clearly it had been in his clothes.

" What sort of trouble ?" I asked.

" The Dean has you marked down as a dangerous man, and at times like this the Dean's kind can cause a hell of a lot of grief."

" I know that."

Dean Burroughs was a cousin of Peter Dawkinson, the reactionary old editor of the *Arbiter*, the newspaper as firmly

entrenched behind out-dated attitudes as *The Times* had ever been at its worst period—and as powerful. Burroughs and I had been in opposition even before my first day at East Lincoln, back when I edited Garbitt's short-living independent *Zonal*.

" What you don't know is that the Dean has started vetting your phone calls," David said. " I was by the exchange just now. You made an outgoing call ; Mrs. Ferguson had it plugged through to old Putters, the Dean's fair-haired boy."

" It was a private call to my wife," I said furiously.

" Are you leaving or something ? Don't mind my asking."

" Yes, I'm leaving, though by God what you tell me makes me want to go and sort things out with Burroughs first. No, that luxury must wait ; time's short. I must leave at once."

" Then I warn you, Simon, that they may try to stop you."

" Thanks for telling me."

He hesitated, knowing I wanted him to move away from the door. For a moment we stood confronting each other. Then he spoke.

" Simon—I want to come with you."

That did surprise me. The news about the phone did not ; in the present tense atmosphere, it merely seemed in character, a small sample of a vast untrustworthiness. I accepted David's words as truth ; David, though isolated from the rest of the teaching body by his political and sexual beliefs, had a way of knowing whatever was happening in the college before anyone else.

" Look, David, you don't know what I am doing."

" Let me guess then. You are going to drive to London. You have influential friends there. You are going to get in contact with someone like Lord Boulton or Tertis, and you are going to throw in your lot with the group trying to overthrow the government."

This was so good a guess that he read his answer in my face. I said, with some bitterness, " Your politics are no secret to me. For years you have preached that we should disarm, that we should cease to behave like a first-rate power, with all the assumptions of a first-rate power, when we are really a second-rate power—"

He seized my arm, only to release it at once. Behind his spectacles, his eyes brimmed with anger.

" Don't be a bloody fool, Simon ! We *are* a second-rate power, but now the moment of truth is upon us, isn't it ? The bastards who misgovern us would not climb off their silly perches when they had a chance, when we were warning them. Now, *now*, they just *must* honour agreements. You know I've no time for America, but by God we owe it to them to stick by them : we owe it to ourselves ! We mustn't behave like a fifth-rate power : that at least we're not."

" So we've both arrived on the same side ?"

From his pocket he produced a revolver.

" You could have worse allies than me, Simon. I don't go to Bisley every year for nothing. I'm prepared to use this when needed."

" Put it away !"

Savagely he laughed.

" You're a gentleman, Simon ! That's your trouble. It's the only really vital difference between us. You don't enjoy force ! You're as like Minnie as makes no difference ! In the ultimate analysis, his faults are yours—and it's a class fault."

I grabbed his jacket, clenching a fist in his face and choking with rage.

" You dare say that ! Even you've not opposed Minnie as bitterly as I. I hate all he stands for, hate it."

" No you don't. You both belong to the same league of gentlemen—Balliol and all that. If it wasn't that your wife happened to be American, you'd feel as Minnie does. It's you blasted gentlemen putting the social order before the country that have got us into this bloody disgraceful muddle . . . " With an effort, he broke off and pushed my hand roughly away, saying, " And I'm in danger of doing the same thing myself. Sir Simon, my apologies. Our country has disgraced us before the world. Please let me come to London with you. I'm prepared to do anything to boot out the Nationalist party. That's what I came here to say."

He put out his hand ; I shook it.

* * *

two

We were round at the car port getting my Wolseley out when Spinks, the head porter, came thudding up at the double.

" Excuse me, Sir Simon, but the Dean wants you very urgently, sir. Matter of importance, sir."

" All right, Spinks. I'll just drive the car round to the front of Manor and go in that way. He's in his rooms, I take it ?"

His round heavy face was troubled.

" You will go straight in to him *now*, sir, won't you ? He did stress as it was urgent."

" Quite so, Spinks. Thank you for delivering the message."

I drove round to the front of Manor, accelerated, and in next to no time we were speeding down the drive. David Woolf sat beside me, peering anxiously back at the huddle of buildings.

" Relax," I said, knowing it would anger him. " Nobody's going to shoot us."

" The war's forty-eight hours old—I wonder how many people have been shot already ?"

Not answering, I switched on the car radio as we struck the main road. I tried the three channels, General, Popular, and Motorway. On the first, a theatre organ played " Roses of Picardy." On the second, a plummy woman's voice said, " . . . when to my bitter disappointment I found that all the jars of strawberry jam had gone mouldy ; however, this tragedy—" On the third, a disc jockey announced, " That was ' My Blue Heaven,' and while we're on the subject of colour, here is Reggy Palmer and his Regiment in a colourful arrangement of another old favourite, ' Chinatown '."

" I wonder they didn't censor that one out for reasons of political expediency," David said sourly.

We stayed with the jocular jockey, hoping to catch a news bulletin, as I drove south. Avoiding Lincoln, we entered the newly opened M13 at Hykeham and increased speed. Noticing the number of Army vehicles heading south with us, David started to comment when the news came through.

" This morning has been punctuated by disturbances and demonstrations in most of the larger towns throughout Britain. Some arrests have been made. In Norwich, a man was fined twenty pounds for defacing the Town Hall. The Sovereign's visit to Glasgow has been postponed until a later date."

" Royalty !" David grunted.

" Tautology !" I grunted.

" The Soviet Ambassador to Britain said today that the Soviet peoples greatly sympathised with the wisdom shown by the British in remaining neutral. They themselves had been drawn into the conflict with the deepest reluctance, and then only because vital interests were at stake. M. Kasinferov went on to say that he was sure that guided by our example the rest of Europe would remain neutral, thus saving itself from what could only be complete annihilation."

" Bloody flatterers," David growled.

" Concealed threats," I growled.

" In the United States of America, our neutrality has been generally condemned, although as one Washington correspondent points out, ' Had Britain not torn up her treaties with us, she might well have been obliterated by now.' Discussions over the immediate evacuation of U.S. air, naval, and military bases in this country are taking place in Whitehall now. A government spokesman said they were proceeding in what he described as ' a fairly cordial atmosphere '."

" How English can you get ?" David asked.

" They're probably tearing each other's throats out," I said, instinctively pressing my foot down on the accelerator. I looked at my watch ; an idea had occurred to me. From the dashboard the gentlemanly voice continued in the same tones it had used in happier years to describe the Chelsea Flower Show.

" Last night saw little aerial activity, though reliable U.S. sources report aerial reconnaisance from points as far apart as the Arctic Circle and Hawaii. Formosa is still under heavy bombardment from shore batteries. Units of the British Fleet stand ready to assume defensive action in Singapore harbour. The fighting between Chinese Airborne forces and units of the Indonesian army in Northern Central Sumatra and near Jokarta in Java still continues. Peking yesterday reported the evacuation of Medan in Sumatra, but Indonesian sources later denied this, whilst admitting that the city was " almost uninhabitable " by now. The landing of U.S. troops near Palembang continues. So far only conventional weapons are being used on all fronts."

" So far . . . so far," David said. " They're only limbering up yet."

That was where all the trouble had begun, in Sumatra, little more than a month ago. Peking had protested that the large population of overseas Chinese there were being victimised. Jokarta had denied it. A bunch of bandits shot a prominent Indonesian citizen in the Kesawan, Medan. President Molkaeto protested. Tempers flared. Fighting broke out. The U.N. were called in. The USSR protested against this unwarranted interference in national affairs. A plane full of U.S. experts was shot down near Bali, possibly by accident. The slanging started. Three weeks later, the People's Republic declared ' a crusade of succour ': war.

" David, we're going to London via Oxford," I said.

He looked curiously at me.

" What the hell for ? It's a long way round. I thought you were in a hurry ?"

" The motorway will take us as far as Bicester. The delay won't be too great. As you know, I'm a Fellow of Saints ; I want to call in there and have a word with Norman, if possible."

His reaction was predictable. Among the less informed on his side of the political arena, Saints had an undeserved reputation for being a sort of shadow Establishment from which the country was governed. This legend had been fostered by the fact that Saints, as a compromise between Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies and Oxford's own All Souls, naturally contained the influential among its members.

" Who is Norman ?" David enquired. " Do you mean Norman Parmettio, the Contemporary Warfare chap ?"

" If you like to put it like that, yes, ' the Contemporary Welfare chap.' He's in his eighties now, but still active, a sage and loveable man. He drafted the Cultural Agreement of '66 with Russia, you know. He's seen academic and public service, including working as an aide to old Sir Winston at Yalta in the forties."

" Too old ! What do you want to see *him* for ?"

" He's an absolutely trustworthy man, David. You forget how out of touch I am. We can't just drive into London knowing absolutely nothing of what is going on behind the scenes. Norman will put us in the picture as to what's happening in the Foreign Office and to who's changed sides in the last forty-eight hours."

" Touche. Carry on. You know I only came for the ride —but for God's sake let something happen. My stomach's

turning over all the time ; I have a presentiment of evil. I'm sick !"

" So's the whole confounded country."

We felt sicker before we reached Bicester. Another news bulletin gave us more details of local events. International news, as I had suspected, was being heavily censored ; there was no mention of what was happening in Europe, or of what the Commonwealth was saying or doing.

Several members of the government had resigned—the predictable ones like Hand, Chapman, and Desmond Cooney, with a few unexpecteds such as poor old Vinton and Sep Greene. Martial law had been proclaimed in Liverpool and Glasgow. In the interests of public safety, a curfew would operate tonight and until further notice in the following cities : London, etc. Airline services between Britain and the U.S. and Britain and the U.S.S.R. were temporarily suspended. The L.C.C. were all out at Lords for 114.

At Fogmere Park, we ran into trouble. There was a big U.S.A.F. base at Fogmere. You could see the planes and runways from the road at one point. A knot of people perhaps a hundred strong—a fair number for such a country spot—filled the road. Several cars were parked on the verges, some with men standing on top of them. Banners waved, many of them bearing the usual disarmament symbol. One florid individual was haranguing the crowd through a megaphone.

" This'll take your mind off your stomach," I told David, rolling forward at twenty m.p.h. and sounding my horn. I glanced sideways at him. He sat rigid with his fists clenched in his lap—presumably nursing his presentiment of evil.

The crowd that had been facing the other way turned to look at us, parting instinctively to clear the road. The fellow with the megaphone, a big man with a red face and black moustache, dressed in a loud tweedy suit—how often one saw his type about the country—bore down on us and tried to open my door.

" It's locked, old fellow," I said, rolling down my window. " Looking for a lift to somewhere ?"

He got his big fingers over the top of the window and poked the moustache in for me to inspect. His eyes went hotly from me to David and back to me.

" Where do you two think you are going ?" he asked.

" Straight down this road. Kindly get your face out of the way. You are being obstructive."

He was running to keep up with us. I could hear the crowd shouting without being able to grasp what they were saying.

" Don't annoy him," David said anxiously.

" I want to talk to you," the heavy man said. " Slow down, will you. Where are you going ? What's the ruddy hurry ?"

His head was outside the car door. The window closed electrically, catching his fingers. He roared in anger, dropping the megaphone to clasp his bruised knuckles. As we surged forward, it became apparent why the crowd had gathered. Beyond them had been established a check-point with a black-and-white bar across the road and the legend : " UNITED STATES AIR COMMANDO. HALT." Behind sandbags were armed men and a couple of hefty tanks, besides several light vehicles, including a British Army Signals truck. It all appeared very efficient in the colourless sunshine.

As I halted at the barrier, two Americans in uniform stepped forward, a corporal and a sergeant, one on either side of the Wolseley. Again my window came down. The sergeant looked round and amiable. I thrust my face out before he could get his in.

" What's happening here, sergeant ?"

" U.S. Air Commando check point. Just a formality to check for weapons. We have to stop all vehicles." This in an East Coast accent : Maine, I guessed.

" Have to ? Whose orders ?"

" Look, my orders, sir. It's only a formality. We don't want trouble."

" It's we English, unfortunately, who don't want trouble, sergeant but I'm curious to know by whose authority you have closed a main British road."

The crowd behind, divided in loyalty as in understanding, called " Lock 'em up !" and " Let 'em go !" indiscriminately.

The corporal on David's side of the car, a yellow complexioned fellow I had already marked as a trouble-maker, since his type was prevalent in the British Army, said, " You Limey copsuckers, you'd always argue rather than act."

" Simon, don't be difficult ; tell him what he wants to know and let's get on," David implored. Turning to the corporal,

he added, " Don't make any mistake, we're really on your side."

" Oh no you ain't, Mac. You're just a neutral. You ain't on anyone's side."

" A very apposite answer, if I may say so," I replied. " I still wish to know by whose orders you have erected this barrier across the highway."

" Let's not argue, mister. Let's just say it's necessary, or I wouldn't be here wasting my time," said the sergeant patiently. A British Army Officer, a dapper captain, was coming from behind the barrier towards us. I beckoned to him and repeated my question.

Instinctively he summed me up, just as I summed him up the moment he spoke. Under the Sandhurst veneer I recognised the Birmingham middle class accent, just as I saw he had identified my Balliol honk, accentuated for the occasion. The moment would be lost on our American sergeant, a breed without such subtleties.

" There's been a spot of trouble, sir," the captain said, very politely. " A small private van passed along the road a couple of hours ago and machine-gunned the American planes over on the runway. So we are just taking precautions to see that such a breach of neutrality doesn't happen again."

" Captain, I am a friend of Lord Waters, the Lord Lieutenant of the county. Who has sanctioned this road block ?"

" We naturally have official permission, sir, which I could show you."

" Get 'em moving, captain, before we all die of boredom," urged the sergeant. Two other cars had arrived behind us and were hooting.

" Do you mind me asking, sir, have you any weapons in the car ?"

" No, captain. No bombs, no machine-guns."

" Splendid. Carry on to the next check point, sir, and try to keep moving all the time."

" I will try," I assured him earnestly, and we rolled under the barrier arm as it lifted. A mile down the road was the other point, stopping vehicles coming from Oxford ; it let us through without comment.

" Rather a comic incident that, eh ?" I said.

David's face was wooden.

" Your sort love to make trouble and humiliate people, don't they ?" he said.

" Not at all. You can't have every Tom, Dick and Harry blocking the roads, or where would we be ? I just asked a question I was perfectly entitled to ask."

" It comes to the same thing in the end."

" It's people like you who fail to ask pertinent questions that get misled. Your party, for instance."

" You dare mention parties after the tragic mistakes *yours* has made this last week ?" He was furious. Debate always made his temper rise.

Quietly I said, " You know I know my party has behaved indefensibly, David—quite indefensibly. But your party's unreal dreams of collective security without armament, of nuclear disarmament in a nuclear age, have hampered the country's striking power so effectively that our shame must also be yours. When you were the ones who pulled our teeth, how could you expect us to bite ? What curb could we offer the Red powers ? At least these traitors like Minnie and Northleech can plead they had no alternative but to act badly."

" Christ, you wriggle on the hook as deftly as they do ! What about the torn-up treaties ? What about the promises ? What about the Anglo-American alliance ? All hot air, I suppose ?"

