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A Nova Publication 16th Year of Publication

Boris Karloff

Host of ABC TV's

Out Of This World

s-f playhouse

ITV Network

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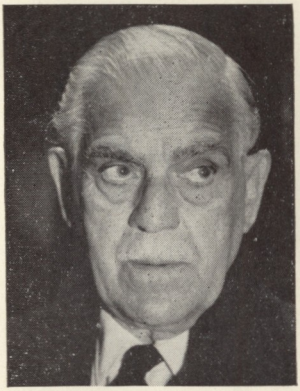

From playing the role of the creator of "Frankenstein" in the film of that title to being host to ABC Television's Saturday night series of "Out Of This World" science fiction adventures (ITV National Network, 10.00 p.m.) covers a span of thirty years in the life of celebrated actor Boris Karloff, during which time this kindly English gentleman—the antithesis of all the macabre characters he has played—forged a name that ranks with that of Lon Chaney and Bela Lugosi as a master of the horrendous.

Meeting him and producer Leonard White on the "Out Of This World" set at Teddington Studios recently, we discussed his fascinating career at some length; gruesome though many of the parts have been in the long list of films he has played in, there is little doubt that he has enjoyed the medium immensely from a truly artistic

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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Guest Editorial

Although he no longer writes science fiction stories Guest Editor Robert Silverberg still retains a close interest in the genre and offers some comments this month upon a subject which has long been controversial

S-F and Escape Literature

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

If ever a weary and overworked phrase deserved retirement from public circulation, " *escape literature* " merits the rest. It strikes me as redundant and needlessly pejorative, to use a couple of educated-sounding words. It deserves to be sent to the graveyard of empty phrases, to be interred beneath a blank gravestone.

The pejorative effect of the phrase is one that every reader of science fiction is amply familiar with. " Oh, that's only escape literature," one is told all too often, when trying to persuade a friend to sample the wares of a Heinlein or a Sturgeon or a Clarke. The " only " isn't even necessary. Telling a book off as " escape literature " is enough to damn it straightaway, without any qualifying adverbs to strengthen the effect. Science fiction, because it falls into the category of " escape literature," is automatically beneath contempt. It is lumped lightheartedly in with such other " escape literature " genres as the thriller and the western story as mere mental eyewash.

" Escape literature," then, is a nasty phrase among the literati. Which would be perfectly all right—nasty phrases are stock-in-trade for the men who dispense literary judgements—except that this particular phrase is not only nasty, but meaningless as well.

I hold that it's a redundant phrase—that the word " literature " *embodies* the concept of escape. And thus that the stigmatizing of a book or of a genre as " escape " literature is actually to say nothing at all about it. An empty word has been

added to a meaningful one, but no act of criticism has thereby been carried out.

Getting into an argument about the *purpose* of literature is not intended here. Teleology has never been my strong point. But I *am* interested in the *effect* of literature. And let us, for the sake of this discussion, include as literature all forms of printed prose fiction. I'd rather characterize some things as " good " literature and others as " bad " literature than start deciding between that class of prose fiction which deserves the name literature at all, and that which does not.

The effect of literature in general, I submit, is that of escape. Take as a point in question a work that no one will deny falls into the class " literature "—the lengthy novel by Marcel Proust known in English as *Remembrance of Things Past*. At this moment, no doubt, it is being read with eager interest by a young man in a Bayswater flat, by a girl in New Jersey, by a professor of mathematics in Australia. The novel has nothing to do with life in Bayswater, even less contact with the daily routine of existence in New Jersey, and does not mention Australia at all.

Rather, it is a kind of time machine. It transports the reader to a particular era of French history, some seventy years bygone, and gives him entry into a very special segment of French civilization. It takes him far from today's troubled world and lets him peek undetected at the vanities and posturings of people culturally, geographically, and temporarily far removed from most of us.

Yet who would call *Remembrance of Things Past* " escape literature ?" Literature, yes. But *escape* literature ? It provides escape, of course, but no one thinks of it in those terms alone.

I'll go on to submit that *all* literature is escapist, in effect if not necessarily in intent. And that the more successful the writer is in providing escape—that is, in creating a detailed and enterable world on paper—the more memorable the work of literature will be.

A novel's escapist qualities, then, should not be cause for damning it outright, through his art. The great writer gives us escape, gives us surcease from the posturings of belligerent leaders, gives us at least temporary leave of absence from the world of woes we live in. The untalented writer provides simple-minded escape into a world of flimsy, hastily-rigged two-

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Joseph L. Green's short story "Initiation Rites" four months ago opened many interesting possibilities for the development of peaceful co-existence between humans and aliens. Peace in a strange environment, however, can never be bought easily.

THE COLONIST

by JOSEPH L. GREEN

---

one

His name was Sam Harper.

His wife was trying hard to pretend Sam Harper didn't exist, though the narrowness of the bed made the pretence a shallow mockery. He lay with scowling face and smouldering temper, staring at the back of Kay's blonde head. They had quarrelled after going to bed, quarrelled bitterly, until she burst out and for once expressed her deeply-buried resentment.

"You're a brute, Sam Harper! A big, primitive animal who should be living with the apes in the zoo. You certainly don't know how to treat a civilized woman!" And she had burst into sobs and turned her back to him.

In the corner of the tiny six-by-eight bedroom the baby began to whimper. Kay sat erect with a weary sigh. Harper watched his wife, small and dainty and lovely in her pyjama bottoms, as she stepped to the cradle and switched off the rocker. With slow, fumbling fingers she stripped off the wet nappie, slipped a clean one on to the crying baby and took the wet tissue into the kitchenette. Harper, able to see every inch of the tiny room from the bed, lay quietly watching as she

removed nutrient solids from a cabinet and began to mix the baby a bottle. She had neglected to make his formula in advance again. She was back in a moment, gave the baby the bottle and flipped the switch. The small one in the rocker, snug and dry and warm again, sucked contentedly and went back to sleep, though he continued emptying the bottle.

Kay paused at the side of the bed. " I'm sorry, Sam," she said to her husband. " I didn't really mean what I said. Please don't be angry."

A fleeting smile touched Harper's lips, and was swiftly gone. " I'm not. Not now. Get in bed and go to sleep."

With a sigh of relief she pulled the covers up around her neck and did so almost immediately.

Harper lay for a long, restless hour, staring at her tranquil face in the dimness of the night light, before he at last closed his eyes and composed himself for slumber. Somewhere between the edge of sleep and the border of wakefulness he made his decision, and knew that it was irrevocable. He had been trembling on the brink for months and Kay had at last pushed him over.

Next morning he dawdled through breakfast until Kay, in impatient anger, snapped, " Finish your gunk and get out of here or you'll be late to work ! It's hard enough for you to keep a job as it it."

Sam Harper fiddled with his spoon, stirring the lukewarm liquid that passed for coffee. " I've got news for you, honey. I'm not going to work today."

" What ? Do you want us back on that miserable subsistence pay ? Are you out of your mind ?"

" I won't be on it, baby. Just you. All my bills will soon be paid. And our benevolent government will look after you until you find a new man. This is good-bye, Kay. I'm signing up for this month's Call."

She pushed her chair back and jumped to her feet, incredulous. " Now I know you're insane ! No one volunteers for the Colonial Service who isn't ! What's got into you ?"

" I think you know," said Harper quietly. " Haven't you been consulting the building psychiatrist about me lately ?"

She hung her head in sullen shame. " Well you're so hard to live with . . ."

" It could get tougher than it is, Kay. I didn't tell you yesterday, but my request for a transfer to the shops was refused.

The waiting list of qualified people is so long they're not accepting new applications. And I've sat at that useless desk shuffling useless paper as long as I can bear it. I've got to get out of there or go as insane as you seem to think I am."

"Everyone can't work in the shops, Sam. You must adjust—"

"Adjust! You mean learn to like doing nothing? That's adjustment in today's world, isn't it? Adjust to non-thinking, non-working, non-laughing—and after a while non-living? No, thanks, not for me!"

"You can't change the world—"

"No, but I can leave it!" He rose and crossed the tidy kitchenette, tried to take the small woman in his arms. "Go with me, Kay!" There was a desperate, harsh pleading in his voice. With an angry toss of her head she stepped out of his reach.

Defeated, he stopped, and his arms fell to his sides. "I knew it wasn't any use," he muttered, more to himself than her. "And the tragedy of it is that it might make a real woman out of you."

"I'd like to stay just as I am, thanks," she said icily. And suddenly she was small in more than stature. She was small in spirit and understanding as well.

Sam Harper dressed hastily and left the 320 square feet that was his allotted living quarters. He caught the express lift to the roof and stood in line to get aboard the series of aircars that landed and took off at one-minute intervals. The apartment building, one-hundred and twelve stories of steel and concrete anchored to the bedrock of what had once been the North Island of the New Zealand group, was only one of a series of similar buildings that covered almost the entire island.

The Colonial Service Building was on South Island, as were all the Government buildings. Sam leaned back in the soft seat and stared out the window at the Floatfarms as they passed over the open stretch of water between islands. The channels of clear water reserved for pleasure-boating grew more narrow every year as the huge algae farms demanded ever more room. The giant aluminium harvesting platforms, small at this distance, moved with relentless slowness through the green fields. Earth's hundred billion people had to eat. Pleasure-boating was not necessary to life.

And he had heard recently that the official work-week, which had crept from twenty to forty hours in the last fifty years, would soon be extended to forty-eight. Earth's eighty billion people had to have something to do. The recreation centres were inadequate and there was no room to extend them.

South Island was almost identical to North, except that the buildings, being largely industrial and governmental, were taller. They covered the land like a great grey blight, and in their cavernous depths millions of people lived and worked and died without the touch of sun on their faces or the coolness of an unfiltered breeze blowing through their hair. Life on Earth was a sterile, empty thing, from birth till death. One dull day passed into another with the ease of grey habit. Life consisted of so many hours sitting at a desk shuffling paper that accomplished nothing, so many sitting in front of the Tri-D at home being insufferably bored, and so many of supervised, carefully controlled play. In the year 2092 people lived to be a hundred-and-fifty, on the average, and Earth was choking with the pollution of their billions.

The Colonial Service was the third stop of his particular aircar. He descended into the bowels of the grey tower and in less than an hour had been interviewed, accepted, and sent home to pack his personal belongings and get them to the matter transmitter. His ship would leave next day.