" Here's Oxford," I said, as we came on to the top of the Banbury Road.

three

We were stopped again, this time by an exotic crowd of R.A.F. Regiment, Army, Civil Defence, and police, with a couple of AA men for luck. Plus a cheerful bunch of civilians doing good business with an ice cream man.

" Sorry, sir, can't go through Oxford unless you've got a good reason for it." This was a well-scrubbed corporal with a tommy gun over his shoulder.

" Such as ? I'm going to see an old friend at one of the colleges. Is that a good reason ?"

" Better make it next week instead, sir. There's been a bit of trouble in the town. A fire or two and some hooliganism. We're trying to keep the city centre clear. Try the by-pass, sir, if you were thinking of going through. Keep moving and you won't get into no trouble."

He wasn't to be budged.

" There's a phone box over there," David pointed. " Try phoning Norman."

" Good idea. Thanks, corporal."

" Thank you, sir. Nice day, anyhow, isn't it ?"

" Yes, lovely. Except for the M.C.C., eh ?"

" What, sir ? Oh yes, quite sir. They didn't put up much of a show, did they ?"

We left him beaming as I drove over to the side of the road. David laughed with an angry face.

" You love playing the decent chap and you love playing the cad, Simon. Which are you really ?"

" The common man, David, l'homme moyen sensual. In other words, a bit of both. Buy yourself an ice cream while I'm phoning."

I got through to Saints straight away and recognised the head porter's voice at once, strained as it was through thickets of phlegm. Legend has it they built the college round him.

" That you, Dibbs ? Challington here. Would you put me through to Professor Norman Parmettio."

" Hello sir, nice to hear your voice. We haven't seen you here for months. You used to be so frequent."

" Pressure of work, I fear. Is the Professor there ?"

" Well we had a bit of trouble last night, sir."

" Trouble ? What sort of trouble ?"

" Well sir, we had to have the fire brigade round, sir. Some young hooligans threw petrol bombs over the East Wall, sir. Terrible it was, sir. Fortunately I was all right in here. I phoned the police and the fire brigade and anyone I could think of. Proper scaring it was. I've never seen nothing like it."

" Indeed. Anyone killed ?"

" Not to speak of, sir. But the East Wing's a ruin. Your old room gone, sir, and part of the chapel. By a miracle of good fortune my lodge was preserved, but—"

" It seems impossible such things could happen in Oxford, Dibbs. The time is out of joint. Where's Professor Parmettio?"

" Those are my feelings exactly, sir. There you have it. Terrible it was. As for the Professor, bless his soul, he committed suicide the day before yesterday an hour or so after the Prime Minister spoke about us British being neutral

and keeping the lamps alight. At least he missed the fire and all the fuss—"

" Parmettio dead ? Do you say he's dead ?"

" No, he committed suicide, sir, up in his bedroom. Left a note to say his country had dishonoured him and that he was taking the only possible course open to him. A fine old fellow he was, sir . . ."

As I climbed back into the car, David dropped a newspaper he was scanning.

" You're as pale as a ghost, Simon. What's the matter ?"

" How's your presentiment of evil, David ? Norman's dead. Committed suicide—couldn't bear the dishonour. Poor dear old Norman ! The porter told me and put me on to the Warden."

" On to Richards ? He's a true blue government man. What did he have to say ?"

" He's not so true blue as we thought ; frankly I feel sorry for him. He sounded like a sick man over the phone. He told me that several of the clearer-thinking younger Fellows, Thorn-Davis, Shell, Geoffrey Alderton, and one or two more, tried to charter a private plane to fly to America. Foolish, I suppose, but quite understandable. They were apparently arrested at the aerodrome and haven't been heard of since. Richards went round and saw the local Superintendent of Police in person but couldn't get a word out of the man. He was almost weeping as he told me. And then—"

" Then ?"

" Richards was cut off."

We sat in silence.

At last David said, " I'm sorry if I sounded stupid before. It's all a bit nastier than we thought."

" No nastier than we had a right to expect. We'd better get to London while we still have the chance."

" You think all potential trouble-makers are being arrested?"

" What else ? And I'd hazard that by now you and I are on the list. Got that gun of yours ready ?"

He had bought a local paper from a vendor while I was phoning. As we drove off I caught sight of its headlines : RUSSIAN NUCLEAR SATELLITE IN ORBIT : Ultimate Weapon, Moscow Claims : For Emergency Only.

At one point, David leant over and switched the radio on, but they were playing ' Roses of Picardy ' again.

We drove into and through the outskirts of London without being stopped. By noon we were driving through Hammersmith, moving in fits and starts through dense traffic.

" How about stopping for a drink and some sandwiches?" David asked. " We don't really know when we'll eat again, do we ?"

" Good idea. There's a pub over there that looks likely."

London was far from normal. In the centre of town we would see processions and meetings. Here were only people in small groups, hanging about or strolling. Some of the smaller shops were closed. Never had I seen such a large percentage of the population with their eyes buried in newspapers, not even at the time of the Suez Crisis, back in '56—when the Americans had failed to support us, came the treacherous thought to my brain. Momentarily irritated with myself, I ushered David into the pub.

As I ordered drinks, I saw him cast his eye over the men present. One of them next to him, a man in voluble conversation with his mate, mistaking the intent of David's look, leant towards him and said, " You agree, don't you, mate ?"

I could not be sure what David replied in the general hubbub, but I heard the other fellow say, " Why should we go to war for a lot of black men in Sumatra ? I'd never even heard of Sumatra till last week ! I reckon the government did right. Old Minnie has my vote every time. Let the blighters fight their own battles."

At last I got served. Carrying a tray with a Guinness and a pale ale and expensive chicken sandwiches over to David's table, I was in time to hear David say, " I can't see that neutrality *is* a way of saving our skins."

The two men, who worked, or so I surmised, at the big cake factory nearby, were on him with glee.

" You mean you think it would be *safer* to have declared war on the Chinks and Ruskies ?"

" I mean that once global war breaks out, safety axiomatically disappears."

" Never mind axiomatically, mate ! As long as we aren't in it, it's not global, is it ? 'Ere, Bill, there's a bloke here thinks we ought to be fighting for the bloody Yanks !" They motioned to a couple of their mates, and soon there was a ring of them round our table. David's nervousness increased.

" If they wants a war, let them have it, I say," Bill opined. His cheeks were heavy with woe and drink fat. " It's none of our business."

" But that's precisely what it is, Bill," I said. " You've heard of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, I expect ?"

Howls of derision greeted this. The first speaker—Harry, I believe he was—leant over our table and said, " Are you honestly going to sit there and tell me that you want to see this country blown to bits just because the Americans have come a cropper in Sumatra ?"

" That's not a proper question. But if you are trying to ask me whether I support the democratic way of life, then I must perforce answer yes—"

" Democracy ! Wrap up !"

"—because I believe, like many another Englishman, that it is better to die fighting than die under Communist bombs or whips."

" That's all bloody propaganda !"

" Who's he think he is ?"

" Go and join the Army !"

" You're a right one," Bill said to me. " What have the Yanks done for you to make you so fond of them ?"

" You ought to ask yourself that," David said angrily. " You're old enough to remember the last war—yes, and the war before that ! How do you think we'd have managed without American aid then ?"

" Okay then," Bill said in gloomy triumph. " Then we'll hang on for three years and *then* we'll come in to help them, the way they did with us before !"

This sally drew a howl of laughter, and they turned away from us, losing interest and going back to a game of shove ha'penny.

" Bill certainly averted a nasty moment," David said with rancour. He drank deeply into his Guinness. " Thank God for this poisonous British ability to laugh at themselves."

" And at others."

We drank up, ate our sandwiches, and rose to go.

" See you on the Russian steppes—scrubbing them !" Harry called. Their laughter followed us into the sunshine.

We drove down the Mall and so to the Foreign Office, where I hoped to see Tertis. We had passed the marchers

and the speakers' the ragged and the angry ; but the prevalent mood was distastefully light-hearted. Although many of the shops had closed, cafes and pubs were open, and people were treating the whole thing as a grand unplanned holiday, lying in the Parks caressing each other or buying each other ice-cream.

All this angered David much more than it did me ; he had always been the one with faith in the masses.

I thought of the cities I knew thousands of miles away, their grandeurs and their shortcomings : Washington, New York San Francisco (my favourite American city), Chicago, Kansas City, and others I had never had the opportunity to visit. Yes and I thought of Moscow and Leningrad, Baku and Tiflis, each of which I had visited on trade missions in the fifties ; and of the teeming cities of the Orient, Canton, Shanghai, Peking with its factories and Ming tombs, Amoy, all cities I had not visited and now never would visit.

What was happening in them now? Were they being crushed to the ground even while London lazed in the sun? I looked up to the sky half expecting to see—I knew not what.

" Not yet " David said grimly interpreting my look. "But it will come."

We parked the car with difficulty and made our way to the Foreign Office.

On the drive down from Oxford after hearing of Norman Parmettio's death my mind had become clear. If it were possible to help overthrow Minnie's government I would help. If I were needed to take part in a new government in whatsoever capacity again I would help. Throughout the fifties and the early sixties when the Cold War had shown signs of thawing (largely because of the then Russian leader Khrushchev's love-hate affair with the West) I had remained convinced that Communism was a declared enemy. Nothing I had written or spoken publicly had wavered from that belief. My record was clean. There were not so very many like me left in Britain. If I were needed I would serve.

Although I did not know if Tertis was accessible he was my best line of approach. I had worked with him often ; we knew and trusted each other. If he were not available, I would try elsewhere, probably with the Athenaeum as first call.

At the doors of the Foreign Office David and I were stopped. We had to give our names, after which I was allowed to write a note for a messenger to take up to Tertis. The messenger was gone for a long while ; only when fifteen minutes had elapsed did he return and request us to follow him.

Leo Tertis was assistant head of the Military Relations Department formed in the sixties and lately of growing importance. We walked down a corridor I remembered well, with messengers lounging by doorways and chandeliers hanging overhead. Nobody knocks on doors in the F.O., the assumption, I suppose, being that anyone admitted to the building in the first place will be birds of a feather. When our messenger indicated the Second Room of the Department, I walked straight in.

Tertis was there, five years my junior and at fifty a curiously youthful figure with plump pale cheeks, almost white hair and dark eyebrows. He looked, not unexpectedly, exceedingly grave and very tired. A vacuum flask of coffee stood on his desk ; though the window was open, a smell of stale cigarette smoke pervaded the room.

He had been sitting talking to a short plump man. As David and I entered, he broke off, rose, and came round the desk to shake my hand. I introduced David ; Tertis eyed him appraisingly.

" David Woolf ; I remember the name. You stood for Fleetwood in the by-election, didn't you ?" he asked.

" I did."

" Then you're a unilateralist. What are you doing here with Sir Simon ?"

Give David his due, he hardly hesitated before replying, " I've seen the error of my ways."

" You're too late, my boy," Tertis said grimly, turning away to add, " I won't pretend I'm particularly glad to meet either of you just now, but while you're here you'd better be introduced to the Minister of Economic Affairs, Mr. Edgar Northleech."

I had already recognised the plump man as Northleech. For me he represented one of the country's worst enemies, a crony of Menhennick's, and one of the prime movers for increased appeasement towards Russia since the retirement of Macmillan had allowed his sort to get into power. Northleech moved heavily towards us now, his white hair flowing round

his head, paunch well out, beaming through his spectacles as he extended his hand. David took it ; I did not.

Moving round to Tertis, I said, " We don't have to tell each other where we stand. What can I do to help, Leo ?"

" I'll give you the true picture in a moment ; it's bad. Friend Northleech, like your friend Woolf here, is busy changing sides. These are men of straw, Simon, blowing with the wind. I would rather ditch them than use them."

Northleech came into the conversation saying, in the rambling manner he maintained even when angry, "The ability to change should not be despised. I can help you, Tertis. I can get you to Menhennick ; he's ready to discuss anything ; pressure of events makes him feel he may have been misled."

" Misled !" David exclaimed. " We don't want to *talk* to you and Minnie. We want to shoot you. Don't you realise that revolution or civil war are brewing up and down the country ? Misled, be damned !"

" Enough of that talk, Mr. Woolf," said Northleech. "We have the situation in hand, you know. Anybody can be misled."

" It's the duty of men in office not to be misled. You've failed in your duty—abysmally. The Communist block's intentions have been clear since the forties."

Red in the face, Northleech pointed a fat and shaking finger at David and said, "That comes well from a unilateralist and a homosexual !"

" Leave personalities out of this ! At least I and my party acted from our convictions. We advocated national disarmament as a first step towards general international disarmament. We advocated neutrality because as a neutral power Britain could weld other neutrals into a powerful enough group to break the deadly status quo of Big Two power ideologies that have frozen the world since the close of World War II. But your people, Northleech—yes, and I include you in this, Simon, and you, Mr. Tertis—what were you up to all the time ?"

Tertis banged furiously on his desk.

" That's enough," he said. " If you wish to remain in here, hold your tongue."

But David went straight on, levelling one finger like a firearm at the three of us.

" Your sort had no real thought for world peace, or even for the country. You were after preserving the social structure to which you belonged, just as Halifax, Baldwin, Chamberlain, and the other hangers-on did in the thirties. You're the damned middle-class powermongers with no knowledge of Russian or Chinese language and culture, or of what goes on in their dangerous skulls. It's your unspoken assumptions that have ruined Britain, not Communism or Socialism or all the other isms put together—your assumption that the best thing that can happen to anyone is that he can become a conformist and a gentleman, your assumption that your own narrow way of life is the only fit way of life. What happened to the workers ? Once they got an education—*your* type of education, with a smattering of Shakespeare and a veneer of BBC accent—then they too were hell-bent on becoming gentlemen, poor carbon copy gentlemen."

" Paranoia !" I exclaimed.

" Why ?" he demanded explosively, turning on me. "Because I don't subscribe to your conventions ? Don't worry, you had nearly everyone else subscribing. You fools, you've ended by deluding yourselves. That's why we're all on the brink of disaster : you said to yourselves, ' Oh the Chinese leaders are gentlemen. Treat them like gentlemen and they'll behave like gentlemen !' Look where it's got you."

" You're a very foolish young man," Northleech said. " There is no historical basis for your remarks. If we have in this country a rule by gentlemen, as you claim, then it is simply because the hoi polloi have proved themselves unfit to rule. Besides, there is no conspiracy. Sir Simon and I went to the same public school, but we never had one opinion in common, then or since."

" Except the unspoken assumption that you were both of leader material !"

" Bringing you to the F.O. has gone to your head, David," I said. "Your speech would have been more effective delivered to rabble in Trafalgar Square."

" It may be yet. I'd still like to know why Northleech should be here, rather than with Minnie, palling up to the Chinese."

With a brow of thunder, Tertis said, " If you'd had the courtesy to keep quiet when you came in here, you would have heard why the Minister is here. It's too late for your

type of speechifying, Mr. Woolf, just as it's too late for a lot else. Edgar, you'd better tell them why you came."

Northleech cleared his throat, glanced anxiously at Tertis, removed his spectacles to polish them furiously as he said, " It is no longer possible to keep peace with the People's Republic. Three hours ago—probably at about the time you were leaving your university—the first nuclear weapon of World War III was detonated. A 'clean' one-megaton bomb was dropped on Hong Kong. It was about six in the evening, local time, when the maximum number of people were about in the streets. We are as yet unable to obtain coherent accounts of the extent of the destruction."

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In the silence that followed, Tertis's internal phone rang. He picked it up, listened, said, " Bring him in."

Looking up at us, he said wearily, " Our country is fatally split, gentlemen. That's the curse of it : when we come to discuss any detail, the opinions on it are infinite and one man's vote is as good as another's. Perhaps it's the democratic system itself that has brought us to this humiliating position ; I don't know. But I must ask you now to put personal considerations aside if you wish to remain here. We are about to be visited by General Schuller, Deputy Supreme Commander of NATO."

This I scarcely heard. I was still overwhelmed by the Hong Kong catastrophe and trying to assess its meaning. As a result I had one of the briefest and most significant exchanges that ever passed between two men.

I asked Northleech, " Then I suppose we are now actually at war with Communist China ?"

Northleech said, " No. Their Ambassador has apologised. He claims the bomb was dropped by accident."

There seemed to me no possible reply ever to this, but David asked, " And you believe him ?"

" It seemed politic to do so."

" Politic ! My gods alive, there's a term being used appositely for once !" David broke into ragged laughter.

Hopelessness came up and overwhelmed me. The terrible betrayal all round was at last revealing itself, and not a man in the country was innocent. Faintly, I said to Tertis, " You

were going to put us in the picture. What of the countries of the Commonwealth ?"

A deep voice from the door said, " Canada declared war on the common enemy two hours after the U.S. did so. It was expedient for the defence of the North American continent Australia entered the war as soon as Sydney got news of the Hong Kong disaster. Your government promptly tore up the SEATO agreement. Seems the one thing it is efficient at is the gagging of news."

General Schuller did not introduce himself. He marched into the room and planted himself by Tertis. He was brusque and angry and had cut himself shaving with an old-fashioned razor that morning. His German-American accent was thick and nasal. Dark, handsome, very neat and be-medalled, he dominated the room with compressed fury.

" Well, Tertis, here I am. Who are these men ? We were to be alone, as I understood it."

Tertis stood up, listing us without introducing us. I felt like an undergraduate again under that black stare. The General made no comment, save for a snort when Northleech's identity was made known to him. Plainly he dismissed David and me from his calculations. David, with his sensitive nature, would not stand for this. Stepping forward, he produced his revolver and said, " I am an enemy of your enemies. I'm prepared to shoot any traitors, sir."

Schuller never paused.

" Shoot Northleech," he said.

As my body seemed to freeze, so the tableau did. Even Northleech only cringed without moving from where he stood. David Woolf remained absolutely immobile. Then he returned the gun to his pocket and spoke contemptuously, in perfect command of himself.

" I kill from conviction, not to pass a personality quiz."

Schuller grunted again, outwardly unmoved, but from that moment the first impact of his personality was weakened.

" I won't mince matters," he said, swinging his head so that he spoke directly to Tertis. " Britain has never added anything to the power of America. Rather, it's been a liability, a weak partner to be helped along, mind without muscle. Get it ?"

" There to aid your muscle without mind," I interposed tartly but he continued without condescending to notice the interruption.

" We could have done without Britain as a partner once. But because she needed us, we've got bases and personnel and war material over here to defend our friends. Now at the eleventh hour—no, by Jesus, nearer half past midnight—your Prime Minister announces that Britain is to be neutral. Egged on by Red threats and encouragement, he says America must withdraw from these Isles. Right ?

" It so happens it is no longer strategy for us to withdraw. We cannot withdraw. We are not going to withdraw. What's going to happen now, Tertis ?"

Without hesitation, Tertis said, " As things are now, with the present government, we shall fight you to turn you out."

" Get in the picture, man. You *are* fighting us. Norfolk's a battleground right now. Outside Glasgow, the R.A.F. is bombing our installations."

" I don't believe it," I said.

" You'd bloody better believe it, *Sir* Simon, because it's happening right enough."

" I believe it, General," Northleech said. "You presumably want to know what can be done to change the situation ?"

" No, I'm going to tell *you* what can be done."

" You need our help, General. Don't interfere with our offering it to you. What are the alternatives as you see them ?"

" The alternatives are brutal. Either you get Minnie Menhennick and his boys out of the way and replace him by a sensible anti-Red government, or—or I'm afraid London is going to be destroyed and this island will become an American forward base. You've got till sundown to act. We can't let you have any further time."

Put the way he put it, it sounded all wrong. Without American interference, we would have set our house in order anyway. Made to do it under threats, we would become inglorious traitors. After all, what future was there for Britain in a nuclear war ? Suddenly before my eyes rose a picture of our cities all in ruins, women and children dying, even as they were dying now in Hong Kong . . . and it could happen within five minutes of our declaration of war. All the same, Schuller's view was understandable, inevitable even. I just wished it could have been put by someone less obviously a gun man.

Dismissing that hopeless argument ad hominem, I asked Northleech, " Where is Minnie ? Can you get us to him ? Is he at Chequers, or Number Ten or where ?"

" He's in London, in an underground HQ. I could get us there in twenty minutes in my car, if you're sure it's the right thing . . ."

" It's too late to *talk*. We have to act," General Schuller said. " Yes, let's for God's sake go in your car. My Thunderbird might be a little kind of conspicuous."

" I'm staying here," Tertis said. " Though I'm under suspicion, I can be more use by keeping in touch at this end. My boss feels as I do, and there are plenty more in responsible positions who will back a change of government. You're comparatively unknown, Simon, but they'd accept you for P.M. in the emergency. You go with the Minister."

As the others moved towards the door, I shook Tertis by the hand and said, " I'll do whatever I can."

" One word of warning," he said. " The country is now under martial law. Conscription for Civil Defence starts tomorrow and you, Simon, have been officially declared an agitator—by the Dean of your college, so I hear. There's a warrant out for your arrest, so mind how you go."

" It should improve my reputation if I stand for office," I said. " And David ?"

Tertis nodded.

" They want him too."

I turned round just too late to see what happened then. David had evidently gone first into the corridor. Northleech was frozen in the threshold with General Schuller close behind. Shouts came from along the corridor, shouts and the sound of running feet.

David pulled out that wretched revolver and fired twice, backing into the room as he did so. Someone screamed and the running stopped. Belatedly, one shot was fired in reply. It splintered through the door, which David had shut by then.

Gasping, he looked round at me and said, " They're after us, Simon. Now what the hell do we do ?"

" Rubbish," Schuller growled. " They're after me : who else ? What is this, a trap or something ? Northleech, Tertis, get that desk across the door before they rush us."

He strode across the room as Tertis and Northleech went nto action. He wrenched open the side door leading into

the Third Room of Tertis's department. This was the secretaries' room. There were three of them, nice fresh young fellows all looking rather identical with identical suits and their hands raised above their heads. The General had brought two majors and a signalman with him, to wait for him in this outer office. The majors had already attended to the secretaries, while the signalman worked at his walkie talkie, speaking into it in unhurried code.

" Nice fast work, Farnes and Able," General Schuller said, striding into the Third Room and adding to the secretaries, " Sorry about this, boys, but if I'm in a trap you'll have to play hostage."

" They're after Woolf and Sir Simon, General, not you," Tertis said. " Let me go out into the corridor and explain to them."

" You'll stay where you are. I'm sorry not to trust you, Tertis, but right now the British aren't my favourite nation. I'm taking no chances with anyone. Farnes and Able, bring those three hostages into the other room. Get the desk in too and barricade the side door with it. Look slippy. Operator, get Green Devil One on the air."

" Right to hand, sir," the operator said, looking up and handing a scramblerphone to Schuller.

The majors both had light machine guns. The one addressed as Farnes covered Tertis, David, Northleech and me, while Able directed the three secretaries. The latter worked efficiently, dragging in the desk, even smiling as they did so ; for them this seemed just a break in F.O. routine. I wondered whether they were displaying British nonchalance or if they genuinely did not grasp the seriousness of the situation.

For myself, I expected a grenade to come through the door at any moment, until it occurred to me that the guards outside were holding their fire in case they injured the General. Everything happened in such rapid succession that it was difficult to think clearly. Although I did not know in what tone Dean Burroughs had reported my hurried exit from East Lincoln, it seemed likely that he would have exaggerated enough for the group in the corridor to regard me as a potential killer.

The General handed the scramblerphone back to his operator, informing the majors as he did so, " They're going to have a whirleybird at the window in two minutes minus for us."

Instinctively we all glanced over at Tertis's long windows with the balcony looking out across Horseguards' Parade.

Later it occurred to me that here was a moment for clear thought—the first since the General had entered the room. He filled it by striding from one desk to the other with his jaw forward, saying with heavy sarcasm, " And now, my friend Tertis, we'll test out your theory that the guards outside aren't gunning for me at all. Farnes, throw this guy David Woolf out into the corridor."

You understand there were ten of us in the room. The place was comparatively crowded. I saw David's face shift as he ducked and moved. He looked rat-like : both frightened and frightening.

" You can't do this, Schuller. I'm on your side. Take me in the helicopter with you !"

He dodged behind Northleech, who whinnied with fright, and behind Schuller, pulling out his gun as he went. The crazy scheme no doubt was to hold Schuller at pistol point until we were all safe in the copter. Doubtless David fell between self-preservation and patriotism and saw this idea as offering more hope than being pushed out into the corridor.

" Hold still, General, I won't harm—" he began, his voice shrill. But Farnes moved too. He sprang two paces across the room, dropped to one knee, and fired on automatic, one short and deafening burst.

The long window splintered and fell in. Northleech dropped next—through sheer panic reaction. For a second, dazed, I thought David had not been hit. Then dark blood gouted out of three holes in his shirt, spreading fast.

General Schuller swung round on him. David closed his eyes and fired one shot. Schuller blundered forward on to him. The two men fell together, breaking a chair as they went. Appalled, the two majors ran forward.

In moments of extreme crisis, a governing mechanism seems to take over from the rational centres of the brain. Without reflecting at all on what I was doing, I went to the outer door, pushed aside the desk that barricaded it, and threw it open.

Behind an open doorway opposite, armed men watched from cover. I saw their weapons come up. Down the corridor one way, another group had gathered, dark suits mingling with khaki.

" General Schuller has been assassinated ! Help !" I called.

Framed in the doorway with smoke drifting past me, I must have looked a wild enough figure. But it was that pregnant cry "Assassination," echoing down the corridors of the Foreign Office, that brought them all running. As they came, I turned and beckoned Northleech.

In the excitement, the two of us left unnoticed. My last glimpse into the fatal room caught a sudden shadow falling over it. Schuller's helicopter was arriving—on time, but too late. We ran down the corridor, Northleech puffing hard. As we descended the Grand Staircase, more shots rang out. Another fool had gone trigger-happy. Long bursts of automatic fire indicated that the helicopter was returning as good as it got.

We met several people. To all of them I uttered my formula and they scattered. Even at the door, where a no-nonsense captain in the South Wales Borderers moved to block our escape, I said, "Captain, General Schuller has been assassinated and you people will have to answer for it. See you get reinforcements and surround the building. Nobody whatsoever must leave until further orders. Clear?"

"I'm not in charge here, sir—"

"Then consider yourself so immediately. Get half a dozen men up on the second floor at once."

He jumped to it and we were through.

"My car!" Northleech puffed. "It's got a radio link. I must speak to Whitehall on the way. Over this way."

He headed towards the Chiefs' Park and I followed, blinking in the sunshine.

"We're going to Menhennick?" I asked.

"Yes."

His car was one of the new JC wagons, with a chauffeur lounging near who threw open the rear door smartly as we approached.

"The Tower, James—fast," Northleech ordered.

We climbed in and I asked, "You mean to say Menhennick's in the Tower of London? How singularly appropriate."

"Underneath it."

Northleech was just recovering his breath. As we rolled forward, he opaqued the bullet-proof polaroid glass so that we could see out and not be seen. At the press of a button, a small bar slid out at knee level. At the press of another, his radiophone opened before him. We were of course completely sound-proofed off from the driver.

five

The screen before the Minister lit. A severe matron appeared, with behind her a crowded Whitehall room where people came and went.

" Give me Bawtrey, General Intelligence," Northleech said, still puffing slightly.

" There may be a moment's delay, Minister. Routine is a little disturbed at present."

" Fast as you can, Miss. Emergency."

She turned away. Northleech stabbed a finger at the screen.

" I'll give her ' routine disturbed.' Look, there's some bugger walking round that room with a cup of tea in his hand. Do you wonder the country's going to the dogs !"

I bit off the obvious answer that it was people like him who helped it go. He poured us some drinks, looked more cheerful, and began to grumble, all the while tapping one knee impatiently and staring at the screen before him.

" Sorry we had to leave Leo Tertis with his hands full like that. Expedient, however. Look, Simon, I don't want you to feel disappointed, but Tertis was flannelling you in there."

" In what way ?"

" This incredible stuff about the possibility of your becoming P.M. No offence, but it just shows how far poor old Tertis's judgment is awry. I urged the Foreign Secretary to get him into something safe like Housing years ago. I mean, we need a man of experience, a young man, a man in the public eye, a man who knows the ropes, knows where to turn for guidance."

" To you for instance ?"

" I'll serve as long as the public need me, Simon. I'm an old warhorse."

" You're a bloody pacifist, Edgar. Appeasement's the be-all and end-all of your philosophy."

He looked broodingly at me, entirely without taking offence.

" You don't really want to see this grand little country blown to bits just to gratify your ambition, do you ?"

" My record—"

" Blast your record. You can't help being what you are, I know. There's none of the visionary about you, that's what's lacking. In my young days, I had the good fortune to be guided by the great Lord Halifax—"

" You know what I think of Halifax !"

" I don't care what you think. You don't think enough. That's the world's trouble. Look at Schuller : the action school, as much brain power as a bull. Need never have been killed if he'd spent thirty seconds cogitating instead of rapping out orders. Non cogitavit ergo fuit. Same with Woolf—an anarchist and subversive like all his kind. He had no idea he was shooting Schuller : it was simple father-hatred squeezed the trigger."

" Package reasoning—"

" Putting you through," said the panel. Simultaneously, a bearded man in shirtsleeves with a cup at his elbow and a pile of flimsies in his fist blinked into being on the screen.

" Hello, Bawtrey," Northleech said, with a parade of affability. " What's happening ?"

" Everything," Bawtrey said, taking a swig from his cup. " What do you want to know, Minister ?"

" Relevant events of the last two hours. Hong Kong ?"

" Nothing fresh. No new H's dropped yet. Singapore on general alert, Aussie fleet engaging Chinese ships off New Guinea. Suspected Russian nuclear subs bombed off Alaska coast—"

" What else ? Washington ?"

" Contact with America is just about defunct," Bawtrey said. " They're tearing their hair here, Minister. Not a peep from Washington, New York, Ottawa, Toronto—the whole blessed continent might just as well have disappeared. All cables are reported temporarily out of order, and all wavelengths blanketted with unusually strong interference."

Northleech and I looked at each other.

" How long has this been the case ?" Northleech asked.

Bawtrey glanced at his watch.

" I've been on shift two hours. Two and a half hours, at a guess. There may be something through in a few minutes. Meanwhile, hang on, here's something else of interest."