It was too bad no one had solved the problem of transmitting that delicate matrix of forces known as life. Meat could be transmitted without difficulty, and was the main item the far-flung colonies sent to Earth, but as yet only plants or seeds had survived the trip and retained their capacity to grow. Still, if it had not been for the transmitters there would have been no colonization at all. Movement of any amount of goods by spaceship was economically unfeasible. Their cargo was limited to the men, women and animals who would live on the new planets.

On the ride back he leafed through the mass of literature the recruiting officer had given him. Most of the information was repetitiously familiar. He knew about the automatic divorce for persons called or volunteers whose mates did not wish to accompany them. One of the few new things he learned was his exact destination, a planet called Refuge in the system of Antares, and the amount of land he and his new wife, whoever she might be, would own. A flat, half-square mile.

The ship was more representative of the Earth it was leaving than the planet to which it was going, meaning that it was crowded from stem to stern with people. The Call picked men and women equally, and less than half of the spouses chose to accompany their mates. The pioneering instinct had apparently been bred out of the average Earthling, or the draft would not have been necessary at all. Kay was a meek and spineless creature well suited to her environment. The government fed and protected her, doctored her when ill, delivered her babies, and when the lawful number had arrived would sterilize her as well. Like a hundred billion others she lived a comfortable, dull life. She had to sleep ten hours a night in order to be even half alive next day. She had no initiative, no drives of any sort. She was boring, compliant, a little stupid ; still, she was a lovely woman, and she had been his wife for three years. And it is never easy to give up a son.

The people on the ship were kept too busy for much introspection, however. There were endless training classes, hours of instruction in the use of machinery to men who had never lifted a tool heavier than a pencil, classes on child care and family medicine for the women, and a thorough indoctrination of what the colonial service law required of everyone.

The trip took twelve weeks, and in less than six the memory of Kay had faded to a faint memory. Harper found himself looking over the single women of the crew, trying to determine who would make him a good wife. When he finally made his pick he wondered if he was deliberately trying to spite the memory of Kay, for the woman he chose was tall and strongly built, more supple than slender, with an olive complexion and very black hair, the opposite of small, dainty blonde Kay in almost every way. She had a six-year old daughter who looked very much like her. And Harper noticed more than once that she eyed him in a speculative way in the classes they attended together. This was not surprising, considering that he was the largest man among the callees and she perhaps the tallest woman. He did a little quiet checking and found, without much surprise, that he was not the only volunteer on the ship. Of the consignment of three-hundred males, three-hundred females and approximately forty babies and children, about twenty-five men had volunteered. One lone woman had done likewise. Her name was Cassie McDougal.

He came upon her one day in the observatory, during an idle hour between the last meal and sleeping time. She was alone, staring pensively out at the incredible brightness-darkness of open space. He walked up to her and said, " You're Cassie McDougal."

" And you're Sam Harper. I've been wanting to meet you."

" I'm glad of that. Will you marry me when they perform the mass ceremony at the landing field ?"

She was silent for a moment, her face turned to the stars. " You don't have to, you know," he added gently. " Even if there's no one else you want. You can get a three-month extension from the port authorities after we land if you haven't found anyone to suit you on the ship. And in case you're wondering about your girl—I left a baby son on Earth."

She swung around to look into his face, and there were tears in her eyes. " I won't need the extension," she said huskily. They smiled at each other in the diffused starlight, and then kissed once, passionately, before returning to their bunkrooms for the section's rest.

Their feeling for each other grew with dream-like rapidity after that first kiss. A week later they applied to the captain for permission to be married on board and were summarily refused, on the grounds that all the married quarters were occupied. They spent the remaining few weeks in comparative unhappiness, but were far too busy to waste time pitying themselves. It did not seem very long before the great red disk of Antares filled the observatory with purple light, and soon the ship's huge magnetrons had locked into the magnetic field of Refuge and were lowering them safely to land. The ports opened and admitted the different, oddly-smelling air of Refuge, and the disembarkation began. There was no delay for the families. A guide met each family at the ramp and took them into the orientation room immediately. For the remaining hundreds, the captain had a few words.

" I'm very sorry to say," he began heavily, " that of the three-hundred and forty single people on this trip I still have not received marriage petitions from eight. I feel it my duty to warn you eight people that, though the law grants you a three-month extension before compulsory marriage, it is not very often a wise idea to take advantage of it. The number of available men and women on Refuge is small, very small indeed. You may find yourselves far less satisfied than you would have been had you chosen now."

There was a small stir among the remaining eight people and two of them, a short, sturdy young woman with a round face and a thin man who looked small beside her, stepped forward. " We've decided we'd like to try it, Captain," said the young man awkwardly.

The remaining six people looked doubtfully at each other, and made no move.

" Excellent," said the captain cheerfully. " Join the others and clasp hands. Repeat after me, using your name where I use mine. I, Josuha Henderson, do solemnly pledge . . ."

two

The orientation lecture was designed to make them feel they belonged on Refuge, and succeeded fairly well. They were shown tri-D's of the native fauna and flora, with emphasis on the dangerous beasts such as the giant herbiverous *grogroc* and a small but dreaded killer, the flying cat. They were given maps of the area around the city of Refuge, and discovered the planet had ten towns built around ten transmitters and a total population in excess of fifty thousand, quite a few of them born there. Refuge was the oldest town, the newest two years old. For the first time they heard the word Loafer, and saw tri-D's of the humanoid natives, hairy creatures who lived like animals in the woods and refused honest labour of any sort. They had large reservations of their own and were strictly protected by the law, represented here by Central Government, which in turn reported to Earth Central. They were also given a complete list of what Central Government furnished them, and what they were expected to make themselves. It was readily apparent that C.G's largest offering was to be instruction and advice.

The newly-married couples filed out of orientation and joined the long lines moving toward the first article they were to receive, a huge, atomic-powered tractor, complete with all accessories. There was a powerful two-way radio built into the tractor. Refuge had no other form of personal long-distance communication.

There was a large trailer hooked to the tractor, and on it was a folded two-room house, a set of hand tools, several small power tools and a miscellany of other articles, including their personal possessions from Earth.

" And now we're pioneers," said Harper somewhat bitterly, looking at the tiny bit of equipment with which he was expected to farm three-hundred and twenty acres.

" You'll be issued more supplies when you're settled in," said the busy official who was examining their I.D. cards. " Now start the tractor and join the line, please."

Instruction in driving the tractor was one of the courses given on the ship. Sam gingerly mounted the skeleton frame, deposited himself in the bucket seat and flipped the switch activating the power plant. The machine began to hum. He grasped the wheel and eased the hand-throttle down. The tractor hissed gently and moved forward. He drove it slowly toward the next line, Cassie and Jeannie pacing along beside him.

They received enough concentrated food to last for months, though it occupied very little room in the large trailer. At the next point they received weapons, which Cassie handled in unfeigned awe. The last man in the long line gave them a pile of books and pamphlets, some of which were instructions on how to use the equipment they already had, most of which dealt with farming and the crops they were expected to grow.

When they were through at last the trailer was loaded to its capacity. In Sam's hand was a certificate to the land he would own and farm, subject to the usual repayment provisions. Spread before him on the control panel was a map of the area.

" Sam, do we want to drive on out there today or stay tonight at the Welcome Centre ?" said Cassie, looking over his shoulder at the map. She nodded pointedly in the direction of Jeannie, standing by one big tractor wheel and gazing with childish wonder at the multitudinous activities going on all around her.

Harper pulled his mind off his land and back to the present. For the first time it occurred to him that he was a newly married man, and tonight was their wedding night.

He looked at the tall, black-haired woman who had been his wife for almost two hours. " We'll drive on out. I want to spend my first night on Refuge on my own land."

Cassie nodded in agreement, and got into the trailer with Jeannie.

There were four roads out of the town of Refuge, one in each of the major directions, and they were of unpaved dirt, with shallow ditches running along each side. Their land was clearly marked on the map, about thirty miles out.

They drove slowly through the town of Refuge. It was an unimpressive cluster of wooden government buildings huddling around the central steel giant that housed the matter transmitter The great majority of the people lived on the farms. Each colonist was an independent businessman and stood or fell on his own merits, but all business was conducted with the representatives of C.G. who manned the transmitter and handled the exchange of food from Refuge for manufactured products from Earth. This was one area where Earth Central gave nothing away. People to whom all comforts were freely given sat and did nothing. A businessman-farmer on Refuge, with hard work and reasonable luck, could amass comforts and conveniences equivalent to those on Earth in a few short years. In addition, he had all the advantages of being a free citizen on an uncrowded world. Quite a few hard-working men had accumulated impressive surpluses of Earth Central Credit Notes. Earth, in turn, received several million tons of badly needed food each week.

Some peculiar refractive property of the atmosphere turned great Antares a soft shade of purple. It was at the zenith as they entered the open countryside. The land around them, though mostly cleared and under cultivation with crops from Earth, still possessed many areas of shaded forest, the native vegetation green but possessing a slight ochre tinge. Only in parks back on Earth had Harper ever seen such a profuse riot of vegetation. His home, and that of most of Earth's billions, had been the dead grey walls of the skyscrapers.

Two hours driving brought them to their land. It was situated in a lovely valley, rimmed on the North by the flank of a small granite mountain and on the East and West by low rolling foothills. The floor of the valley was reasonably flat, and filled with rich green-yellow grass. The slopes of the hills were covered with trees. It was as near paradise as the Harpers had ever expected to see.

They entered the valley from the South end. A small stream, the Sweetwater, originating in the mountains to the North, flowed serenely through the length of the valley. There were already two small houses perched close to the water, a half-mile apart. Around both houses were cultivated fields, but it was obvious the people were relative newcomers. The houses were small and made from whole logs, and the fields had the rough, unkempt look of newly broken land.

" Are you going to stop and meet our neighbours ?" Cassie called from the trailer.

" Maybe later," Sam turned to shout to her. " Right now I'd rather get on up the river to our place and pick a spot to pitch camp."

The rough trail they were following led to within a half-mile of the first house before branching off in two directions, and Sam had started to swing the tractor into the one that would carry them past the rear of the house when the tractor radio buzzed urgently.

He flipped the switch that activated the set, picked up the mike and said " Hello ? Sam Harper here."

" Hi, Sam. I'm your neighbour, Willy Miller. Turn that wheel around and come by here and meet the family before you go on upstream, or I'll start my own personal neighbourhood blacklist with your name resting prominently on top," said a cheerful, friendly masculine voice. Sam looked toward the closest house as he slowed the tractor to a crawl and saw a man, small at that distance, standing by a tractor similar to his own a few feet from his barn. As he stared the man lifted one arm and beckoned to him.

" Let's stop, Sam," called Cassie happily. Jeannie giggled with excitement.

Sam laughed, flipped the switch to send and said, " Okay, you've convinced me. Coming in."

A few minutes later he was shaking hands with Miller, a small, chubby man with bright red hair and an infectious grin. His wife came out of the house to welcome the newcomers, and they all trooped inside for coffee. The Millers had two children, the smallest of which had been born on Refuge.

" Glad to get a real family for neighbours," Miller was saying as he ushered them through the rough slab door into the small front room. " A lot of the people who aren't married until they arrive make life miserable for themselves and everyone around them until they get used to each other. Which is natural enough, I guess."

"Jeannie is my daughter by a previous marriage, Mr. Miller," said Cassie immediately. " Sam and I were married at dock-side, along with quite a few others."

The small man's face turned as red as his hair. " There I go again, putting my foot in my mouth up to the knee. I'm sorry if I sounded patronizing—I"

"—am a loud-mouthed idiot," his wife, a small, sturdy brown-haired woman finished for him. "Why don't you fill your mouth with coffee for a change. Look, I have a suggestion. Why don't you two spend the night with us. You can take the bedroom and Willy and I will sleep in here on the daybed."

"Thanks, but Sam wants to spend our first night on our own land, even if we have to sleep in a tree," said Cassie. "And I agree with him."

"I know how you feel. Well, then, why don't you leave Jeannie with us. She can sleep with my daughter, and I'll keep her for the next few days, till you at least get settled in. Jeannie," she swiftly crossed the room to kneel in front of the child, "how would you like to spend the night with me? Your mother and new daddy are going to be sleeping on the ground, and there'll be animals walking around in the darkness and lots of other scary things. Wouldn't you like to spend the night with Clara here?"

The small girl looked up at her mother, wonderingly, and Cassie gave a slight nod.

When night fell Harper had the house inflated and the trailer unloaded. Cassie prepared them a meal from the concentrates while he finished pegging the walls to the ground. They had chosen a spot near the riverbank where the stream curled outward in a lazy arc, so that they were surrounded on three sides by water. The nearest edge of woods was a quarter-mile away.

After the meal, which was simple but good, Harper sat gazing into the fire while Cassie washed dishes in the river water. When she came back into the firelight he noticed her arms and legs were clean of dust and grime, and realized she must have bathed herself as well.

She saw his glance and smiled. "There's a very nice sandy beach at the point, where the water's only two feet deep, Sam. And the water is so clean I wouldn't be afraid to drink directly from the river."

He got up, stretched lazily, full of contentment that had no name and a peace that went all through his soul. He took the three steps that separated him from his wife and pulled her into his arms for a long kiss, then picked up the soap and towel and walked toward the river. Behind him, Cassie undid the door flap and crawled inside on the fat air mattress, where she swiftly undressed and slid beneath the covers.

Harper shed his clothes on the riverbank and stood for a moment at the water's edge. One of Refuge's two moons had risen over the North-west horizon and cast a pale streak of light across the gently moving dark surface.

The big man lifted his arms, clenched his fists, gazed out over the beauty of the river, at the black shadow of the opposite bank, and felt a swell of exultation such as he had never known. His chest filled with air as he took a deep breath and held it, and the muscles in his arms and legs stood out under the skin as he dedicated himself, wholly and completely, to this new life.

The season was autumn on this continent, and the water held a cool hint of winter. He bathed swiftly, and afterwards washed out his clothes.

He emerged, dripping, and dried himself. He picked up his clothes and held them in one hand as he walked back. He spread the wet garments across the railing of the trailer and then walked to the tiny house. An arm emerged from the darkness as he stooped to enter and held back the flap.

three

" Carey !" Doreen called excitedly. " It's C.G., for you !"

Carey rose from the kitchen table, where he had been having a mid-morning coffeebreak with his crippled Uncle Harvey, and went to answer the radio. Central Government had been calling on him fairly often lately, since he and Timmy had succeeded in stopping that rodent invasion of the farms to the North a few months back.

Carey smiled when he saw the excited look on his red-headed sister's thin face. Doreen was sixteen now, and just beginning to shed the angular slimness of youth and blossom forth as an attractive young woman. Both Carey and Timmy had been coaching her for the past several months in the art of Controlling, and she would be ready for the Initiation Rites next winter. Apparently she had learned even faster than Carey.

He picked up the mike and pressed the switch. " Carey Sheldon here."

" 'ullo, Carey," said the bored, nasal voice of Varinov English, head of the Security Section of Central Government. " Got a bit of a problem in the Upper Sweetwater River Valley. New family named Harper moved in late last fall. Seems they can't get along with the people in the Loafer community at the

head of the valley. The beef, as I get it, is that there is a large grove of trees on this fellow's land which he wants to cut down, and the Loafers won't let 'im. Can you and Timmy run up there tomorrow and straighten 'em out ?"

" That sounds a little off. The Loafers normally respect property rights," Carey said, puzzlement in his voice. " I'll be glad to go up there and see what I can do. Can I have the use of the C.G. flitter again ? That's long ride to the Upper Sweetwater."

There was a brief silence, and then English said, " We'll arrange it. Be here first thing in the morning to pick it up."

" Will do," said Carey, and signed off. Doreen was waiting to pounce.

" I want to go with you," she said rapidly, giving him no chance to interrupt. " You promised I could next time something came up that didn't look too dangerous and I want to go. If I'm going to take the Initiation next winter I've got to get in some real practice—"

Carey stopped her by putting one large hand firmly over her mouth. Grinning, he said, " Okay. You can go, if it's all right with Timmy."

Doreen squealed with joy, hugged him tightly, then went running to tell Uncle Harvey and her mother. There was no danger of Timmy saying no. She knew Carey's hairy young Loafer friend had too soft a look in his large, liquid eye when he stared at her to say no to anything she wanted.

Carey followed her, more slowly. Maud, his mother, a tall, gaunt woman in her early fifties, had just come in from the yard. She was listening to Doreen with a slight frown on her brown face. Since Carey had saved the life of her brother Harvey last winter, when a *grogroc* had broken into the barn and started eating up a year's supply of peanuts, and the crippled man had attempted to stop him, she had dropped her opposition to Carey becoming a Controller, and had even permitted Doreen to take lessons. But this business of her travelling thirty miles up-country with Carey and Timmy on what could well be a dangerous mission went against her grain. There was little point in arguing, though. Maud Sheldon had been the head of her family since her husband was killed by a *grogroc* when Carey was a small child, but since her youngest son had learned that Controller thing she had felt the reins of family control slipping slowly and certainly into his young hands. Not that

she minded. It had been a long and weary twelve years, during which a woman not basically hard or strong had been forced to be so by the rigours of pioneer life on a new and raw world. It was a relief now to be able to lean on his strong young shoulders.

" Take good care of her, Carey," she said now, and saved herself useless argument.

" I won't let anything happen to her, Mom. Now I'm going over to Loafertown and see if Timmy is free tomorrow."

He saddled a horse for the two-mile ride and cantered swiftly across the open land to the sea, where he followed the open stretch of beach into the beginning of the thick woods where Loafertown was located. This particular community made their home in the middle of a large *waquil* grove, a giant trailing plant that grew on the ground and had fruits twelve feet high and thirty feet long. They controlled *grogrocs* and other herbivores who ate the pulp out of the fruits, leaving the thick rind intact. The hollow fruits made excellent small homes.

He found Timmy and several other young Loafers engaged in a merry game of fishing. They were sitting on a rock that extended a short way into the water, fishing with dipnets. The water below them swirled with fish, but they were extremely fast and hard to net. At the inlet to the small lagoon three pre-Initiates were projecting the image of a *whampus*, so strongly Carey felt the backwash in his own mind.

The fish, whose dim minds were hard to control, could not be lured directly into a net but had to be hemmed into a small area by some projection trickery and physically caught. This particular school was largely blackfish, which ran from two to four pounds in size and were delicious eating. As long as they felt the presence of a *whampus* at the inlet they would race back and forth in the shallow water, where a real *whampus* could not venture, and adept work by the young Loafers would yield a rich dinner. When they had all the fish they could eat before they spoiled, the Loafers would release the remainder. The hairy natives lived in strict accord with nature, never taking more than was needed at the moment of any food or facility.

Carey swiftly explained the request to his lean friend, who had been his playmate and companion since they were babies. Timmy nodded in understanding. " I have heard stories of those people at the head of the Sweetwater. It is said they have

customs not shared or understood by their neighbours, and raise trees as if they were children."

" Well, apparently we'll have to convince them it's Harper's land and they must leave him alone, or else get his grant changed and have the disputed grove added to their reservation," said Carey. " But we'll worry about that when we get there. I'll be early in the morning. And . . . Doreen wants to go with us, and I said it was all right with me if you agreed."

Timmy turned and gestured toward the three young pre-Initiates, who had left the inlet and were walking toward them, while the blackfish, the *whampus* projection gone, vanished through the inlet into the open sea like dark streaks in the grey water. " A little actual work will do her good, Carey, though this does not sound like a problem for a Controller."

" No, and I don't know why they called you and I." said Carey. " But if we can smooth things out it may save some bitter feelings on both sides."

Timmy nodded in understanding, and Carey left him to return to home and work. The young peanuts were just raising their green heads above the dirt, and the tender plants needed cultivating.

" Looks as if Harper is a go-getter," said Carey as he eased the stick forward and the flitter drifted toward the ground. Harper had been here only five months, but over a hundred acres near the river were plowed into neat, ordered rows, and green shoots were thrusting upward from a large garden near the usual " first " house—a neat, small log cabin made from trees cut from the nearby hillsides and hauled to the riverbank —which looked sturdy and comfortable. C.G. provided them with enough lumber to finish the inside, and with windows. Some of the " first " houses built by the less industrious colonists were all they ever achieved, but the majority made a few good crops and built large, spacious homes such as the Sheldon farmhouse. On Refuge, totally unlike Earth, the trend was toward large families and they needed room. Here it was available.