As he was speaking, Bawtrey leafed through his flimsies. " The first space battle is now in progress. U.S. Orbitters attacking the Red nuclear satellite, meeting opposition from Tsiolkos and Chinabugs."

" Europe ?"

" Mobilisation in France, Italy, and the Scandinavian countries. Every man in Western Germany at the frontier, Reuter reports. Same in Turkey, Greece. Main impression seems to be that they're waiting to see what Great Britain decides."

As the man talked, I stared out of the window. We moved with unconscionable slowness, though Northleech's driver took short cuts when he could. Trafalgar Square was crowded, and not only with soap box orators. A figure in a white cassock was holding a service on the steps of St. Martins-in-the-Fields. Down the Strand, traffic was entirely at a standstill. We detoured round Covent Garden, to squeeze into a Fleet Street almost as crowded.

In contrast to the sightseers round the Park, people here looked grave. Outside a Civil Defence recruitment booth, both men and women queued. The military was out in strength ; a column of light tanks added to the traffic congestion. I thought of the other grey old capitals of Europe, members of the same dying yet grand order, all teetering on the brink of annihilation.

Bawtrey shuffled up another piece of paper as we approached Ludgate Circus.

" Dame reaffirms Sark's neutrality," he read disgustedly, screwing it up. " And here's one more in your line, Minister. Deputy Supreme Commander of NATO General Gavin T. Schuller, was assassinated within the last twenty-five minutes by Derick Woolf, described as a member of the British Communist Party. Members of the Special Police shot Woolf before he could escape. Fighting is still—"

He paused. Someone visible to us only as a torso tapped Bawtrey's shoulder and handed him a fresh communique. He read it out slowly, squinting now and again at Northleech as he did so.

" Here's one for the general circuits. Sounds like big stuff. Seems they finally got through to Washington and Ottawa. This one's datelined Washington and reads : ' Mr. Martin Mumford, President of the United States, will make a special address to the world at 1500 hours, British Summer Time, today.' That's in about twenty-eight minutes time. ' This address will transcend in importance any previous statement ever made by a U.S. President.' Hm, some billing. ' It is of the utmost importance that the largest possible audience

in all countries sees and hears the President speak.' Sounds as if the Martians have stepped in, doesn't it ?"

"That will be all, thank you, Bawtrey," Northleech said, obviously disapproving such facetiousness. As he switched off, the bearded man picked up his cup, swigged it and faded into nothing. The set folded neatly back into its compartment.

The traffic thinned ; we accelerated along the last stretch of the way, and the Tower swung into sight ahead. The bright dress uniforms had gone. Light tanks had replaced the sentry boxes. Everything was handled efficiently. Northleech produced a pass for the guard officer, which was okayed. Nevertheless, we and the driver had to climb out and be searched for firearms, while two plain clothes men simultaneously examined our vehicle.

They gave us clearance in under forty-five seconds, saluting us as we drove on under Byward Tower with a guard riding beside the driver.

We drove over to the Queen's House and climbed out. I followed Northleech inside. Another guard stationed by a wooden staircase was replacing the receiver on a handphone as we entered ; the main gate had warned him we were about to arrive. He flicked over a switch normally concealed behind oak panelling.

The wooden staircase hinged at the sixth step up, yawning open to reveal a flight of carpetted stone stairs descending underground. Motioning to me, Northleech started down them, his untidy white hair fluttering round his head in the warm updraught of air.

I recognised that smell of canned air, sweet with disinfectant. It reminded me of the underground HQ of my Department in Hyde Park during World War II. This was a much more elaborate and larger subterranean system. At the bottom of the stairs was a chain of three airlocks giving one on to each other, their indicators all at a neutral green. They opened on to a large circular space, well-lit but almost deserted. Here stood a magazine and paper stall, a tobacconist's, and a cafe, all open. Piped music played softly. I noticed other stairs leading down into this foyer.

Without hesitation, Northleech led over to a central block of lifts, a row of perhaps a dozen of varying sizes, each with an ancient male attendant waiting by the doors. We entered the nearest.

" Level Ten," Northleech said crisply.

Glancing at me with a sly humour, he remarked, " You see the government hasn't been entirely unprepared for emergencies."

" Every man for himself," I replied.

It was an express lift. I climbed out at the bottom feeling slightly sick. For a second we had been in free fall.

Here was a maze of corridors, with many people moving fast with set faces. After some slight confusion and a word or two of barked argument, Northleech got us into an anteroom, where a smartly formidable secretary left us, returning in two minutes.

While he was out of the room, Northleech said, " I know this man, this secretary. Obviously Menhennick is still in full control. We'll have to watch our step until we see how the land lies. Agreed ?"

" It seems inevitable."

" Keep it that way. We don't want trouble if it can be avoided."

" Spoken in character, Minister."

" Don't be a bloody fool, Simon. You're out of your depth and you know it."

The secretary, returning, said, " The P.M.'s with the Indian Premier and other Commonwealth gentlemen. You may go in, but don't intrude."

We went in.

We did not intrude.

The room was impressive. Some fifty men were gathered there, many of them leading diplomats. Waiters with trays unobtrusively served drinks. On the surface it appeared incongruously peaceful. I recognised Mr. Turdilal, the Indian Premier, at once. He stood on a raised platform with Minnie slightly behind him. Minnie looked worn and shrunken ; his face reminded me of the ill look I had seen on the face of Sir Anthony Eden at the time of Suez.

Turdilal seemed incongruously cheerful. He was in full spate as we entered.

" . . . and furthermore, gentlemen, you need no reminding from me that India has always stood for the peace of the world. We are an old nation and we have always stood for peace. That is why we are standing now at this terribly black hour of international conflict solidly behind the British government

and most of the other members of the Commonwealth for neutrality. We—"

"What about the invasion of Indonesia?" a voice called.

Turdilal smiled a charming smile.

"What about the invasion, indeed, my South American friend? Carnage added to carnage does not equal peace, my friend. We are not Gadarene swines, may I remind you. Your country is also on friendly terms with Indonesia, but you are not hurrying to bear arms on their behalf. No. You are wise. Instead you are stepping up armament production to sell to China, I guess."

Ugly murmurs greeted this, but Turdilal flowed on.

"South America must remain neutral. And that is what I am saying also about Britain and the Commonwealth. Someone must rebuild out of the ashes. That is a harder task than creating the ashes. So I for one applaud Mr. Menhennick's stand against the pressure of power politics."

A hubbub arose as he finished, angry cries mingling with cheers and the odd handclap.

Minnie came forward, clapped Turdilal weakly on the back, and held up his hand for silence. When it came, he rubbed a hand over his moustache and said, "Thank you for your support, gentlemen. I realise our country is in an invidious position, I realise it only too well. But we have been in an invidious position for a quarter of a century now, ever since the perfection of this deadly nuclear power and the emergence of the two great powers. Rest assured, I have done all in my power to keep our beloved country safe. Rest assured, I shall not stand down—"

"Shame!" I cried.

"—until I feel the nation has no more need for me . . ."

"Go, in God's name, go!" I shouted.

Two Ghana ministers looked angrily round and said, "Keep silence while he speaks," and a waiter pressed a large whisky into my hand.

"I will say no more now," Minnie continued, looking at his watch. "In two minutes, the American President, Mr. Mumford, is speaking to the world. We can see it on the wall screen here. I do not know what he is to say, but doubtless it will be of grave import. Just at present our contacts with Washington are disturbed; however, I have been reliably

informed that a very few hours ago the American continent was subjected to intense nuclear bombardment on both her seaboards."

A ripple of amusement that grew with the beginning of his last sentence was killed stone dead by the end of it. A terrible silence, a chill, settled over everyone present—myself, of course, included. Everyone present had their differences with the United States, yet in that moment friction died and love came uppermost. Many faces wore a look of shame. We all stood motionless.

Not a word was spoken until the big wall screen lit. The time was three o'clock.

The Global Viewing sign came on, a spinning world with the illuminated orbits of the TV reflection stations surrounding it. How long, I wondered, before they were shot down and TV shrank again into a petty national plaything instead of the transnational communication it had become ?

A voice said, " Here is the President of the United States of America, Mr. Martin Wainwright Mumford."

He sat composedly at a desk bare of everything bar one sheet of paper. He wore a neat suit. Behind him hung the American flag. He looked young, determined, and under enormous strain. He launched into what he had to say without preliminaries ; he spoke without rhetoric.

" I invited everyone in the world to see and hear me because what I have to say is of personal importance to you all.

" Only a few hours ago, the enemies of the United States launched their mightiest weapons upon us. Intercontinental ballistic missiles carrying nuclear warheads descended on all our major cities almost simultaneously. Their destructive forces when unleashed on their targets were so great that no nation could have survived the blow.

" Happily, all those missiles were checked some miles up in the sky.

" The United States of America now possess a sure defence against the hideous and hitherto all-conquering weapon of nuclear bombing.

" This defence is of such a nature that it could only be given thorough trial under actual test conditions. We have had to undergo that test, and we have survived. Had the defence failed, I should not be here talking to you now.

" The defence takes the form of a shield, which we call the geo-gravitic flux. In theory, this form of defence has been known for some time, but its consumption of energy seemed so vast as to render it impracticable. However, our scientists and technologists have perfected a way whereby the shield—which now covers all of North America, our Canadian allies as well as ourselves—the shield draws its power from the nuclear powers it destroys. The greater the force exerted against it, the more greatly the shield is able to resist.

" You will see that we are in consequence impregnable. What is more, we shall remain impregnable for a long time. We have this new defence. Our enemies have new weapons. We were subjected not only to nuclear attack ; we were bombarded by a type of anti-matter bomb infinitely more terrible than the nuclear bomb, which must now be regarded as old-fashioned. Our shield effectively repelled all comers."

Almost furtively, I glanced about me. Every face was fixed in fascination on that grave face looming on the screen. An immense pressure of triumph was building up as the President continued his address.

" I confess that this nation has—as yet—no anti-matter bomb. We have been concentrating on methods of defence rather than offence. But we have literally at our fingertips the mighty power of the atom. So far we have unleashed no retaliatory bombs in reply to the brutal attack of our enemies.

" It is my hope that retaliation will not be necessary. America and Canada cannot be conquered ; but we could bring our enemies to their knees in two hours from now. We could destroy them utterly as they well know. We do not desire to take this ultimate step. The collapse of the two vast Communist countries would involve the rest of the free world in decades of rehabilitation too costly to be visualised. So we are stepping forward, laying our cards on the table, and inviting our enemies to make peace with the Free World at once.

" This is an unprecedented step to take. We live in unprecedented times.

" Such a step would not have been possible had not our friends the British, and the other North Atlantic countries who look to them for leadership, decided to remain neutral. Had they not so decided, then beyond doubt they would have

suffered the same terrible bombardment inflicted on us. Without the geo-gravitic shield, they would never have survived, and we should have been forced to carry out total war to avenge their destruction.

" So I say again : we offer whole-heartedly a fresh chance to make peace. I invite the heads of the Communist block to meet me personally on neutral ground in London. I give them forty-eight hours to make a just peace. After that time, if they do not show themselves more than willing to build a binding agreement—they know what the consequences will be.

" They will be shown no mercy then. United America offers them more than mercy now."

Mumford's image disappeared. At once a great uproar broke out in the hall. I like many others was weeping with an un-British lack of restraint.

As I was eating in a nearby canteen a few minutes later, Northleech approached, talking to a secretary. He broke off to speak to me.

" Look here, Sir Simon, this wonderful gesture of Mumford's has put a different complexion on matters. I will see to it personally that the order for your arrest is cancelled straightaway."

" Thank you. In that case, I will be getting back to East Lincoln to see how my wife is. Though I shall have to tender my resignation to the Dean."

" Understandable, quite. Well, that's your worry ; I can't interfere there, naturally."

" Naturally."

" Though the Dean may not accept it. His anti-American views were always clear. You'll no doubt return as something of a hero. He may well feel that by keeping you he will gain popularity for himself. I'm sure I should feel like that."

I looked down at my apple tart.

" I'm sure you would," I said. " But I'm sick of appeasement in all its forms. A new breeze is blowing from now on : I'm coming back into politics."

A spark of anger fired the old boy. He rapped on my table, making my spoon rattle against the plate.

" Before you do that, you'd better distinguish between negotiation and appeasement."

" I can already. You're a great appeaser, Minister ; Mumford is a great negotiator. The difference is in the position from which you talk : a position of weakness or a position of strength. Mumford's is one of strength, yours and Minnie's one of weakness."

He cleared his throat. Still angry, he said in a low voice, " Stop kicking a man when he's down. You saw how poor old Alfred Menhennick was. He can't resign quickly enough."

It was the second best news I had heard that day—or ever.

Brian W. Aldiss

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Two new writers make their bow next month with long short-stories, American Joseph Green with " The Engineer," a futuristic story concerning a cure for psychomatic illnesses, and B. N. Ball with " The Pioneer," a first-man-off-the-Earth story with quite a logical difference. Short stories also by Brian W. Aldiss and Australian Lee Harding, plus, of course, the second long instalment of " Field Hospital," by James White in which Sector General Hospital becomes the number one target in a galactic shooting match.

Story ratings for No. 109 were :

1. Goodbye, Doctor Gabriel - - - John Rackham
2. Put Down This Earth (conclusion) - John Brunner
3. Company Store - - - - Robert Silverberg
4. The Ship Of Heaven - - - - Mike Davies

Thr micro-factory was set up to work entirely by itself and successfully produced tiny transistor radios, tape-recorders and TV sets. But down there in the micro-jungle something else stirred.

LITTLE HORROR

by BILL SPENCER

No good hurrying. That could spoil everything.

Rogan looked up wearily from the microvisor, his eyes rimmed and bleared from prolonged staring.

He massaged stiff hands one against the other—long hands that moved slowly and tentatively—then reached for the glass of milk and the two crisp biscuits.

This was the moment everything hinged on. Better take it easy.

Crunching his first biscuit, he let his tired mind flick over the reasoning behind the project. It had to work, of course. But there was always something. The unforeseen, unprogrammed possibility. Don't think about it.

Rogan bleakly munched his second biscuit, swallowed his milk, and turned back to his experimental rig.

He took a deep breath, a hissing sigh almost, and pressed his face against the rubber-edged viewing hood of the microvisor.

His coaxing hands found their way blindly across the banks of control levers. They knew their way around. He touched a control here, inched one forward there.

Through his viewpiece the swimming hazy image sharpened on a pair of infinitesimal gold filaments. The immense magnification made them appear coarse and clumsy.

He played again on the controls of the micro-manipulator.

Twin pairs of platinum tweezers juddered forward, dipping in and out of focus. They seized the filaments and roughly bent them : bent and jerked them.

Rogan drew breath sharply between his teeth.

Careful now . . .

Rogan caressed the controls even more tenderly. The ductile metal yielded under the jerking clumsy pull, did not break.

Good.

Rogan's hands now played over the ranks of controls as though he were composing a massive fugue.

The palpitant golden filaments were made to touch. He watched, with a kind of calm eagerness, as a pair of electrodes were brought near them. There was a brief blue flash, and the final joint in Rogan's assembly was complete.

The last of—what was it ? Close on half a million junctions. Now all that remained was to engage the main micro-switches.

The big moment.