Sam Harper was waiting when they got out of the flitter. He was a big man by Earth standards, almost six feet tall, but not out of place on Refuge. Carey was almost his equal in height, and much heavier in chest and shoulders. Carey liked him immediately. He had the look of tough, ready competence which a man needed to make a go of it on Refuge.

Carey introduced himself and his companions. He saw Harper hesitate slightly, and then take Timmy's extended hand in a firm grasp. He smiled gravely when Doreen extended her freckled, skinny hand, and treated her like a grown woman, which pleased her immensely.

" When Central told me they were going to send out a team to talk with the Loafers I was really expecting someone a little older," said Harper. " Do you work for the government ?"

"Not really, Mr. Harper. I'm sort of an unofficial negotiator with the Loafers, and Timmy and I have managed to be of help once or twice before in similar situations. As for my age, I'm eighteen, which is the legal age at which you become an adult on this planet."

" No reflection on your ability intended," said Harper with a smile. " It's just that I think you're going to have your hands full."

" None taken. As for the Loafers, I was raised with them from a baby and know them pretty well. I'm the first human actually born on Refuge."

They were interrupted by the soft purr of tractors. Two men eased the big vehicles into the yard and dismounted. Willy Miller Carey knew, but the man with the heavy black beard, who was introduced as Earl Kronstadt, was a stranger. Harper introduced them as his neighbours from the other two farms in the valley. Carey noticed with hidden anger that Kronstadt ignored Timmy's proferred hand until the young Loafer dropped it in confusion. Doreen saw the slight also, and her freckles turned a brighter red.

" We came up here to tell you we've got the same trouble now," said Willy Miller, speaking to Sam Harper. " I was working my outermost field, the one about two-hundred feet from the woods, when I noticed the last few rows nearest the trees seemed a little brown. I did some hasty digging and found these. Same as yours." He extended some slim brown roots, half an inch in diameter and very soft and pliable. " I stopped by Earl's place and we checked. Same story. Just the ones nearest the woods now, but it's spreading fast. Another two weeks and fifty acres will be shot."

Carey was holding the proferred root, puzzled. It looked like nothing he had seen before. He passed it to Timmy, and could tell by his friend's expression it was equally new to him.

" This is basically the cause of our trouble with the Loafers, Carey," said Harper in explanation. " These are roots from a short, squatty tree that grows pretty heavily through those slopes on the side of the hills, and I have a heavy group of them scattered through my land where it approaches the hillside. For some reason every tree within a quarter of a mile of my field has put out these long roots and ran them down to the peanuts, and they're strangling them. It's the fastest growing plant I've ever heard of. I found the first group of these roots and cut them in two, and in two days the cut group had reached the field again and three more trees had extended roots and were taking nourishment away from the peanuts."

This was something entirely outside Carey's experience, and he could tell from Timmy's expression that he was equally baffled. " Could we see the field where they first appeared ?" he asked.

" Sure. Come along." Harper led the small party across the open land, through the fields where corn was growing tall in the purple sun, where row after row of young green peanut plants spread their pinnate compound leaves toward the sky. Like most new colonists Harper was making his first year's crop largely peanuts. The hay would feed the livestock he would begin acquiring, the nuts would enable him to start raising fatbirds, the principal meat crop raised by the colonists, and any surplus peanuts could be sold directly to Earth. After almost twenty years of farming Refuge was beginning to diversify, but for the main part their crop was still meat. Earth's floatfarms provided green food, but animal flesh was scarce. Fatbirds brought a good price, and Refuge was a prosperous world because of them.

They reached the edge of the cultivated land and Harper showed them his ruined field. About three acres appeared to have been hit by a blight, though nothing showed above the surface. The plants were withered and brown, some already drooping in decay. And it was obvious that the disease was spreading, covering more and more territory every day.

Harper had brought along a shovel. He led them to the edge of the field facing the woods a few hundred feet away and began to dig. In a moment he hit roots. He rapidly cleared away an area a yard square and called them over. They all stood staring at the network of small roots he had uncovered, spread

through the soft soil in a tangled mat. Harper worked his shovel away from the field, toward the trees, and a moment later had uncovered the source of the infection. Three slightly larger roots ran in a direct line from the stricken field toward the trees.

" The edge of my property extends almost to the base of that hill," said Harper, pointing out his landmarks to Carey. " All of this grove of trees is on my land, and I had intended to clear it within a few years anyway, and use the lumber to build my house. When I followed a couple of sets of these roots and found they were coming from the same type of tree I decided to cut those down now to save my peanuts. That's when your Loafer friends stepped in and stopped me. I had the saw-blade on the tractor and was heading for the first tree when three of them popped up out of nowhere and motioned me away. I tried to argue with them, to explain that it was my land and I could cut down trees if I wanted to, and found none of them could speak English. So after a while I got tired of arguing with them and tried to drive past. And they . . . stopped me."

There was a look of remembered horror in his eyes, and Carey had to restrain his smile. The mental powers of the Loafers were seldom exhibited to strangers, but when they were it was with telling effect.

" Carey," said Timmy abruptly, in the soft, flowing tongue of the Loafers, " there is something here, a—a presence I feel but cannot explain. Open your mind to reception and see if you do not sense it."

" I do !" said Doreen excitedly. " I've felt it ever since we walked out here. It's like—like there were a lot of people here, but they're invisible, and they can't talk, or think, or even move. It's the oddest thing !"

Carey closed his eyes and did as Timmy suggested, for a moment only. He did not want Harper and his neighbours to think C.G. had sent a group of lunatics to solve their problem and someone had to remain in communication with the Earthmen. But that moment was enough. The sense of presence was there, and while it was faint it was also massive, as though they were surrounded by hundreds of dim-witteds people or by a single great mind of low intensity. It was something completely outside his experience and he found himself as much at a loss for words as Doreen.

He opened his eyes abruptly. " Could we see one of these trees, say the first one that attacked the peanuts ?"

Harper gestured for them to follow and led the way into the woods. The ground among the trees was strangely open and uncluttered, almost park-like in its neatness and symmetry. Most of the trees were the tall *kanna*, a conifer very similar to the spruce, which covered most of the temperate zones of the planet and was an excellent source of lumber. Spaced at fairly regular intervals among the *kanna*, almost as if planted there, were a large number of short, heavy trees, very wide around the trunk and extremely bushy at the top. It was to one of these that Sam Harper led them.

" Here's the culprit. I traced that first set of roots back to it, and I wish now I'd cut it down before it had time to tell its friends. Now every tree in the grove has run roots to my peanut field."

" Carey, I want to leave," said Timmy in a soft, urgent voice. " Now."

Carey glanced at his friend, turned and led the way out of the grove at a fast walk. The three farmers followed him, puzzled at his abrupt departure.

Timmy seemed to recover himself once they were back in the open fields. Carey saw his tense shoulders relax and the lines of concentration fade from his face. Something in that grove had been giving Timmy a bad time.

He turned and spoke to Sam Harper as the big man came up. " I think our next step is to visit the Loafers and find out their reasons for not wanting those trees cut, Mr. Harper. They seldom mix into colony affairs. They wouldn't have stopped you except for what they feel is a good cause."

" I don't care what their causes are," said Karl Kronstadt grimly, breaking into the conversation. " I'm not going to stand for this, and if any of your Loafer friends get in my way—well, a man's got a right to defend his property. They'll get a taste of my arc-rifle !"

" I wouldn't cut any trees down until we get this cleared up, Mr. Kronstadt," said Carey quietly. " For your own sake."

" I can look after myself, thanks," said Kronstadt angrily, turning and walking off. " Just you keep those hairy devils off my place !"

four

" Can we borrow two horses ?" asked Carey of Harper as Kronstadt left. " The Loafers don't like machinery. I don't want to take the flitter up there."

" You can borrow my two," said Willy Miller and Carey realized Sam Harper didn't have horses as yet.

" What about me ?" asked Doreen.

" I think you'd better stay with Mrs. Harper until we get back, sis. They probably wouldn't want to talk with anyone not a Controller."

She faced him rebelliously for a moment, but then Sam Harper put a muscular arm around her slim shoulders and said, " Doreen, come on into the house and meet the wife. We're expecting our first baby in about four months and she doesn't get much company. You can cheer her up a little."

They all went into the house and had coffee while Willy went after the horses. Cassie and Doreen took to each other instantly and were soon chatting like old friends. Soon Cassie was telling Doreen about Sam's insistence on spending the first night on his own land and the first few weeks of living in the tiny folding house while Sam built their cabin. When Willy came with the horses and Carey and Timmy left for the Loafer town she seemed perfectly contented.

The valley squeezed together to a narrow neck at the upper end, where the small creek came tumbling down out of the rocky hills. The Loafers had chosen the last grove of trees in the valley for their village, and when they rode into the little community Carey saw another of the many ways these people knew of adapting nature to suit their own purposes. Their houses were arbours, made by planting some fast-growing creeping plant with large flat leaves in a circle around a tree, then forcing the plants to merge and form walls and a roof. Circle after circle had been planted and grown and weaved together until they had walls several feet thick and impenetrable to anything short of a *grogroc*. One small section the size of a big man had been left thin and served as a door.

Scattered in profusion throughout the grove, growing in every open space, climbing up the trunks of dead trees in riotous confusion that was yet ordered and methodical, were food plants. The grove itself contained a large number of *kitzl* trees, which yielded edible fruit, but that was only the beginning.

Every edible plant which grew in that area of the continent was represented in that grove, and made to grow with unbelievable fecundity. Yet no plant strangled another, no grass had been cleared away, no vines climbed living trees. The small grove, outwardly no different from a thousand like it in the valley, was actually a combination home-farm of immense complexity.

" That is a house of much time, and many seasons, while we make a *waquil* house in a day," said Timmy critically, staring at an arbour house. " But how green-cool and alive during the hot-time !"

Carey had seen other amazing things the Loafers had done by their close control of nature, but he shook his head in wonder These people were the most advanced in the cultivation and use of plants that he had yet seen.

A few small children stared wide-eyed at the strangers, but no one paid them any particular attention. Timmy sent a small child after the Head Councillor, who was related to his own father in a very distant way, and in a few minutes a very old man whose body hair had grown thin with age and whose beard was a silvery white came stumbling out of an arbour to welcome them. He and Timmy went through a complex ritual of greeting and establishing of kinship, and then the old man motioned them inside his house and they pushed their way through the leafy green barrier.