Rogan took his face away from the microvisor and looked with the naked eye at what he had made. His mouth quirked in a one-sided smile. The product of five years agonising work was absurdly puny.

The entire assembly could have lost itself comfortably in a corner of his pocket. There was the bumble-bee-sized computer itself—a clumsy construction by comparison with the micro-micro-manipulator, to which it was electronically linked, no bigger than a flea.

Beside them both loomed the relatively monstrous bulk of the supplies warehouse. He'd made it exactly the same size as a matchbox. It was bulging with an extraordinary range of raw materials. Minute ingots of all the useful metals and their alloys. Pellets of natural and synthetic rubbers. Plastics granules. Blobs of glass. Samples of all the naturally occuring elements. Basic compounds. At least a thimbleful of pure water. Tiny crucibles. A midget electric arc furnace.

Yes, it was all there.

Everything was ready.

So what was the problem ? What was making him hesitate?

His hand went to the master micro-switch and pressed it home.

Then, eagerly, his eyes sought the microvisor viewing hood. For a full minute nothing happened. He focussed carefully on the micro-micro-manipulator. There was no movement at all.

A fault? There could be one, but he thought not. You could almost *hear* that computer thinking.

After a few more seconds the flea-size micro-micro- manipulator swung slowly round on its base and sidled into the warehouse. Rogan began to hum a little triumphant tune under his breath.

The flea-like contraption emerged with something in its claws. A scrap of silver steel smaller than a pinhead. Following the instructions programmed into the computer, the faithful flea began to cut away at the steel with whirring tungsten carbide teeth. The fine grey metallic dust was drawn harmlessly into a duct the size of a fly's snout.

Rogan watched as the scrap of steel took on the unmistakable form of a lathe bed—but a lathe so small that beside it the working parts of the micro-micro-manipulator looked gross and clumsy.

The work progressed slowly but remorselessly. When eventually fatigue forced Rogan to stop watching and drag himself off to bed, the main spindle and tailstock were already in position.

The tiny machine Rogan had built with such long-drawn-out labour was sleepless, took no count of night and day.

Next morning, he saw that the gleaming lathe was complete, and a milling machine about the size of a grain of sand had been started. It was pure pleasure to see the micro-micro-rig going buzzingly about its work—the more so because Rogan was called upon to do nothing but watch.

He ate a scratch breakfast of oddments culled from the 'fridge, chewing abstractedly, one eye glued always to the viewing hood of the microvisor.

The milling machine came along beautifully all through the morning. It was about half finished by the time he at last tore himself away from the viewing hood and went out in search of lunch.

He picked the best restaurant and studied the menu in detail. He felt like celebrating. Tomato juice. Sole Belle

Meuniere washed down with a bottle of Beaujolais '58. Peach Melba. Coffee.

He was feeling good by the time he got back to the rig. But his mood changed abruptly when he took a quick look through the viewing hood.

At first he couldn't believe what he saw. He tracked his lens this way and that trying to find the milling machine, but it simply wasn't there any more. Where the milling machine had been there was a mess, an ugly mess of metal. There was no other word to describe it.

Rogan's mind grappled with possibilities. Had some ultimate psychoses seized the computer, causing it to issue a series of crazy and quite random instructions to the micro-micro-manipulator? The result anyway was pure chaos, as though a criminally disposed idiot had got loose in a laboratory and assembled some tottering clumsy construction with shaking hands.

Rogan tracked the bulging eye of his microvisor back and forth across the rig, painstakingly adjusting the focus to swing different objects in and out of his field of vision.

Suddenly he gasped. He was looking at a fly's head six feet in diameter. Observing an insect at close quarters with the tremendous magnification was both unexpected and shocking. He knew how a gnat must feel when it strolls unconcernedly round a corner into the very jaws of a spider.

With a feeling of distaste Rogan reached for a pair of tweezers and lifted up the transparent plastic cover of the rig. He removed the fly. The insect was already dead. Apparently it had got into an argument with the micro-micro-manipulator and had come off worst. But not before the vibration of its random buzzings had ruined hours of work on the rig. How had the fly got in? Perhaps through a small gap where one of the lead-out cables passed out to the main power supply. Rogan plugged the hole carefully with a filling compound. He couldn't see any others.

The milling machine was a complete write-off. Cautiously he removed that too, then overrode the programming of the computer with his master controls so that the manufacture of a brand new milling machine was begun again from a new ingot.

It was a set-back, but not complete disaster.

After assuring himself that the micro-micro-manipulator was now functioning correctly once more, Rogan went out for a long walk to cool off. He passed a jeweller's and idly looked in the window. A tiny wrist watch was exposed under a giant magnifying glass with the back removed. The ticking pulsating works looked crude, with a primitive clumsiness about them, after the almost incredible precision which Rogan had become accustomed to looking at through the microvisor. He snorted quietly to himself and walked briskly past.

By the end of a week the micro-micro-rig had completed a lathe, milling machine, planer, forging press, arc furnace and other ancillary equipment—the whole outfit taking up less space than half a lump of sugar. Now it was ready to begin its main task—the work of constructing an exact replica of itself to a scale of one-fifth.

The resultant micro-micro-micro-rig (or micro rig as Rogan mentally termed it for short) would then be capable by a repetition of the same process, of building a micro-micro-micro-micro-rig (or micro^4 rig) which would then be capable of building a micro-micro-micro-micro-micro-rig (or micro^5 rig). And so on, ad infinitum.

Or nearly ad infinitum. For there was what seemed to Rogan an unsurmountable barrier which would prevent miniaturisation beyond a certain point in the step-down process.

This was the size of metallic molecules themselves. Obviously a gear wheel, for example, to function as a gear wheel, had to be composed of a certain minimum number of molecules. Each " tooth " of the wheel could not be smaller than the dimensions of a single molecule. In practice it would have to be a good deal bigger. Long before that point was reached, Rogan's microvisor would be useless, even at its maximum magnification. But the ultimate micro^n rig could be trusted to carry out, through the long chain of command, the original programme of the master computer.

Or could it?

That, one way or another, was among the things that Rogan was going to find out.

At the fifth step-down, Rogan had to switch over continuously to his maximum power lens. Even so the activity he was watching, now almost unthinkably minute, was virtually

beyond the resolving power of the microvisor. There were no sharp edges to what he saw—only a busy movement of submicroscopic activity.

He had to rely on the faultless programming of the master computer being faithfully followed through all these diminutions. One more step down—it would be the sixth Rogan told himself—and the climax of the whole process would come.

At this stage the master programme called for the setting up of a sub-microscopic factory to begin actual production. Perhaps it should have been explained that this was the entire point of the operation.

Rogan became increasingly restless as the time approached when the first infinitesimal product would roll off the production line.

He'd force himself to go out for a walk, mentally promising himself that he wouldn't return before a certain time. But long before that time came, he'd be back to check up on progress. His eagerness made the work seem to proceed at an agonising snail's pace.

But as soon as the first product reached the final stage of assembly, he knew it was going to be a success. Even before the complete device came off the delivery conveyor, he could hear the sounds of a familiar radio programme.

When at last the first complete transistor radio tumbled gently on to the sheet of clean paper he'd put to collect it, it was no bigger than a grain of sand. The actual works were on a smaller scale still, but in order to make the complete device visible, the outer case was made far larger than would otherwise have been necessary.

The outer photo-sensitive surfaces shone and gleamed like irridescent mother-of-pearl. It was a jewel of a radio.

Rogan picked it up gently with his tweezers and examined it under a watchmaker's eyeglass. It was perfect—blaring forth the whole time with surprising volume for so small a thing.

There was, of course, no possibility of control-knobs on a radio so small. But Rogan had anticipated this difficulty.

He passed one finger rapidly over the tiny jewel. The shadow crossed its light-sensitive surfaces briefly. And instantly, reception was switched to another programme. It was now a whole symphony orchestra that was booming incredibly from the minute radio.

To switch off, one had only to cover the set with one's hand for a moment or two. The sound died as the energy provided by incident light, which powered it, was used up.

Rogan was delighted. He played with the radio for a long time, switching it on and off and changing programmes, until, finally, he decided to put it away.

He picked up the noisy little object in his tweezers and began to cross the room with it when—horrors—it slipped and fell from his grasp on to the floor. His eyes registered the swift glitter as it bounced once, still playing. Then it was lost to sight and, even worse, became gradually silent.

Evidently the tiny radio had fallen into a crack in the floorboards.

He located a torch and went searching for it, going down on all fours on the floor and shining the torch this way and that in the cracks of the boards.

It was no use. No answering burst of sound rewarded the probing of his torch. He was just about to give up, when he thought he heard the radio again.

The sound seemed to be coming from the direction of the workbench. For a moment he was puzzled, then he began to laugh. A second model was rolling off the production line —already—and it was this he was hearing.

This time he was more careful. After a series of routine tests to check for correct performance, he prepared a black plastic box with individual cells to receive fifty of the radios, dropped the second model into one of the small recesses, and carefully closed the lid.

Within twenty-four hours he had the box full. Rogan decided that the time had come to start selling.

He went round to the nearest radio shop and showed his wares.

The radio dealer squinted at one of the minute receivers and scratched his grizzled head.

"Can't see that anyone would want a radio as small as that," he said slowly. "It's not practical."

Rogan put the radio through its paces once more and proved to his own satisfaction at any rate, that it was eminently practical.

The dealer remained unimpressed. "No, I can't take them. Sorry." He thought for a minute. "Only thing you might

try—they could go down as an advertising gimmick or something."

Rogan decided not to waste time arguing. He muttered his thanks for the suggestion and went off to the next dealer.

This man was almost equally cautious.

" If you like to leave ten of them with me, I'll keep them on a sale-or-return basis. I'm not going to advance any money on them, though."

" All right," said Rogan. He was in no particular hurry. " But just in case you need it, here's my phone number . . ."

The dealer offhandedly noted it down, and Rogan left him the radios.

When he had gone the dealer took out one of the radios on the end of a small screwdriver. He found a sheet of blank card, put a spot of gum in the middle and carefully stuck the radio to it.

He pondered a moment, took a brush pen and wrote on the card : " Smallest radio in the world—only £5."

While he was doing so the door buzzed and a customer pushed it open.

" These pocket transistor radios you have in the window." The customer waited until he had the dealer's full attention. " I'd like to look at some of them."

" We have quite a range, sir," said the dealer, turning round and taking two or three standard size pocket receivers off the shelf behind him. " There's the ' Mighty Atom ' at twelve guineas and the ' Compact Comet ' at ten guineas."'

The customer was turning them over in his hands when he caught sight of the card which the dealer had left lying on the counter.

" What's this ?" he asked in a tone of quickened interest.

The dealer showed him.

" A new one just in."

He demonstrated how to change channels, how to switch on and off. The man was fascinated.

" But it's only five Pounds. Doesn't that make it just about the cheapest on the market ?"

The dealer had to admit it *was* cheap.

" It's only a novelty really, of course. And making one uses very small amounts of raw materials, the manufacturers tell us."

" I can believe that," said the customer. " But there must be a fantastic amount of detail work in them. Anyway I'll take one."

The dealer opened the small black box of radios, took one out, and carefully wrapped it in a twist of tissue paper.

" Mind you don't lose it," he said.

Two hours later the dealer was ringing Rogan to ask for another five hundred of the radios.

" They're fantastic," he said. " I've never known anything sell like this. How soon can you let me have them ?"

Rogan made a quick mental calculation and decided he'd better step up production.

So the big sales rush began.

Everyone wanted one of the tiny radios. They were a gimmick, yes. But gimmicks sold. Goodness, *how* they sold.

Women wore then in earrings. Men had them inset in signet rings. Children insisted on having one. And, of course, children quickly lost them.

They slipped out of insignificant holes in pockets or got lost in the linings of little handbags. They dropped unnoticed from small grubby fingers, and once they had rolled on the floor it was virtually goodbye. Sometimes, if the fall had not put them out of alignment, it was possible to locate them by shining a powerful light about the floor, until music or speech blared out of an infinitesimal cranny in the floorboards. Then a few minutes deft work with tweezers might recover the lost prize.

More often the minute radios were trodden on, swept up or sucked into a vacuum cleaner to be smothered in dust and fluff. Demand for replacement was consequently brisk.

After two months, sales showed no sign of falling off, but Rogan decided to add another line. He was now very rich, so it was more for fun than anything else that he programmed the factory for the production of a sub-microscopic tape recorder. It ran for twenty hours, recording on tape so fine that you needed a microvisor to see it at all.

Again, the power was derived from incident light, and control was by holding coloured filters between the light source and the device. A red filter caused the tape to run fast in reverse, a blue filter switched from record to playback.

The device was popular. Very popular. Apart from its obvious uses for parlour tricks and practical jokes, it was

much in demand by private detectives, amateur and professional. Rogan also suspected that a large proportion of the output was absorbed by espionage activity on one side or the other.

Eventually so many people were using them that the things became a nuisance. So Rogan switched production to a TV set. It was so tiny that you needed a magnifying glass to see the picture at all. But still people bought them.

It was then that two things happened which Rogan failed at first to connect. He noticed that the power consumed by his micro-factory was two and a half times the amount he'd calculated—and the amount he'd observed to be in use when manufacture first began.

Rogan at first suspected a fault in the micro-ammeter, but another instrument gave the same reading. This was puzzling.

The second odd occurence was even more inexplicable. Peering into the micro-factory, Rogan had noticed a kind of grey fuzz, not unlike fungus, growing in one corner. He wondered if something had gone badly wrong with the control system, but the products—minute radios and TV sets—still rolled faultlessly and regularly off the production line.

He got a surgical scalpel, and with the point, carefully cut out the grey fuzz. Under the maximum power lens of his microvisor, the fuzz showed a complex structure, much of the detail too small to be resolved.

The next day the fuzz was there again. Again he cut it out. This time it seemed to be developing a vague form—the form (could he be imagining it?) of a winged insect.

He spent the whole day trying to reason out what was causing it. Everything, apparently, was functioning normally. But there was the anomaly of the extra power being consumed. Was it possible that *other work* was going on in his factory, in parallel with the work he had programmed?

Could the computer be undertaking its own experimental work? It hardly seemed likely. A much more sinister possibility impinged on Rogan's mind, and he strived to push it aside.

The fact that he was unable to see the actual working of the micro-factory with his microvisor, because the active components were so extremely small, meant that he could not

be sure that other entities were not present in the factory. Entities which by reason of their infinitesimal size he could never observe directly.

Could intelligence exist on so small a scale? And if so, might it not be powerless to influence the macro-world—the world lived in by man—until Rogan provided a lever that was small enough for it to twist?

Rogan gloomily studied the micro-factory, felt an impulse to smash it with one quick blow of a hammer.

It was late at night now. He felt worn out by a day of futile, unanswered questions. He decided he was becoming a prey to his own fears. The micro-factory, after all, was turning out perfectly good saleable products. Better get some rest.

The wasp-thing came out at him next morning as he took the transparent cover off the micro-factory—buzzed at him viciously.

He dodged and struck at it blindly. He missed. The wasp-thing darted through an open door into the conservatory.

He followed it, with a kind of mad bravado. It mustn't get away.

In the conservatory, under the hot, glassy sun, everywhere was alive with insects. Bluebottles buzzed. Wasps. Bees of various sorts. Which was *it*?