There were three other grizzled oldsters and one middle-aged Loafer with very black hair sitting on *wirtl*-leaf cushions in the centre of the compost floor. They rose to their feet and muttered grave greetings as the young men entered, and Carey realized they had interrupted a council meeting.

Or was it the other way around ? Had the meeting been called because these people knew they were coming and would want to speak to the council ?

The Head Councillor settled himself on his haunches and picked up the fruit he had been munching when the child came for him. They waited for the visitors to speak.

" I am Carey Sheldon, adopted son of Nyyub, Head Councillor of the Tribe of Lindorn, and a Controller," Carey introduced himself. There was no rection among the seated men and he realized they must have already heard of him through the tribal grapevine and known an Earthman had become a Controller. Timmy introduced himself in turn, and Carey resumed, " We come here as the representatives of the

Council of the Hairless ones, because of the dispute which has arisen between yourselves and the farmers who tend the land in the wide part of the valley. We have already visited the farmers and heard their story. They say you have refused to let them cut down trees which are on their tribal ground and are theirs to cut as they choose. We have come to ask your reasons for this action."

There was grave silence for a matter of minutes, and then the old Head Councillor struggled to his feet, amid a creaking of aged bones, and stared gravely at them out of eyes grown old and rheumy. " I will speak for the Council, young Controllers. We have stopped the men you call farmers from cutting down the *breshwahr* trees because we attend to them as a sacred trust, and have done so from generation to generation, back through the days to the-time-that-has-no-memory. When we agreed to live within a certain area of this valley and let the farmers have the rest we did not ask that the land where the *breshwahr* grows be included because we did not believe that any one would ever want to cut one down. Now that we know they would do this we shall have to ask the representative from the Council of Hairless Ones to return that land to us, so that we may continue our trust."

Carey kept his face impassive as he listened, but his mind was running at lightning speed. *Wahr* was the Loafer word for tree, and *bresh* their word for that quality which distinguished the animate from the inaminate, or the dead from the living. They were calling them the tree-that-lives, or lifetree.

" We have considered whether or not this should be done, and do not think it would solve the problem," said Carey. " These trees have put out long roots, running for many man-lengths under the ground. The roots have reached the fields where the peanut grows and have strangled the young plants, causing them to die before bearing. This is an evil thing and must be stopped, for the farmers must grow peanuts to eat. I would ask why the tribe-that-grows-its-own-homes has kept a sacred watch over the short trees you call *breshwahr*. To me it appears much as any other tree, save that its roots grow at great speed."

The black-haired younger councillor leaped to his feet, his face angry. " The *breshwahr* are not as other trees !" he declared loudly. " Only in this valley does the *breshwahr*

grow, and even here, where we protect and cherish it, the number of young sprouts grows fewer each year. Someday we will find the ills that plague it, and it will grow tall and strong like the *kanna*, and it shall be the friend of the Loafers."

"Why do the Loafers wish to be the friend of the *breshwahr*?" asked Timmy.

"Because it is a very wise tree, wise with the wisdom of ages, and it can teach us many things."

"What can a tree teach people who know as much about plants as you?" asked Carey. The black-haired councillor only smiled and sat down again without speaking.

"I will answer," said the quavering voice of the old man. "The *breshwahr* speaks, and to him who has the ear to listen it tells many things. It was the sacred *breshwahr* which taught us how to grow our houses, and how to find our food. It has been our friend in time of need, and we are a friend to it. It is the tree-of-life, and we live in its shade. There is no more to be said."

"But—" he stopped, knowing it was useless. A Loafer never argued, and most of their conversation consisted of flat statements. The talks were at an end.

"Let us go, Carey," said Timmy urgently, before Carey should forget his manners again.

Carey sighed, more in vexation than anger, and went through the ritual of thanking his hosts for their hospitality and for the help they had not given he promised that the matter of turning back to them the land on which the *breshwahr* stood would be duly considered, and then they took their leave.

"What do you make of it?" Carey asked as they rode back to Harper's house.

"There is some quality about the trees themselves which we have not grasped or understood," said Timmy thoughtfully. "Let us get Doreen and return to the first tree. I want to see it again."

Carey shrugged his broad shoulders in bafflement and followed his friend through the woods. Sometimes Timmy could be exasperating.

* * *

five

They left the horses at Harper's, refused the big man's offer to accompany them and headed for the sacred grove. Timmy's face began to mirror strain as they left the edge of the ploughed land and entered the woods, but he kept going. Doreen, all wide-eyed attention, was feeling it also. Her hand crept under Carey's arm and held tightly as they walked. Carey kept his attention on the ground before him, doggedly refusing to receive or project. And he felt nothing of what was gripping Timmy and Doreen.

They stopped before the short, heavy tree, standing in serene ugliness among its slender and beautiful *kanna* neighbours, and for a moment Timmy simply stood and regarded it with grave eyes. Then he lay down on the heavy grass, closed his eyes and said, " Carey, I am going to try to make contact. I don't know what I'll find. You may have to . . . come in after me. I think it best you do not try a contact unless you must do so to reach me."

" As my friend thinks wise," said Carey, and sat down by his side. Doreen sat opposite him.

Timmy took several deep breaths, and then his breathing grew shallow and long. He seemed to fall asleep almost immediately, and the lines of strain faded from his face. A minute passed, another ; his body stiffened as though shocked, the muscles contracting into bunched knots, his whole posture rigid and hard. He had made contact with some unexpected form of life.

Timmy's mouth opened and he made a wordless sound. Carey swiftly stretched out beside him and reached for his clenched hand. Before he could project himself and go after Timmy the young Loafer's body began to relax and the rigidity in his muscles eased. His expression fell back into its natural lines and he said in a low, blurred voice, " *No . . . Stay out, Carey . . . Well.*"

Slowly Carey relaxed, though he continued to hold Timmy's hand. A moment passed. Doreen, watching in wide-eyed alertness, saw Timmy's mouth pucker twice and then faint words came. " *I . . . found them . . . all around us . . . old . . . old . . .*" the voice faded and for a moment there was quiet, and then Timmy seemed to gain an equilibrium between projection and communicating through his body and the words

came more freely. " *The* breshwahr, *Carey . . . alive . . . awareness . . . intelligence* ! *But slow, so slow . . . like a great underwater stream . . . immense minds . . . seeking, always seeking . . . only the valley Loafers . . . and now the food is here* ! *The food of awareness . . . the salts . . . white crystals . . .*" the voice dimmed and faded out. The hand Carey was gripping tightened and then relaxed, and Timmy opened his eyes.

Timmy had been in contact less than five minutes, but his face showed tiredness. He struggled erect, and Carey braced him with an arm around his shoulders. The young Loafer breathed deeply, regaining his strength, and then rose to his feet, staggering a little but able to walk. " Let us return to the house," he said in a subdued voice.

Doreen stepped to his other side and attempted to support him, but Timmy smiled his thanks and walked without assistance. By the time they reached the edge of the ploughed land he was almost normal.

Carey and Doreen refrained from questioning him until they were seated in Harper's house and had cups of coffee in their hands. Timmy was broodingly silent, lost within himself. Sam Harper and Cassie waited expectantly, and finally Timmy stirred and raised his eyes. " The *breshwahr* trees in this valley are alive," he said to the Harpers. " There is a salt of a special kind, very rare on this planet, that was once abundant in this valley. Because it was here the trees that could reach it, over a period of many thousands of years, developed that quality you call intelligence. All *breshwahr* develop awareness, given enough time, but they must be provided with this salt. The aware-trees have not grown in intelligence for hundreds of years, for they long ago drained the last of this salt from the earth. Then you farmers came and you planted a crop new to the valley, and there was salt in the ground once more."

Carey felt his respect for Sam Harper rise as he saw the big man blink once at the news that he had intelligent trees on his farm, and then accept it as a fact.

" For more generations than can be counted on fingers and toes the Loafers in this valley have known of the trees. They have protected them from all harm, taking it upon themselves as a sacred trust to preserve the life of the only intelligent plants

on Refuge. In turn the trees have taught them what they know of growing things, which is why these Loafers have such a complete control of plants. Yet the situation was dead, unmoving, until you strangers came.

" Now, with the added salt you have put into the ground the *breshwahr* can continue to grow in intelligence, both as individuals and from generation to generation. And they must have these salts, or in the years to come their awareness will fade away. They are not deliberately harming the young plants in your fields. But when they draw all these salts out of the ground the plants wither and fall sick, and soon die."

" And what are these salts ?" asked Carey.

" My friend, I do not know. Nor can they give them a name. We only know there is a little of it on Refuge. Either you brought it from Earth yourselves or your plants make it as they grow."

" The fertilizer !" Sam Harper was on his feet, his face excited. " C.G., furnished me with four tons of superphosphate and their handbook recommended I dust the land with it before planting. It has to be something in the fertilizer!"

" It couldn't be rock phosphate," said Carey, puzzled. " That's so common here we grind it ourselves and make our own fertilizer."

Doreen bounced to her feet. " But we don't know all that they put into it, Carey. They might be adding something from Earth that isn't here on Refuge at all."

Carey rose also. " There's a quick and easy way to find out. I'll take the flitter into town and check at the plant. Who wants to go with me ?"

Before anyone could volunteer there was a sudden urgent pounding on the door, and Willy Miller entered without waiting for an invitation. His face was as red as his hair from excitement and exertion. " It's Kronstadt," he said rapidly. " He's got the sawblade on the tractor and is headed for those trees near his land. I tried to stop him but he wouldn't listen to me. And I saw four Loafers coming down the valley at a run, heading in that direction. There's going to be trouble."

" Not if we can stop it." Carey was on his feet, his face angry. To be so close to a solution, and have some fool like Kronstadt foul it up at the last minute ! " I'm semi-officially representing C.G. I'll stop him forcibly if necessary."

" But the fertilizer !" said Doreen, and then added immediately. " I'll go."

Doreen was a chem major and could probably find the vital salt as easily as Carey, but she had never handled a flitter. " Someone will have to fly you, sis," he said, sweeping the small group with his eyes. He would need Timmy to help soothe the Loafers, and Willy Miller was an unknown quantity. Cassie was obviously out.

" I'll go with her," volunteered Harper, as Carey's gaze settled on him. " I think I can manage the flitter."

Carey hesitated a moment, then yielded to the sense of trust the big man inspired and nodded. " Fine. Then let's get going."