There was one way to tell.

Quietly he closed the open skylight in the glass roof, and both the doors. He had the thing trapped now.

He grabbed an aerosol spray from the ledge behind the door and blasted at every insect in a kind of frenzy. Insects were buzzing now incoherently, in mad circles, their co-ordination gone. They whirred around him in tight spirals. His flesh crept.

That one in the top corner now? Was that it?

He hit it with a high spray. The wasp spiralled down out of control. Another one in the corner of the door pane. He blasted it at close range with the spray. Nothing happened. And again. Nothing.

Now, realising the horror, he tried to smash it against the pane with the butt end of his spray.

The wasp-thing came at him, fastened to his wrist, and stung him deeply. He crushed it between his fingers and

there was only a dry crackling. There was no juice in it—except for the poison sac. Or was it a virus or bacterial culture?

Heavily, he staggered back into the hall and fumbled with the phone.

Would he never get through?

"Doctor, I've been stung by an insect. No, not an insect, not a *real* insect. Exceedingly rare and deadly. Can't identify. Bring every antidote, every antitoxin.

"I may not have very long, Doctor."

Rogan lay on the sofa, tearing at his collar, trying to remain calm.

Bill Spencer

We do not publish many psi stories—it is a plot motive which has been so overdone in recent years that readers have become heartily sick of the word psi itself. However, try this one for a change.

THE PSI SQUAD

by PHILIP E. HIGH

" Drink this, please." Harcourt's voice was soothing but firm.

" What is it—a truth drug ?" Nevinson eyed the pale liquid doubtfully.

" It's a drug, yes, but not a truth drug. It's purpose is to relax, to ease the patient's natural hesitancy." Harcourt's professional assurances had worn smooth and convincing by constant repetition. " You came to me for help, I cannot help unless you co-operate."

" I see." Nevinson swallowed, frowning. " You will excuse my natural caution, Doctor, but if the slightest hint of this matter reached the Department—I am a policeman, you see, a superintendant—the State might consider discharging a neurotic "

" Neurosis is your own term, I take it ?"

" Well, yes, I—"

" May I suggest that you leave the diagnosis to me," Harcourt smiled his professional smile, " Now, you came to me because you felt something was wrong, some probably frightening aberration which we will deal with later. Were you under pressure at the time."

" A policeman is always under pressure." Nevinson sighed. " Unfortunately this happened three weeks ago while on a holiday in Europe. Before I left everyone told me I should visit the Spatza, you've heard of it no doubt, one of the show-pieces of the world." He paused and shook his head. " Can't quite recall what time of day I got there—was it evening ?"

" It doesn't matter," said Harcourt gently. He had been watching Nevinson closely for pupil-dilation and was relieved to see it had begun.

" Doesn't it ? No, I suppose it doesn't, time isn't all that—" A film seemed to descend over his eyes and he lost contact. He was still speaking but Harcourt and the consulting room had disappeared. He was living it again. He was back in the small European hotel which, although prohibitively expensive, was literally a museum piece.

Real *glass* in windows which opened outwards on metal rods, *radiators*, *electric light*, every piece of equipment in the hotel dated back five hundred years.

Nevinson tossed his suitcase on to the bed and looked round the incredibly wide room. So this was how they lived five hundred years ago. Strange, perhaps they suffered from claustrophobia or had been deliberate space-wasters. Yet, curiously, despite its size, the room was cramped or more aptly, cluttered. After a brief examination he realised why, everything in the room was *fixed*, not a single article of furniture was recessed, nothing could be folded into floor or wall. God, what a way to live ! Nonetheless Spatza was worth seeing, worth sleeping in if only for a single night.

He looked about him with even greater interest. Above the head of the bed two ancient swords were crossed below an unfamiliar flag and, on either side of the flag two curiously shaped objects dangled from pegs.

He crossed the room, frowning at them, what the devil were they ? Metal urns ? Food carriers for troops of a bygone age? History, that is ancient history, had not been a compulsory part of his education. He thought, with a tinge of regret, that in these days of specialising he had skipped the course completely.

He lifted one of the objects from its peg, sat on the edge of the bed and studied it, frowning. Idiot ! he said to himself, on closer examination their purpose was obvious.

He smiled to himself, realising he was tired but somehow completely relaxed, then, suddenly . . .

He was lying face down in a hole in the earth—no, not a hole, a slit trench. He was no longer Nevinson, Nevinson had never existed, nothing existed save—

The air split, a cloud of black smoke appeared suddenly above his head and shrapnel spattered the ground about him.

Somewhere a man screamed thinly. He went on screaming and Kauptman's harsh voice began shouting for stretcher bearers.

To his left the Spandau stuttered angrily, the brief burst of fire fading away in the weapon's characteristic sighing sound. At least four Brens thudded back an angry response from the opposite side of the railway line. Tommy was hanging on tightly, working his way up the culvert trying to outflank the position. They would succeed of course, the long, hopeless rearguard actions would go on until none were left to fight.

He felt suddenly naked, exposed and curiously helpless. What did one do when hope expired? The replacements who never arrived, the promised artillery support which always failed to materialise, the armour which never appeared and the skies black with allied planes.

To his right there was a brief plopping explosion, then another. Mortars! Tommy had got a mortar going, cleverly concealed as usual, probably behind the ruins of the railway bridge and there was nothing they could do about it. Their own weapons and their crews had long since been knocked out on the long pull back.

The world erupted suddenly in noise and flame and he found himself tossed sprawling and helpless like unwanted refuse. He landed heavily on his back, rolled over twice, tried to sit up and couldn't. The upper half of his tunic was missing, the trousers torn rags. He made scrabbling motions with his hands in an effort to sit upright but succeeded only in curling up on his left side. God, he hurt, hurt inside as if someone had kicked him, kicked him again and again. With some effort he moved his head and looked down. Dully, unbelievingly, he blinked his eyes trying to focus them on the red oozing crater which had been his stomach . . .

Five hundred and seventy years in the future the German helmet rolled from Nevinson's knees and crashed to the floor.

Harcourt lifted Nevinson's eyelids and nodded to himself. It would be twenty minutes before normal consciousness returned—plenty of time.

He went quietly into the next room and dialed a number.

" Yes ?" The connection light brightened but the screen remained pointedly blank.

" Sub-agent Harcourt here, reference six stroke two eight four. I'd like to speak to Mr. Curd."

" Check, I'll put you through." There was a pause, then : " Hello, Harcourt, Curd here, what can I do for you ?"

" Nothing at the moment, thanks. I may be able to do something for you. I think I have one for you."

" Ah ! Genuine ?"

" Genuine and unusual, he's a touch-merchant."

" You're quite sure ?"

" I couldn't doubt it. He went right back to the times when there were *nations*. Luckily I've made a hobby of dead languages or I should have lost a lot."

" Hope you haven't lost him." Curd sounded anxious.

" On the contrary, he's still in my consulting room out to the world."

" Good, we'll pick him up as soon as we can."

" No need, there's an ironic twist—he's a superintendent of police."

" Good God !"

" Yes, he imagined he was suffering from aberrations, consequently he was a little cagey. I had to use Sachaunesol to break him down."

Curd chuckled. " There are windfalls *and* windfalls, to catch one fully trained really *is* something. How do you assess him ?"

" Imaginative but orthodox, he won't believe you even if you tell him."

" Then we'll have to show him, won't we ?" Curd chuckled again. " It was a smart move roping in some of you psychs as spotters. Thanks, you've done a fine job. Now for the details, his name—?"

Harcourt returned to the consulting room five minutes later smiling to himself. He knew enough about the Special Branch to realise what would happen. Nevinson would be relieved of his police duties and transferred in the normal way. He would then be given six months intensive training on conclusion of which he would be sent out on his first mission *alone*. It was a brutal, make-or-break system which strangely produced a high percentage of brilliant operatives.

Harcourt wondered briefly what they would lay on for Nevinson and whether the revelations regarding his faculties

would be made before or after the mission, if, of course, he survived it.

" Aska." Curd's blunt red finger stabbed at the star chart. " An independent colony which discourages visitors." He looked up. " The people on this planet are up to something, Nevinson, we're sending you to find out what."

Nevinson, standing stiffly to attention, said : " Yes, sir."

" At ease, Nevinson. Once a man is briefed for a mission we drop the formalities." He pushed the star chart to one side. " It's not going to be easy, we know this is your first mission but we have special reasons for choosing you. In the first place, although you have been through the initial training, you are unfamiliar with the Special Branch organisation and methods. If they do pick you up, you won't be able to tell them anything of value."

" Should they pick me up, sir ?"

" They shouldn't but they might, we're dealing with something we don't understand. According to rumour, only to rumour, mind, these people are *special*." Curd drew a deep breath and hesitated. " Their methods of interrogation are supposed to be unique."

" In what way, sir ?"

Again Curd hesitated, then he shrugged slightly. " They're supposed to be Psi's."

Nevinson stiffened. He did not voice the word ridiculous but his expression did.

" Oh, I know, I know." Curd made flapping motions with hands. " It *sounds* impossible but the grim fact is we've sent in five highly trained operatives and none have returned." He sighed. " We have, of course, made discreet enquiries but Aska disclaims all knowledge of them. Obviously we cannot press the matter without arousing suspicion but we'd like to know what happened to them. Somehow they betrayed themselves or—" Curd made a grimace, "—the people on Aska have *methods*."

He frowned and changed the subject abruptly. " You've been briefed and conditioned. You should get through but don't push your luck, observe and get out. Clear ?" He held out his hand. " Good luck, Nevinson."

The interview and the final ' good luck ' were in the forefront of Nevinson's mind as he stepped from the orbit-ferry and made his way towards the Aska customs buildings.

He thought ' now for it,' but the immigration official glanced perfunctorily at his papers, stamped them and handed them back.

" I'm afraid you'll have to put up at the Ferry Hotel, sir. Aska city is on the other side of the mountains, you see, and there is only a daily service." The official smiled faintly. " Visitors are rare here but you'll find the hotel well up to Empire standards."

It was, Nevinson was surprised and relieved. The small suite was cool, functional and mechanically without fault. All the equipment, including the dimensional with its small but comprehensive programme of entertainment tapes, were admirably serviced and maintained. The wide curving window of the bedroom looked out across miles of golden-coloured trees which stretched to the foot of blue, snow-capped mountains lining the horizon.

He sighed almost with relief but as an ex-policeman and trained operator he left nothing to chance. A careful check of the room, however, produced nothing suspicious. There were, as far as he could tell, no hidden spy-eyes or pick-ups. On the other hand, with micro-engineering in its present stage of perfection, the room might be crawling with the things. No use taking chances.

He unpacked what was necessary, selected a menu on the auto-serve and took his time over the well cooked swiftly delivered meal.

So far so good. He watched the wait-mech remove the empty dishes, loosened his collar and lay down on the bed. He could rest, in all probability no one would take the slightest interest in him until he arrived in the city the following day.

He was wrong.

At 8 p.m., local time, the door-mech announced three visitors and promptly opened the door without his personal intervention.

" Don't get up, purely a routine check." The speaker was a big man in a black uniform and a peaked cap which had gone out of fashion centuries ago. " Police." He flashed a bronze-coloured badge briefly. " I'm superintendant Garret." He waved his hand vaguely. " Vogel and Dawson, my assistants."

Nevinson climbed off the bed and dropped into the nearest chair. " What can I do for you—oh, please sit down."

" Thank you." Garrett lowered himself into a chair and his two assistants followed suit. Dawson took out a small note book, opened it and laid it on his knee.

" No quill pen ?" Now that it had come Nevinson felt at ease and almost confident.

" A quill !" Garret slapped his knee and laughed loudly. " You've a sense of humour, sir, I like that." He beamed. " You appreciate, I hope, that this is routine and reflects no personal distrust. This is a Rim planet and, as such, has certain attractions, a convenient hiding place for example. You understand."

" My papers were examined on arrival."

Garret made a depreciating gesture. " My dear fellow, you know as well as I, that today papers can be forged so skilfully they surpass the original. In any case, old chap, this isn't a third degree, a few simple questions to satisfy the powers-that-be and you can come and go as you please.

Nevinson felt his first twinge of unease. This was too smooth, too pat and altogether too friendly.

Garret took a small book out his pocket and studied it frowning. " Let's see now, where are we ? Ah, yes. You're here on a trade mission for Empire Automats ?

" True." Nevinson noted that Dawson now had a pencil poised over his note pad and that Vogel had pulled the peaked cap down over his eyes and appeared to have gone to sleep.

" And your name is Albert Harker ?"

" Again true."

Vogel pushed back his peaked cap and opened his eyes. " It isn't," he said.

Garret turned and beamed at him, his expression that of a father reproving an endearing but slightly naughty child. " What isn't, Vogel ? You're a little obscure today."

Vogel yawned. " He said it was true—it isn't that's all. He's not here on a trade mission and his name isn't Harker."

" Really ?" Garret continued to beam but somehow the atmosphere had changed. There was tension now, a grimness and suspicion and to Nevinson the whole room seemed bleak and vaguely threatening.

Garret leaned forward, still beaming. " Vogel says you're telling untruths, Mr. Harker. What have you to say to that ?"

Nevinson frowned. " What is this—some sort of joke ?"

" Oh, really !" Garret leaned back in his chair, his smile as broad as ever. " You insult our intelligence, sir, this may be a Rim planet but we have no time to play jokes. Where was your last call on this trade mission ?"

" Denza in the Rayle system."

" It was a rewarding visit ?"

" Moderate, I've done better elsewhere."

" He's lying." Vogel's voice was almost crooning.

" Do you wish to question me or would you rather play games ?" Nevinson's voice was convincingly indignant but he could feel sweat on his forehead.

" *You* are playing the games." Garret's smile had disappeared. " Suppose we begin with the truth, eh ? I suggest you are on the run from another system."

" I am not." Nevinson was disconcerted to find that he was already on the defensive.

" You are here on an espionage mission."

" Absolutely not."

" Absolutely yes," said Vogel. " He's a spy from Terran Intelligence."

Nevinson found himself raising his voice angrily. " What the hell is this ? I never heard such idiotic—"

" Save it !" Garret's voice was so harsh it startled Nevinson to silence.

" Now." Garret was beaming again. " Shall we begin at the beginning with the truth or do we have to drag it out of you ?"

" I don't know what you're talking about."

" You know, all right. What you can't accept is how *we* know. Surely they warned you ?"

" Look, if you're going to arrest me, get on with it."

" My dear fellow we've hardly begun. You're armed, I presume ?"

Nevinson nearly lost his temper. " If you can find a weapon on me you'll be damned lucky."

" We don't operate with luck only with facts—where is it ? "

" I have no weapons I tell you."

" Don't let him open his cigarette case," said Vogel.

" Your case, please." Suddenly there was a weapon in Garret's hand. " Take it nice and easy, I find the smell of burnt flesh offensive."

Conscious of the sweat trickling down his face Nevinson gave it to him. " There's nothing in there but twelve cigarettes."

" The fourth on the left could blow your head off," said Vogel, yawning.

Garret opened the case and extracted the cigarette. "Needle-blaster, very neat indeed." He replaced it carefully and looked up. " Now Vogel will tell *you*."

" He's a catspaw from the Special Branch of Terran Intelligence," said Vogel in a bored voice. " They threw him out in a hurry before he could learn too much background and organisation. In point of fact he's a police official transferred from his post specially to do his job."