Carey and Timmy took Harper's tractor and followed Willy Miller at breakneck pace across the rough ground. The red-haired little man led them parallel to the river for a half-mile, past the last of Harper's fields, then swung into the woods. They heard the high singing of the powersaw as they entered the cool green shade.

Willy Miller drove like a maniac, weaving the big vehicle in and out among the treetrunks. They reached the scene of destruction in a few seconds. A huge old *breshwahr*, a thick-trunked parent of many thousands of seedlings, had at last met its end. Kronstadt was finishing his second cut as they came up and the great bushy top was leaning in the direction of the guide cut. As Carey dismounted from the tractor the great tree tilted further yet, and then with a crash that shook the forest it fell. From the jagged stump, and from the massive trunk lying in mute agony on the ground, oozed several gallons of a thin yellow-green fluid, like anaemic blood.

" *It is dying, the last agony . . .*" whispered a pain-filled voice, and Carey turned in time to support Timmy before he fell. The young Loafer's face was twisted in sorrow and hurt, and there were unshed tears in his eyes.

" *And now a great cry . . . from all breshwahr .. . the Loafers hear . . . they come . . . they are here,*" and Timmy straightened up and broke the painful contact with the dying tree. Out of the heavy woods before them four silent figures emerged, and stood looking accusingly at the intruders from Earth. They were led by the black-haired man they had met at the council meeting.

Kronstadt dismounted from the high tractor seat and walked toward them, his face defiant. Behind him, the bright circular sawblade, extending ahead of the tractor on a mechanical arm, hummed slightly as it spun at several thousand rpm. He had neglected to turn it off.

There was cold, controlled anger on the face of the black-haired councillor as he walked up to the farmers. He stopped in front of Carey and gestured at the fallen giant, and then at Kronstadt. " A life has been taken, and punishment must be given," he said in the flowing Loafer tongue. Before Carey could speak he gestured again and Kronstadt stiffened as though shocked. A look of startled fear crossed his bearded features, and then they grew slack and uncontrolled as he waged a terrible internal struggle. Carey glanced at the three Loafers at the edge of the woods and saw that all three had their eyes closed.

Kronstadt gave a convulsive cry, staggered where he stood, turned in an odd, jerky way, like a marionette propelled by strings, and started toward his tractor. He was walking directly toward the whirling blade that had just downed the *breshwahr*.

A Controller handled animals by projecting strong images, sensations of pain and pleasure, hunger and fulfilment. The Loafers telepathic powers were limited, and they only partially understood the ones they possessed. They guided animals rather than compelled them, pushing the brute minds gently but insistently toward whatever job they wished accomplished. During his Initiation trial Carey had tried to take complete charge of an animal's body and found the creature fought so hard against direct control the result was bodily paralysis, with neither mind able to accomplish actual control of the muscles. These valley Loafers had somehow discovered how to link minds for extra power and were capable of actually taking over another man's body.

Carey hesitated, while precious seconds passed. He could stop the three Controllers by physically assaulting them, while their attention was so completely diverted, but to do so would create an ill-will that would be long in dying. At the same time he could not permit them to kill Kronstadt, not only because he was a fellow Earthman and farmer but because the Controlling powers of the Loafers were too well known. They would have to answer for their actions, and the results would be catas-

trophic for Loafer-Colonist relationships. Legally, Kronstadt had acted completely within his rights.

" Hold ! Instead of one life I will give you many," Carey said loudly, raising his hand for attention. " *I can make the* breshwahr *live again* !"

Kronstadt took two more jerky steps, perilously close to the whirling blade. Carey tensed himself to lunge at the three Controllers, though he had waited almost too long, and then Kronstadt stopped. The bearded man stood swaying visibly a moment, before collapsing in a heap on the ground.

There was a faint look of reproach on the Councillor's face as he met Carey's eyes. The younger man lowered his own in shame. For a moment he had forgotten that he was dealing with Loafers, had ascribed to them the Earthman's emotion of hate, an Earthman's desire for vengeance. To the Loafers, life was a sacred thing, never taken unnecessarily. They had not intended to kill Kronstadt, only frighten him. And judging by his hysterical weeping they had succeeded in a way he would never forget.

Two hours later, when Harper guided the flitter to a stop in the field nearest the sacred grove, Kronstadt had recovered his self-control and gone. The *breshwahr* had stopped bleeding and was already turning brown. Evidently its circulation system and life processes were many times faster than those of a normal plant. And the Head Councillor, whose feebleness had caused him to fall behind his companions, had joined the other Loafers and been brought up-to-date on developments.

Doreen was carrying a thick paper bag when she and Harper joined the others. She offered it to Carey with a happy grin, and he opened it and examined the contents. It was full of a white, gritty substance that resembled fine salt.

" This had better be it, sis," said Carey fervently as he led them to the nearest *breshwahr* and began to dig with Harper's shovel. He soon found a tender rootlet leading from the tree toward the peanut field. He sprinkled it lightly with the salt and then replaced the dirt. " Get in touch with it, Timmy, and see if we've guessed right," he suggested.

" But it takes hours—" Doreen started to protest, and then fell silent. It took hours for an ordinary tree's metabolism to convey food from a root to the sensing elements in its trunk. This would not be true for the *breshwahr*. And she found

herself wondering just how the intelligent tree differed from its fellow plants in physical structure. It would be interesting to examine the fallen giant, if she could get permission.

Timmy lay flat again and closed his eyes. This time the contact seemed to be much easier. Apparently communing with plants, whose slower rate of doing everything, including thinking, made them hard to contact, got easier as you grew accustomed to it.

Timmy lay still for only a moment, then rose to his feet. " That is the salt, Carey."

" Doreen, what is it ? How did you find it ?" demanded Carey.

Doreen smiled happily, " It wasn't hard, once Sam made us realise it almost had to be in the fertilizer. As you know, we mine calcium fluorphosphate, or rock phosphate as it's commonly called, and treat it with imported sulphuric acid to break it down to monocalcium phosphate and calcium sulphate, which are soluble in water. We've found through trial-and-error that river bottom land will yield a much better first peanut crop if the land is dusted with superphosphate before you plant, and that's why the handbook recommends it.

" At the fertilizer plant we found that Refuge is low in the element boron, and consequently boron salts are very rare here. The native plants have learned to get along without them, but peanuts, and any other crop from Earth, require a trace of boric acid for good growth and good seed germination. So a small quantity of borax is added to the rock phosphate and the sulphuric acid acts on it to form the boric acid you need. This white powder ? Just plain, ordinary borax, one of the more common minerals of Earth. The fertilizer plant imports it through the transmitter by the ton."

The conversation had been in English, and Carey translated for the benefit of the Loafers. " We have found that which the *breshwahr* needs for the growth of strong seeds, that which was once abundant in this valley and is no more, the salt which caused the *breshwahr* to learn to think even as you and I."

The Loafers, who had watched the trial with intent and earnest faces, broke into happy laughter. There were tears of joy in the old Head Councillor's eyes when he said, " That is good, very good. If you will give us this we will feed it to the *breshwahr* as it is needed."

Carey translated swiftly for Harper, and the big man nodded in agreement. Carey turned back to the old man. " We will give the Head Councillor all of that salt, which is called borax, that we have with us, and as much as the trees shall need for all time to come, if the *breshwahr* will withdraw their roots from the peanut field and permit the small plants to live. In addition, I ask that the-farmer-who-killed-a-*breshwahr* receives no further punishment."

The old man closed his eyes for a brief moment, and then said, " If the salts are given to the trees in abundance there will be no need to rob the little plants, and the farmer has been punished enough. It shall be as you say."

" Good. And in return I shall ask the Council of the Hairless Ones to restore all land on which the intelligent *breshwahr* live to the Loafers, that they may continue the trust they have maintained so well through the generations."

" That is as it should be. And to prove our hearts are good we will show the strangers who have moved here how to grow crops." The old man's face twisted in gentle irony. " They have much to learn of plants."

The Head Councillor, assisted by his younger companions, struggled to his feet and gravely said good-bye to the three who understood him. He looked long and hard into the face of Sam Harper, and one worn old hand reached out to touch the big man on the shoulder. Then the old man turned away and hobbled into the woods.

" And that ends another source of possible trouble between Loafers and Colonists," said Carey thoughtfully, as he lifted the flitter into the air.

" And think what your friends will learn about growing plants," said Timmy with a smile.

" And look at what I learned about being a Controller," said Doreen happily. " Just to think that someday I'll be able to talk to a *tree* ! It's almost more than I can imagine."

" We've been on this planet nineteen years, and we still have only scratched the surface," said Carey soberly. " Tomorrow we may discover something so revolutionary the trees will seem commonplace."

" We've got the rest of our lives in which to look," replied Doreen. Her hand crept out and into Timmy's. She smiled into his hairy face.

Joseph L. Green

Several years have elapsed since Robert Presslie was writing regularly for us, during which time he produced some exceptionally fine short stories. In welcoming him back this month, we can also say that he also has a much longer story coming up shortly.

One Foot In The Door

by ROBERT PRESSLIE

Ragg's first view of Acamar would have discouraged a man with less brash self-confidence. On his drive from the space-port to the Temple of Commerce he saw nothing but prosperity and as a salesman he knew how difficult it was to sell to those who have everything.

Streets and buildings were of uniform off-white plastic. The car which had been sent for him slid along the streets on its cushion of air so softly that he almost fell asleep as he sat half-submerged in opulently tapestried cushions. And when the car pulled into the administrative sector it was like being suddenly transported into a fairyland of single-storied buildings, every one of them a different tint.

The Temple of Commerce itself was of such a delicate pink it might have been made of compressed rose petals. Ragg, however, was not unduly impressed. He had been told what to expect. He had also been told that if he saw an Acamarian working he would be seeing one of the nineteen wonders of the universe. In fact, it so happened that the first native he saw, working or idle, was the one who stepped out of the Temple of Commerce to welcome him.

He was pink—to match the temple. Acamarians were neither hirsute nor hairless ; their skins were covered with short cilia which gave them the appearance of being sheathed in felt. It was their custom to dye their felt according to fashion, casts and profession.

" Boval," the alien announced himself. " I wish you good respiration and pray that business between us may be profitable to both parties."

" You are the traffic buyer ?" asked Ragg.

" A post which I am sure you will find I am unworthy to hold."