Garret nodded, lit a cigarette and looked at Nevinson thoughtfully. " There's always a fool. Didn't they warn you ?"

Nevinson shrugged, bluff now was a waste of time. " I was told you were special."

" Anything else ?"

" They hinted you had paranormal faculties."

" Wasn't that a broad enough hint for you ?"

" Candidly I didn't believe it, I'm still doubtful."

" Haven't we given you proof ?"

" You've given me proof of knowledge, it could be prior knowledge."

" Stubborn aren't you ?" Garret sighed. " Tell us something unknown to anyone but yourself, truth or lie."

Nevinson scowled at him, suddenly tempted. " Very well, at eighteen I had an affair with a married woman named Ethel."

Vogel laughed softly. " It happened to your best friend and her name was Vanya."

" Damn clever aren't you ?" Nevinson found himself irritated with the apparent proof. " I give you top marks for showmanship, the rest is questionable. As to being a psi, for your information, so am I."

Vogel grinned back at him insolently. " Give a mind-reader a chance, I wanted to tell *you* that."

Nevinson felt himself pale. " What the hell do you mean ?"

" I think you can recall your own unusual experience without my help—it still worries you, doesn't it ?"

" How did you know *that* ?" Nevinson half rose from his chair.

" Don't get rough ideas." The weapon in Garret's hand jerked forward. " On this planet we like to handle things

peacefully. Now sit down and listen." He smiled, spinning the weapon skilfully and a little dangerously by the trigger guard. " Whether you believe us or not we get results. Now the position is this, an intelligence agent may enter an independent colony providing he declares himself as such and has reasonable grounds—such as an extradition warrant—for doing so."

" I am perfectly familiar with Interstellar law," said Nevinson bitterly.

" Then you flouted that law by landing on this planet as a trade representative, didn't you ? That very act makes you answerable to local courts and the penalty could be execution."

" Let's get on with it." Now that he was caught Nevinson felt curiously indifferent.

" Not so fast." Garret rose, spinning the gun again. " I said the penalty *could be* execution. Later we may need more information from you but, in the meantime, we are confining you to this suite until the courts decide what sort of charge should be brought against you." He grinned a little twistedly. " For your information we're sensitive here, we believe in our faculties and we like outsiders to believe in them too." At the door he turned. " If you think mind reading is all we can do, try getting out of this suite, just try . . ."

Nevinson swore at the closing door and sat angrily on the bed. He felt not only apprehensive but humiliated. Information had been taken from him with insulting ease and he had gained nothing.

He frowned. These people might not be psi but they were certainly special, how had they *done* it. A sudden uncomfortable thought struck him, he was thinking along *conventional* lines. Vogel might, or might not be a telepath but whatever it was he had he got *results*. Whatever it was he did it *worked*, irrespective of the means he *read minds*.

Nevinson found himself sweating slightly.

He frowned at the door, his thoughts turning to other matters. What did they mean—he could try ? The challenge was suddenly so irritating he was unable to let it pass. No doubt there was an alert and armed guard outside but armed guards had been overcome more than once.

He tried the mech and the door opened obediently. Outside the brightly lit corridor seemed empty. A sharpshooter of a muscle man in another room ?

He ripped the leg off a plastic chair and approached the door warily. As a weapon the chair leg was absurdly light but it would serve as a stabbing instrument and rightly used . . .

He reached the door, edged forward and staggered back with a cry of pain. It had felt as if a net of fish hooks had been dragged abruptly across his face.

Hands over his eyes he staggered back and leaned against the wall. Strangely there was no damnpness on his palms and he was surprised to find that he could still see.

Cautiously he took his hands from his face and walked slowly to the mirror. His face was *unmarked.*

He frowned at the door and thought ' force screen ' bitterly. It was an extraordinarily good one and no doubt of an advanced type. There were none of the usual visual distortions and not the faintest trace of scintillation.

Ah, well, force screens had been broken before, the first job was to find the weak spot, usually in the corner extremities, which could be checked by a simple test.

He picked up the chair leg again. All one had to do was toss something at the screen several times and note the least resilient spot when it bounced back.

He tossed the chair leg. It went right through and landed out in the corridor.

He stared at it unbelievingly, picked up a table ornament and tried again. That, too, went straight through.

An A-screen ? No, that wasn't possible, it had been talked about for years but no one had ever succeeded in devising one and yet—God, suppose they had ! A non-lethal barrier which permitted the entry of inanimate matter but stopped organic life dead in its tracks.

Supposing Aska had succeeded ! H.Q. had to know, he looked rather wildly round the room and thought suddenly of the dimensional. A skilled technician could adapt the instrument for transmitter purposes, useless for hyperdimensional work, of course, but perhaps a ship in orbit.

He was no technician, he was without tools or micro-kit but he had to try.

After thirty minutes blasphemous effort he succeeded in removing the inspection panel.

" I get the idea," said an amused voice behind him. " It's ingenious, shows an admirable devotion to duty but let's not get monumentally optomistic."

Nevinson turned angrily. " That's right, make—" He stopped. He had the uncomfortable feeling that his eyes protruded slightly. " What are *you* doing here ?"

" I belong here, didn't you know ?" Curd put a suitcase on the floor and dropped into the nearest chair.

Nevinson felt the colour rush to his face. " Then it was all a fool—"

" Quiet !" Curd's voice had the crack of authority. " Remember, you were sent here on my orders, you will oblige me by bearing that in mind." He paused to let the words sink in and the other's temper to cool then he smiled faintly. " You may sit down, Nevinson, but you will remember please, you are an agent. It is not your business to question my movements or my methods, nor for that matter jump to the conclusion you have been the victim of an elaborate hoax."

Nevinson wriggled uncomfortably in his chair, acutely conscious that the lecture was justified. " I'm sorry, sir."

" There's no need for apologies. I appreciate that your orthodox ideas have been up-ended and it's only natural under the circumstances for you to conclude the whole business was a hoax. In point of fact, however, no one here had a clue to your identity. You might have been here on a trade mission, you might have been a criminal on the run, you could have been anything. I can assure you that my men had no prior knowledge whatever."

Curd paused and sucked alight a cigarette. " As you may have guessed by now, everything on this planet is nothing but a front for a new unit we're forming. Periodically we rope in innocent volunteers to visit this planet, sometimes, as in your case, trained operatives and, on two occasions, we've caught operators from some of the Independent colonies who had heard whispers of something going on."

Again Curd paused, frowning at the other thoughtfully. " I can see you're still doubtful—the unit we're training here is a Psi Squad."

Nevinson felt himself stiffen but he fought down the expression of disbelief.

Curd blew a careful smoke ring. " Before you reject the idea as absurd, stop and *think*. In the last nine hundred years we have made enormous technical strides, surely it is within the bounds of reason to argue that man's mental capabilities might also expand." He laughed softly. " I can see your trouble,

you're reasoning in terms of mysticism, of alchemy and the black arts. A man with mental advantages prefers to keep them a mystery, it gives him an edge over his fellows. Boiled down, a paranormal faculty is nothing more than an *extenssion* of the normal senses and as such can be reduced to a science." He smiled suddenly. " For example, trying getting out of that door."

Nevinson scowled at him. " With your permission, sir, no thanks. Whatever kind of force screen that is, it hurts."

Curd smiled. " It hurts, yes, but the only force screen in this room is the one in your mind. Garret is a highly advanced hypnotic specialist, he wasn't spinning that gun for fun but for hypnotic purposes and, as you have learned, it worked."

Nevinson's scowl deepened. " But that's not psi."

Curd sighed. " You're arguing as to *means* not *ends*. The yardstick in this unit is whether the *means* achieve their purpose."

Nevinson felt suddenly uncomfortable. This was a point of fact he had almost reached himself but had failed to follow up.

Curd reached down for the suit case and pulled it on to his lap. " We didn't send you here entirely as a guinea pig, Nevinson, you're here to join the squad."

" I ?" Nevinson sat upright.

" You." Curd opened the suitcase. " I'm sorry to break this to you the hard way but you are a paranormal."

" What !" Nevinson half rose from his chair.

" Don't look so alarmed, it's an asset not a disease. Further, from this moment on, you are under orders and you will do exactly as I say." He removed something from the suitcase and handed it across. " This is a diplomatic bag. Remove the plastic wrapping and hold the bag in your hands."

" Yes, sir." Uncomprehendingly Nevinson obeyed.

" Relax, man, lean back in your chair. Right, now what do you get ?"

" I don't quite follow—"

" Never mind about following, just do as I say. What do you feel when you touch that bag, answer me in terms of emotion."

" I—I—" Nevinson found himself stuttering. " I suppose I feel—afraid—yes—yes, that's it afraid."

Suddenly he was afraid. The crowd at the ferry-port looked normal enough but all the time—that Steward on the liner for example, the way he had kept hanging around. Desperately he tried to reassure himself. He was a legal courier on a legal errand for an independent colony, he was carrying a diplomatic bag, there was not the slightest reason for them to suspect him. On the other hand he was certain he was suspect and there was no doubt whatever he was being watched.

I've been doing this too long, he told himself. After a couple or three runs your nerve goes. He'd never have taken it on if he'd known what he was carrying but once you were in there was no getting out. God, he wished he'd never seen that advanced addict, no wonder the penalty for carrying the stuff was death.

No, mustn't think of that, he was shaky enough now. Anyway it was Earth's fault really, an Independent had to live somehow, what with all these tariffs and embargoes. All this talk of keeping a united Empire in case they met up with an alien enemy was so much bunk. All Earth cared about was holding the reins, as for the proposed freedom-within-the-empire that was just a blind.

Weren't there a hell of a lot of uniformed men? He looked quickly over his shoulder and saw others. They were closing in! God, and they said the Special Branch were in this business now.

He had a sick premonition that this was the end and, worse, his nerves were cracking. He knew he should stay put, he knew he could probably bluff it out, he knew the place of concealment would fool a hundred experts but he panicked.

He turned and tried to dodge into the crowd.

A uniformed man appeared almost immediately at his side. "We'd like a word with you, sir."

He swung the bag wildly at the man's face and ran.

"Halt! Halt! You there. Halt!"

The crowds seemed to melt away from about him and he was running frantically across the bare white apron of the ferry-field.

"Halt!" Footsteps pounded behind him.

He turned and fired. He saw the bluish discharge splash in the uniformed man's face. He saw the upgush of smoke and vapour. He saw the blackened thing collapse and go rolling across the white concrete and then something hit him full in the chest . . .

Nevinson opened his eyes a little dazedly. He was stunned and emotionally shocked. "What happened?"

" That was pretty good." Curd's voice was soothing. " Don't get alarmed, you're apt to get too involved emotionally but you'll learn with experience."

" I was telling you all that ?" Nevinson was calming down rapidly.

" A pretty workmanlike job too," said Vogel who had entered unnoticed.

" I wish I knew what I was doing." Nevinson looked up and found that Garret and Dawson had arrived also.

" All in good time," said Curd gently. " Incidentally, as you have probably guessed, the character with the bag was a suspected Cresotin carrier hiding behind diplomatic privileges —ever seen an advanced Cresotin addict ?"

Nevinson shuddered slightly. " Too many."

" We still don't know how he was carrying the stuff."

" Oh that's easy, the answer is so simple it borders on genius —I'm holding it." He smiled, strangely sure of himself. "The bag itself is Cresotin in it's unprocessed state and, as such, resembles leather or plastic."

Curd said : " Hell, they've got eight of those things through, when I consider the number of times we've checked the contents with photo-penetrators . . . Excuse me, I'd better call the sub-office, we know where he went."

When he returned he was grinning broadly. " We've stopped it, that stuff takes six weeks to process, distribution can't have gone far." He waved his hand. " Dial for drinks all round, Vogel, please. We'll relax while our new recruit receives a much deserved explanation."

When they all had drinks Curd leaned forward. " You will remember what I said to you about *means*, Nevinson. Well let me make it quite clear from the beginning that Vogel *does* read minds." He raised his glass and sipped thoughtfully. "Strictly speaking Vogel is an intonation reader, he listens not so much to what you say but *how* you say it. He is an interpreter of emphasis, over-emphasis and the imperceptible pause. To him a lie stands out like a sore thumb because the cleverest liar living cannot help over-emphasising the untruth in order to make it convincing. In short, Vogel can interpret speech with such skill that he knows not only what is left unsaid but what is inferred."

Curd drained his glass and nodded to Vogel. " Same again all round." He smiled. " Now for you, Nevinson and I'll

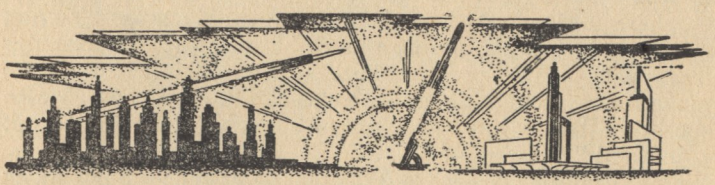
begin with the science side. Medicine has known for a long time that strong emotion brings about chemical changes in the blood. It was also known that minute electrical charges pass through the brain and nervous system, these also increase with emotion. Only recently, however, was it discovered that such human reactions left electro-chemical imprints on inanimate objects via the pores and sweat glands. It may surprise you to learn that in this day and age we have a device sensitive enough to detect these imprints. Perhaps, one day, we'll come up with a device smart enough to *interpret* but, in the meantime, we must make do with what we have—a man."

He grinned across at Nevinson. " You, my friend, have sufficient sensitivity of mind, plus an acutely tuned nervous system, not only to detect these imprints but to interpret them in terms of emotional response. You are, in the vulgar terms of the Psi Squad, a touch-merchant."

He accepted a re-filled glass from Vogel and nodded his thanks. " Obviously, the stronger the emotion the more precise the imprint, but don't imagine you're unique, Nevinson. Potential touch-merchants have existed for thousands of years. Take the case of the husband returning home from work and knowing, as soon as he opens the door, that his lawful wife is in a bad mood. He hasn't seen her, he has heard nothing but he senses there is an ' atmosphere.' This Johnny is a potential touch-merchant responding to the electro-chemical contents of the atmosphere."

" So now you know." Vogel grinned and raised his glass. " Brother, you're entering a strange sort of life. You now know you're nothing more than a play-back instrument, Garret makes force screens which don't exist and, as for me, I'm not a telepath but can read minds. Boiling the matter down, old boy, we're nothing more than a bunch of fakes !"

Philip E. High



Editorial (Continued)

because the question chiefly concerns the American markets from which I make my living when I do. I'm going to be extremely blunt because I take the matter seriously.

Clinical psychology, to start with. We've had umpteen dozen stories about the throwback in the future society who deviates to what we today regard as admirable and this hypothetical future culture calls insane. Either he wins out and puts things back the way they were (which is a silly form of wish-fulfilment) or he loses out and this is supposed to be a tragedy.

What about the real nature of madness in a future setting? What about new psychological disturbances? What about new—if you like—perversions of basic instincts?

Moving on from that: a couple of books I've read recently (mentioned at the beginning of this article) are as full of fascinating notions about the way attitudes to love and marriage can change as any writer about probable and possible futures could hope for. There's a host of real plots, too—by which I mean scope for deep character-analysis and properly motivated event—in recent work on the affective processes of animals. Man is an animal. What about a meaningful study of man's emotional attitude towards aliens?