I'll bet, Ragg thought. The aliens had two reputations in business : they professed they were simple beings who did not know a credit bill from a toilet tissue ; but their methods of bargaining would have made a Rigellian bazaar merchant green with envy—a different shade of green, that is.

" My name is Dante," said Ragg. " I am a salesman."

He started to put the Acamarian off his routine. He said, " I regret that you are a bad businessman. Because I am a good salesman. The best on Earth. I've never failed to make a sale yet."

Boval applauded, but the clapping of his hands was a display of regret. " Indeed. This is going to be an unfavourable day for me. Acamar—" he looked piously at the great sun, "—Acamar has seen fit to shame me by pitting my feeble bargaining powers against your obvious talents in salesmanship."

In a very audible aside he continued, " I shall be bleached for this day's work. And my wives . . . ah, well, if they wish to apply for transfer, who can blame them ?"

Ragg brushed invisible specks off his immaculate uniform.

" Such is luck," he said. " We can't all win."

If Boval had expected a different approach, perhaps an imitation of his own self-deprecation, he did not reveal his disappointment.

" Nevertheless," he said, " we agreed to do business and business shall be done whatever the consequences to me and mine. Please remove your shoes and enter."

Externally, the Temple of Commerce had been a low flat rectangle. Inside, there was only one large room and this was circular. But the pale pink motif was carried inside as

well as out. The walls were deeper pink than the ceiling but lighter than the tiled flooring.

The floor itself was only a metre-wide circular path which stepped down to another inner circle of the same width, which, in turn, bordered a wide pool of rose-tinted water.

Ragg took his lead from the alien. They walked round the topmost rim of tiles, stepped down to the next and orbitted it twice before seating themselves at the edge of the pool with their feet in the warm water.

" You realise," Ragg said, " that this is foolish fetish ? I should have thought you would have outgrown this sort of thing."

Boval made a handclap of regret. " You must forgive our foolishness, then. But every religion has its peculiar ritual."

Ragg's eardrums cracked at a sudden lowering of air pressure. Before he got his little fingers to his ears to ease the irritation, the pressure rose again. A quick glance told him there were no vents in the wall, which was unbroken except for four equally spaced door panels—all of them closed. Looking up, he saw the cause of the alternating pressure ; the ceiling, instead of being rigid, was a flexible pellicle which was pumping up and down rhythmically.

" I'm not so naive as the other salesmen," he said. " Your religion has nothing to do with the removal of footwear, the paddling of the feet—or the pumping of the ceiling."

Boval clapped again. " Acamar spare me !" he sighed. " What an opponent I have been sent this time !"

" I told you," Ragg said, with an off-handed lack of modesty. " I'm the best. You fooled my predecessors but you won't fool me. Long ago you might have had the erratic atmosphere that gave rise to your form of greeting. How did you put it ?"

" May you have good respiration—"

" Yes, that's it. But you got somebody to fix your atmosphere, stabilize the pressure, just like you got somebody to provide all the other amenities of your planet. So you see, Boval, I'm not impressed. I'm not falling for the pseudo-religious line."

The alien fingered his felted skin. " I wonder what they'll make me," he mused. " A blue peasant type, I expect. Of course, you are right, Ragg Dante. You are witnessing our weakness and our shame for in spite of our apparent veneer of civilization we are still so primitive that we must provide

an imitation of the atmosphere of our race's childhood and periodically return our webbed feet to the water through which they once propelled us. While I am stricken to think of my own future, I am pleased to congratulate you on yours."

" Rubbish !" said Ragg. " I'm not buying that line either. The first two of my predecessors fell for the religious angle. The next two were smarter, they saw through it and fell—as they were meant to—for the we're-still-primitives gimmick. Me—I'm waiting for the room to start rotating !"

The swish of the pink water around his ankles told him his waiting was over. The walls and the two rims of flooring were turning slowly at a rate of about one revolution every thirty seconds. Ragg had to admit to himself that the sensation was pleasant, particularly the lapping of the water around his feet.

" That's better," he said. " Now we know where we stand. Or sit. For your part, you've established a set of conditions which ought to lull me into the right frame of mind to agree to your proposals. But I'm going to disappoint you. I'm not amenable to induced hypnosis, telepathic suggestion or any other type of mental pressure. So why don't you just accept defeat and get down to discussing business with both parties having an equal chance to make their points ?"

Boval defended himself. " I have never refused to come to terms with any of your salesmen."

" True. But the terms were always yours. And if we hadn't abstained from giving those salesmen the right of signing contracts, Earth would be in a pretty bad way now. Like all the others you've done business with."

Ragg's accusation was no more than the truth. The people of Acamar's only inhabited planet qualified for the title of the universe's laziest race. Yet, because they were also the craftiest, their world was one of the best equipped.

Acamarians had a talent which they used, or misused, to the limit. Physically they were bone idle. Mentally they could beat anyone. Ever since the beginning they had been telepathic. But they had worked on this basic talent until they had developed it to the point where they could use it as a tool and a weapon. With the development of their talent, they had abandoned all physical effort. They had found it so much easier to get others to do their work for them.

On the face of it, their actions amounted to nothing more than subcontracted labour. If the time came when they wanted an arid plain converted to fertile country with satellite towns, they let it be known that there was work available and materials to be supplied. And since few worlds can exist on an entirely internal economy, there was no lack of offers to accept contracts. Salesmen from different parts of the universe vied with each other to get in first. Those who landed contracts went back home in high glee. But it wasn't until all the small print had been read that the fortunate worlds discovered they had been bilked. They had the contracts all right, but to fulfil them—which they were legally bound to do—they had to cripple themselves. Instead of making fat profits, they stood to make disastrous losses on the deals.

As Ragg said, " You set us back a couple of decades on conventional space travel when we contracted to build you a fleet of ships. You're not doing it this time."

Boval said flatly, " Of course, we could refuse to have anything to do with your merchandise."

" You can't afford to. Spaceships are out. Too slow, too small for bulk cargo, too expensive. Matter transmission in microquanta is the thing. Those who don't come in on it will be bankrupt. They'll never be able to compete with the new freight rates—and freightage can be a big part of the price of an exported article. So you've got to buy matter transmission whether you like it or not. And I'm here to sell it."

" If you can," said Boval, showing the iron fist for the first time.

Ragg looking him straight in the eye, thought how easy it was going to be to get the Acamarian buyer to accept Terran terms. He was not concentrating unduly hard on the thought but Boval's pelt became a darker pink with the sudden start of perspiration.

" You can't do that to me !" the alien gasped.

" I've just done it," said Ragg. He relaxed the pressure. " You see, this time the odds are a lot more equal for both sides. You could even say my chances are more equal than yours."

" But your race is non-telepathic, completely psi-insensitive"

" I warned you I was different. Let's talk business."

"No! Wait!"

"What for? Scared? You had better accept the fact, Boval, you're not going to pressure me into accepting *your* terms. You've got away with it in the past. You've hypnotised the Diphdans into running your power and light systems for the next century, at a price which is going to bring them to their knees. Thousands of Sabiks starve to death while they send you food they cannot spare. For a while you had us sending you spaceships for less than the cost of the raw materials needed to build them. But times have changed."

Boval's pelt was soaked. Dewdrops of perspiration beaded him all over.

"You can't escape, of course," he said feebly.

Ragg laughed. "The revolving wall? You're slipping. If I was a normal human I *would* be trapped, faced with four doors and only one of them a real one. But, Boval, all I have to do is pick the answer out of your mind. Which I can do any time I please."

The Acamarian lashed out a mental whip. For one split second Ragg had no desire to sell the alien matter transmission, no desire to do anything but give it away. Then he fought back. And it was Boval who shuddered at the realisation that he was willing to sign away his whole planet to buy what Ragg had to offer.

By mutual consent the battle ceased.

"Tell me your proposal," the alien said, weakly.

The Acamarian spaceship swindle deal had done Earth a good turn. Faced with the prospect of supplying Acamar at a loss, Terran scientists had concentrated their efforts on producing an alternative mode of transport. The obvious solution was direct matter transmission. Across the globe there were dozens of talented men who had been working independently towards that goal. Each of them knew something of the problem; none of them knew the complete answer. But in the emergency they were brought together, their ideas were pooled and in less than twenty years they had a method of matter transmission worked out down to the last homolectron.

The system worked perfectly. Anything could be sent, living matter or dead, from a mole to a mountain. The only drawback was the need for booster stations for transmissions greater than ten light-years.

To maintain an adequate and economical export-import business in some of the universe's outer reaches, it was imperative that a booster station be set up on the planet of Acamar.

For the moment, Boval appeared to be prepared to discuss business on normal lines.

" What's in it for us ?" he asked.

" You've heard it all before."

" I'd like to hear it again."

Ragg shrugged. " As you please. The station we propose to set up will, in addition to being a booster junction, be a transmitter in its own right. Which means that you too can enjoy the benefits of the new form of transport. You will be able to increase your trade with any world connected to the matter transmitter grid. The despatch and receipt of exports and imports will be speeded up immensely. In addition to this, you will also be paid a nominal, but quite substantial, annual fee for the maintenance of the booster."

" *We* maintain it ?"

" That's what I said. And on the debit side you will have to pay for any use you make of the transmitter. I think you will find that these dues will cancel exactly the annual maintainance fee."

" It's robbery !" moaned Boval.

" It's business," Ragg corrected. " Any other questions ?"

Boval's felt bristled with suspicion. " How do we know the station won't be used against us ? It would be an open door through which you could send an army against us or a global weapon designed to explode on arrival."

" We could do that thing," Ragg admitted. " But you're forgetting the grid is a two-way system. You could just as easily do something like that to us. So it looks as if we'll have to trust each other, doesn't it ? Anyhow, attack wouldn't be as simple as you make it sound. The station will be big, yet limited. No army could be sent en masse. At the first sign of the wrong sort of goods arriving, all that the other side has to do is cut the power and leave the homolectronized army in limbo."

Boval's felt had not subsided. " What about a bomb ?" he asked.

" Transmission is practically instantaneous. It would be too tricky to rig a destructor to detonate on arrival when the

interval between despatch and arrival is so small. Anything else worrying you ?"

" Who builds the station ?"

" You do. Under our supervision. You supply the materials and the labour. We supply the know-how."

" It seems that we do everything. We build the station. We maintain it. We pay for the use of it—"

" And you get access to all its advantages. Don't try to make it sound so one-sided."