True enough that: Bernard Wolfe, in *Limbo* and *Self-Portrait*, produced magnificent pyrotechnics on the theme of masochism and its relation to war; Matheson did *Lover When you're Near Me*, a superb horror-piece; Fritz Leiber, in *Nice Girl with Five Husbands*, touched on future marriage customs (so did Wylie, indirectly, in *Finnley Wrenn*, but that isn't s-f), and on possible new neuroses in *Coming Attraction*; and there are more that one can name.

The point I'm getting at is that you *can* name them. Each of these stories would be outstanding in any company, but in s-f they are all the more so because they are rarities. Only Philip Jose Farmer, in *The Lovers* and *Strange Relations*, has seriously worked this vein of immensely rich ore to any depth.

I said I was going to be blunt. The situation is such that if I just wanted to make money I could write a piece of fellow-travelling pornography (look on any bookstall) for a "Man's adventure" magazine or for an inferior pocketbook firm, into which I could put . . . well, a detailed, stroke-by-stroke

description of a couple of Lesbians. In two books I was looking at lately I found exactly that. If I wanted to write a seriously-intentioned study of a future or alien society in which this problem was a central one, it is unlikely in the extreme that I would find a market.

You get the idea.

Look around further ; I mentioned sex first because it's the most conspicuous example. But take also politics. A satire with political intention, yes. A novel with a political setting which is hostile to somebody's politics in another part of the world, yes. A political novel about anti-matter by someone who heard about it for the first time at a cocktail party and didn't bother to find out what any s-f fan knows (courtesy of Jack Williamson's *Seetee* stories, for instance) about the stuff, yes.

But a serious treatment in fictional form of trends already visible here and alarming to people with their eyes on the future, NO. Not if it criticises openly or by implication what is hallowed by age although also tattered by age.

And one of the definitions of *man* is " the political animal."

Religion, too. Here the situation isn't so bad. But the stories that spring to mind fall into limited groups. Blish's *A Case of Conscience* and Miller's *Canticle for Leibowitz* and others similar are pro-religion, and both fine novels, of course. Gore Vidal's *Messiah* and a lot of lesser works are anti-: either anti-fundamentalism or anti-some non-Christian religion

Yet the history of man's attitude towards his deities is as rich as that of man's attitude to sexuality in potential science fiction themes. Once again only Farmer seems to have explored this line at all, in stories like *Father*.

Before anyone points it out—yes, I know I'm being dogmatic. I haven't got infinite space at my disposal !

I think I've said enough to indicate that the sciences as yet barely touched by s-f are (to use a loose but convenient term) human sciences. I hope I'm not merely being grouchy. To put it in the personal context in which this whole article is written, it narks me to see writers in other fields treating questions which science fiction could reveal in a new and interesting light, without being able to work on them myself in the certainty of being paid for the effort.

And surely some of this lack is felt equally by readers. Look at it this way. Science fiction ought to be, and in the

physical and applied sciences often has been, one jump ahead. The world is now in a mess because we know more about what makes atoms tick than about what makes people tick. We are going to be forced painfully into making good that deficiency—or we won't be here much longer. Yet in s-f we're missing out on a whole area of this kind of progress. It's labelled with a rejection slip.

But it doesn't have to be. The fact that such writers as Philip Jose Farmer and Richard Matheson are so highly regarded in the s-f field is a pointer. If you're eager for more challenging stories in your magazines, *please* say so—the law of supply and demand will see to the rest.

For, believe me, we're itching to write them. Maybe they would even put the long-lost " sense of wonder " back where it was.

John Brunner

Opinion . . .

Dear Mr. Carnell,

For years, I've skimmed over "The Literary Lineup," occasionally noting that, as usual, my favourite story ran a bad last but seldom giving the department more attention than this. It never occurred to me that your ratings are based on reader opinion expressed via letters, and that by failing to register *my* views, I was in some small part responsible for my top-rated yarns remaining in a dismal 4th or 5th position. Why this truth should have been so long a-bornin' in my brain is inexplicable, although one might lay some of the blame at your door for failing to solicit letters from readers like myself, to whom the idea of writing a page or two of comments may still be unthought of. Perhaps a small mention in the editorial might help to jog some recalcitrant memories.

Now, regarding *New Worlds* 110. Gerard Quinn does not seem to have improved very much during his long absence from the pages of professional s-f magazines, although one notices a more graphic and simple style than that of the Quinn we knew so well around 1950-55. Certainly, his art is much more attractive than that of Jordon and "Jarr" whose abominations have been desecrating "Nova" covers recently. Perhaps Quinn is cramped by the relatively small space allotted to art on the *New Worlds* cover. I'm not going to wake up the old argument again—it must be admitted that a small illustration is preferable to a large full-page drawing mutilated by the addition of a logotype, story blurbs and a price sticker—but I feel that the cover problem is still unsolved. No matter how fine the artwork is, it loses much of its individuality when squeezed into the tiny space allotted to it. The best solution, I think was that tried by Brian Lewis in his abstract illustrations for *New Worlds* in the 80s and 90s. He used lots of white, bright clear colours, intriguing surrealist shapes a la Yves

Tanguy and thus managed to produce startlingly attractive covers. I don't think you would lose much by trying this particular formula again one of these days.

Regarding your editorial . . . I should like to query your statement that " the return on one good novel can repay a careful author a hundredfold " in non-sf magazine serial rights, film rights and so on. It's been my unhappy experience that the " good " novels seldom reach the heights of such publications as the *Saturday Evening Post* and other " slicks," nor are books of quality generally made into films. This is especially true of science fiction novels. The general quality of s-f found in the *Sep* and other luxury magazines has been at all times extremely low. Heinlein's *Green Hills of Earth* stories had their first airing in the *Post*, certainly, as did Christopher's *No Blade of Grass*, Wibberley's *The Day New York Was Invaded* (*The Mouse That Roared*), Wyndham's *Day Of The Triffids* and so on. Bradbury, Bloch, Beaumont and other short story writers regularly appear in everything from *Playboy* to *Field and Stream.*

However, on analysis, much of this material turns out to be popular fiction with a motheaten scientific slipcover, or straight action writing " souped up " with an application of an intriguing scientific concept. The Christopher and Wyndham fell into this category, in my opinion—under the surface, what have you got but blood-and-thunder with some sex and sadism tossed in as a make-weight ? Heinlein's stories from the *Post* are whimsical little pieces of Saturday afternoon reading, weak, limp and unappetising. He wrote them to make money, an action I can't find it in my heart to condemn, but to take them for good science fiction is surely a mistake. Surely the acid test is that Heinlein's *good* novels—*The Day After Tomorrow*, for instance, or *Stranger in a Strange Land*—are excellent s-f yet manifestly unsuited for serialization in a " family magazine." One of s-f's greatest qualities has been its ability to show our culture in perspective and expose its faults, two activities ignored by the *Green Hills* stories but taken up with startling effect in the novels I mentioned.

My rating of the stories in this issue is as follows :—1, *Resident Physician* ; 2, *Storm Wind* ; 3, *Nelson Expects* ; 4, *Change of Heart* ; 5, *The Fortress of True* and 6, *Stress.* In general, this is one of your poorest issues to date, containing two downright stinkers " The Fortress of True " and " Stress," two mediocre items and two disappointing though craftmanlike

stories. White has just exhausted the possibilities of his " Sector General," idea, and it's about time he dropped it and started writing things like " Tableau " and " Dogfight " again. There is, after all, only a small number of variations in the hospital situation, and these descriptions of unusual cases and even more unusual treatments are becoming tedious. " Storm-Wind," a story to which I had been looking forward for some time, was the most startling disappointment of the year. After Ballard's excellent *Science Fantasy* short stories like " Studio 5, The Stars," I was expecting something new and fresh in his novel. He's inventive, ingenious and original, with a writing style that I personally find very exciting. Why then does he have to fall back on the oldest of the old cliches for his first novel ? Are original ideas so scarce these days.

I have always been at a loss to understand the British penchant—indeed morbid fascination for the idea of " Nature-Gone-Wild." Every writer with a working knowledge of English and a hazy recollection of 19th-century imaginative fiction seems to feel that it is his sacred duty to write a novel about what will happen if the seas dry up, the wheat dies, the earth goes out of orbit or we all grow a third eye. For years, British writers have been producing novels of this kind, few of them distinguished by any skill of writing or story, and most unutterably dull. *The Tide Went Out*, *White August*, *The Death of Grass*, *The Scent of Newmown Hay*, *The Kraken Wakes* . . . it's a list that could be continued on a nauseum, and apparently will be if " Storm-Wind " is an indication of what is to come from British writers. There are more things to write about than the effect of startling natural changes on our civilization. Flood, fire, pestilence and famine certainly wreak drastic changes on our way of life, but when science fiction chronicles such changes without any thought for their larger implications (who bothers to think about the long-range effects of an altered land pattern resulting from heavy flooding for instance, or the kind of world we would have if there was no grain or grass ? Certainly none of the authors who write about such things), then it is failing in its function. Ballard can write better stuff than "Storm-Wind," as his short stories prove—why then doesn't he try to do so ?

John M. Baxter,
Sydney, Australia.

Guest Editorial . . .

Dear Mr. Carnell,

The guest editorial in *New Worlds*, No. 112, was most interesting ; but I was surprised to find that John Rackham really believed that if the scientists were given a free hand they could set the world to rights. As individuals I salute them : but I am not prepared to trust them as a group any further than I could throw a fat politician. Their good intentions have already taken us far too close to Hell for comfort.

The suggestion that the Communists are ' running away ahead in technology ' is not strictly true. Russia (I presume he had Russia in mind, although there are other 'Communist' countries which are still back in the dark ages) is ahead in one field only, that of rocketry. Even here, as Bob Hope once wittily remarked : " It's just that *their* Germans are better than *our* Germans."

I know that democracy has many shortcomings, and that a totalitarian state, such as Germany had under Hitler and—as seems likely—Russia has under Kruschev, can get things done quicker by riding roughshod over the individual ; but I don't regard the totalitarian state as necessarily a better form of society. It just makes things easier for the politicians—and the scientists.

Incidentally, how's this for a piece of roughshodding ? I quote : '. . . never mind the morals, the ethics, the traditional values, the historical abstractions, for the moment. Let's get this " science " to bear on putting the whole sorry mess into some sort of workable order, once more.' I like that ' once more !' What period did Mr. Rackham have in mind ?

It boils down to this. He would like to see s-f used to propagate the idea of the scientists leading us to ' a new, saner, and better world.' I can only warn him that this old map of Heaven is inscribed all over : ' *Here Be Dragons* !'

E. Mackin,
Liverpool, 7.

Dear John,

I have examined John Rackham's statement that s-f is " much nearer to reality than any fiction form since the days of ' inevitable ' Greek drama " with microscope and telescope, but can make neither head nor tail of it.

Leaving aside the dubious nature of his reference to Greek drama, you could take a thousand examples from the writing of this century alone to disprove the rest of his contention. What about Forster's *Passage to India*, or C. P. Snow's 'Lewis Eliot' novels, or even Muriel Spark's current little curiosity, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*—purely arbitrary examples? Don't all these, among other functions, deal with different current problems (race, government, education) and different sorts of reality in a way no s-f even attempts?

Rackham gives his game away by going on to compare s-f only with thrillers and cowboy stories. Why always set this lowly standard? S-f should try at least to capture something of the mythopoetical quality of the early Wells; the best of it does this, often by using satire as Wells and Swift used it.

Nigel Denis said recently that fiction is what fact isn't. This dictum is a much better guide to the nature of s-f than trying to claim for it a superiority in a field that lies away beyond its territory entirely. These Guest Editorials are a marvellous institution; but while we all heartlessly fling opinions about, let us have compassion for facts.

Brian W. Aldiss,
Oxford.

Calling Lee Harding . . .

Dear John,

Lee Harding merely scratches the surface of the problem when he blames the authors for the decline in science fiction quality.

It doesn't pay to write science fiction. Quality defers to quantity in order to ensure a desireable flow of cheques. A pot-boiler gets the same rate a story of real literary merit.

The writers have to cater for a hyper-critical, intelligent and knowledgeable readership which uses every opportunity (rightly so) to pan what they dislike or disagree with. Most mainstream hacks get a lot more for a lot less, with no readers' cudgel always casting its shadow.

Editors would have no trouble in raising the standard of their magazines to a consistent "best authology," level—provided they rejected an even larger percentage of stories than they do now.

Result? The disappearance, or the still-borning of many writers (with yours truly right in there), and few magazines.

" Incidental " science fiction, which does nothing to shape and improve the essential image of the literature, will be with us for a long time.

What can be done? How about the introduction of points ratings and bonus payments (a la *Analog*) or a bonus on readers' votes, for the year's six top tales.

Something like this would provide incentive, a heightened sense of competition, and a rise in quality.

Also, I'd like to see more liaison and correspondence between writers. This would stimulate the flow of ideas, and discussion (personal, or by letter) would lead to a pool of knowledge and experience—and plots. Notice that, in marked contrast to America, collaborations here are as rare as tartan stars.

When, for instance, a writer such as John Brunner makes a fairly detailed criticism of a story such as " The Pathfinders," he's saying in effect, " I'd love to get my teeth into *that* idea !" Every science fiction writer has probably had this reaction.

A word to Bob Coulson—the hand of common usage isn't going to set foot in my territory, James Joyce or no James Joyce . . .

Donald Malcolm,
Paisley, Renfrewshire.

Film Review

THE DAY THE EARTH CAUGHT FIRE

Starring **Janet Munro, Leo McKern and Edward Judd**

After the long years of dismal Hollywood B-pictures labelled science fiction and the very recent BBC berserk-state with atrocious TV serials (*A For Andromeda* and *R.D.* 7—bad casting and plain terrible scripting) I had little enthusiasm for a British effort with such a jaw-cracking title as the one above but went to the Press show because advance information considered that it was a good newspaper story centred round the London *Daily Express*.

For which publicity I am eternally grateful. The film turned out to be the best s-f venture this side of *Destination Moon*, with crisp sparkling dialogue, continuous action with mounting tension and first-class camera work and acting. There wasn't a dull moment or one proverbial mistake, even on the scientific side.

British readers could not have missed any of the resultant publicity by the *Daily Express* since the film was premiered (to be generally released on the Rank circuit January 14th) but for overseas readers who will not see it for some time, a brief resume :—by coincidence America and Russia explode " big ones " simultaneously in the Arctic and Antarctic, world weather begins to change, London experiences rain, heat, fog, drought, then fire. As the pieces are fitted together in the newspaper office it is concluded that the Earth's axis has tilted 11° but it is later discovered that it has, in fact, been jolted out of its orbit and is falling into the Sun.

The *Express* informs the world, pandemonium reigns and martial law is declared as water becomes the rarest commodity. One scene here alone is worth the price of admission as the beatniks go berserk in Chelsea. Desperate measures are called for as world governments get together and decide to detonate five atomic explosions to try and stop the Earth's drift. As the final countdown is concluded the presses are standing by with alternative headlines : *World Saved* or *World Doomed*. It was a relief to come out into the cold winter air after the tension and psychological feeling of great heat generated by this fine picture.

John Carnell