" No !" said Boval. He took his feet out of the water, stood on the rim of the pool and repeated, " No, no, no !"

" You didn't say no to the other traffic salesmen."

" No !"

" Don't you like the idea ? Remember, without it you'll be out of business."

" The station I like. But—"

" Good ! I have the papers here."

" But I refuse the conditions. *You* will build the station with *your* materials and *your* labour and *you* will maintain it and you will also pay us handsomely for the rental of our ground and the use of that volume of space which is ours under the statutory field limits as laid down by the Galactic Judiciary."

The alien's bluster came out in one long breath. He followed the speech with a storm of mental insistence that his conditions be accepted and a blanket of resistance to anything contrary.

Ragg laid the papers on his knees and unfolded them calmly. He knew he was getting through the blanket with ease.

" You sign here," he said.

" I sign nothing. By Acamar, you can't do this !" Boval redoubled his efforts to get through to Ragg's mind. But it was himself who suffered. He could feel his lanced thoughts being thrust aside. His felt sweated again. Then, to his horror, he felt Ragg's mind probing into his, trying to force him to yield to the Terran's wishes.

He stepped into the water and bleated, " It is impossible ! We are the master race. No one can beat us in a mental battle."

" When you've finished trying to kid yourself—" Ragg said.

The alien reached a hand into the water, feeling for something on the inner edge of the pool. He gave Ragg a look of sheer hate.

In response to the switch he had touched, the conditions in the circular room began to change rapidly. The flexible ceiling descended to within inches of the alien's head, the air pressure was crushing. Moist heat appeared from nowhere. The rotation of the walls was quadrupled in speed.

Near as Ragg and Boval were biologically, there were sufficient differences for the Acamarian to be able to withstand the heat and the pressure, while Ragg slumped face forward into the pool as any Terran would have.

Conditions were normal when Ragg came round. By his watch he saw that he had been out for less than two minutes. But judging by the rapt expression on Boval's face and the smoothness of his felt, it had been long enough for the alien to frisk him.

" I knew it," Boval said. " I knew you couldn't possibly pressure me mentally—not without some mechanical aid."

He tapped the slim box he had taken off Ragg. " How does it work ?"

Ragg held out a hand. " Let me have it and I'll show you."

" Don't be naive."

" All right, open it and take out the fuel cell, if you're so suspicious."

Boval slipped the simple catch. The inside of the box had three divisions. The centre division held seventy-two transistors. On one side of these was a coil. Boval extracted the Cambridge fuel cell from the other side and passed the box to Ragg.

" Now tell me how it works," he sneered.

" I've changed my mind."

" Then I'll have to change it back for you," said Boval, and without his previous defence Ragg's mind was naked to the searing insistence of the alien's projected thought.

Ragg shuddered and thought it was a hell of a hard way he had chosen to get the alien to do things his way. He wondered if his sales psychology had not slipped somewhere.

" This," he said, still in considerable pain, " is essentially an amplifier. I expect you have guessed that much. With it I was able to impress my thoughts on you—"

Boval was impatient. Up until now there were several worlds which had not yet become Acamar's unwilling slaves for the simple reason that the natives were equally talented in telepathic ability. He could see himself being promoted to the magenta caste for his work in opening up trade with these hitherto stubborn worlds.

"I know what it does," he said. "I want to know how." And he gave Ragg another brain-lashing to emphasise his point.

"Do that again and I won't even know my own name," Ragg warned.

"Get on with it then."

Ragg indicated the transistors. "This is a conventional arrangement. The fuel cell is likewise not very extraordinary. But it is this coil which is the heart of the amplifier. I'll unclip it so you can see it better. It was invented by a man named Schraeder—don't you think it's lovely?"

A Schraeder coil was indeed a thing of beauty. The wire was wound round a triangular former and at each apex of the triangle there was what looked like a tiny bead. These beads were minute blobs of Schraeder's own ceramic which had the peculiar property of passing electricity in its own good time.

It was not just a case of the ceramic being a poor conductor. It was a perfectly good conductor but current could only get through it slowly, yet without any loss of energy. The beads of Schraeder's ceramic acted like slow-leak capacitors. Each turn of a Schraeder coil therefore had its own resonance and current coming in at one end in feeble amounts came pumping out of the other end with the strength of small lightning.

Due to an impurity—which actually gave the ceramic its odd properties—the beads were multi-coloured. The actual tint was an indication of the degree to which the ceramic retarded current while it stepped it up. The beads of the Schraeder coil in Ragg's hands varied from pale straw at one end to deep ruby at the other.

"My thoughts," said Ragg, "were too weak to impress you without amplification. But the feeble electrical impulses which accompanied those thoughts were picked up by the coil. They were retarded by the paler beads, yet strengthened at the same time. As the amplified impulses passed up the

coil they went through faster and stronger. By the time they were on their way to you they were irresistible."

"Irresistible!" Boval said dreamily. He came down to the Acamarian equivalent of earth and back to the job in hand. "We want these," he said. "Thousands of them."

Ragg waved a hand airily. "You've got a model. Duplicate it."

"You know perfectly well we have no scientists capable of that."

"Hire some."

"Dante," said the alien, "I am not a fool. From your glibness it is obvious that you are confident nobody could duplicate these instruments. So we shall cut out all middlemen. We shall deal directly with the manufacturers."

"Us?"

"Precisely."

"And if I say no?"

"Try it."

Ragg pulled a face. "You've got a point there. However, suppose I agreed, what—as you said earlier—would be in it for us?"

"I'll be fair," said Boval with magnanimity. "You want us to set up a matter transmitter station on our planet. We want these amplifiers—"

"No deal!" Ragg interrupted. "If we give you Schraeder amplifiers you'll be able to twist our tail any time you like, and every tail in the universe."

"You force my hand, I regret to say. I'll try not to hurt you too much."

Several light-years out from Acamar, Ragg Dante was still smiling. At the expense of a slight headache everything had gone according to plan. Earth would have its booster station; Acamar had an option on Schraeder amplifiers.

Ragg was reporting to his superior aboard ship.

"The buyer was naturally surprised that I could supply twenty thousand Schraeders from stock. However, he was so greedy to get his hands on them he swallowed my 'admission' of a planned coup d'etat on his planet. When he asked where were the men who were going to use the amplifiers, I told him they had been going to be sent via the matter transmitter. He was tickled pink—literally—to think he had foiled an

invasion in addition to getting the better of me in our business deal."

He was asked, " Did you recover the genuine Schraeder ?"

" I did. Not that it would have made any difference if I had left it. As Boval guessed, nobody could duplicate it. You know, I wonder how long it will be before they find that we have supplied them with reversed Schraeders ?"

" When they try them out on the next batch of salesmen, I expect."

Ragg laughed. " I wish I could be there. It's going to be funny to see the meatheads of the universe getting their own back on the Acamarians with the reversed Schraeders damping out their every thought. I guess we've evened things out a bit."

" A bit," Ragg's superior concurred. " But not enough. You've got a lot of selling to do yet. The Acamarians will soon discover what's happening. It's up to us to get as many real Schraeders into the hands of Acamar's neighbours as soon as possible."

" It'll be a pleasure," said Ragg.

He lay back on his pallet and shut his eyes.

" Wake me up at Diphda," he murmured.

Robert Presslie

This is another one of those delightful stories Francis G. Rayer does so well—the alien hunt on Earth for a variant alien integrated with our own human life. A difficult task, but the hunter does have certain talents.

VARIANT

by FRANCIS G. RAYER

Prit sensed the variant, but could not localise him. He hated the customary blackness in the variant's mind—a diminishing of sensibility, always present when a good one became variant. The variant was trying to reduce radiation, but could not—a usual variant weakness, too.

The road between small town and tiny village was dark. Prit walked quickly, carrying everything in one light case. He had not been here before, but had been drawn by the clouded radiation of Reiusel's mind. His task was simply expressed—find Reiusel, destroy him. But less simply accomplished, he thought. Reiusel had been alert, able, quick—and knew his life hinged on remaining hidden, or on destroying Prit first. Prit partly regretted that Reiusel must die, but a variant could never return, after that subtle, awful change.

Thin rain dripped from roadside trees. Reiusel was trying to hide the dark beacon of his mind, but could not. Investigating momentarily, Prit sensed Reiusel's fear, but also his determination to live, and the undercurrent of violence and crime, so typically variant. Prit closed his mind quickly.

Lights shone far ahead along the road. A car, driven fast, and approaching. The lights went from sight as the road dipped and Prit stepped into the concealment of a field gateway.

The car was coming fast, headlights in the dark. Halfway between it and Prit a shape moved quickly along the roadside. Tall, wide of shoulder and body, outlined against the approaching lights, he wore a long overcoat, a hat, and was almost running.

Car and figure seemed almost to blend, and Prit knew the driver had not seen the dark shape. Braked wheels screamed momentarily, then were released. The car came on, its speed scarcely reduced. Prit glimpsed a young woman, half seen behind a streaming windscreen, lips parted, gaze on the road ahead. Perhaps she had expected an impact, but there was none. Now, she was convincing herself the shape was a trick of rain and shadows.

Prit's muscles tensed. During that moment any ordinary man must have died—been flung, broken, into the hedge. The form ahead had not ! There could be only one explanation—he was Reiusel, nearer at hand than Prit had supposed.

He stood near the field gateway, listening. Beings from the system near Castor could move silently and Reiusel was no exception. Rain and trees whispered, defeating the ear. But Prit could sense Reiusel's dark mind, though Reiusel strove to conceal it. A variant always lost the ability to shield his mind. Except for that, variants would probably never be found and exterminated, Prit thought.

At length he moved from the gateway. He did not think Reiusel was nearer, and the dark beacon of his mind seemed to grow dim, as with increased distance.

Prit walked on, listening often. Long skid marks testified to the girl's action. The country road was narrow, the grass each side high, overgrown with brambles. A man would walk on the road, and would be difficult to see by someone driving fast in rain.

It was a mile to the village. Prit abandoned the strain of trying to maintain contact with Reiusel's mind. He had at least established that Reiusel was nearby.

The village had one inn, and Prit's ring brought a small, fat man into the corridor by the bar. Prit smiled, removing his hat, resting his small case on a shelf.

" I'm a commercial traveller." He gave explanations before asked, as his immediate superior always advised. " My car

broke down, and I left it back in town. I walked out this way to kill time, but it's too wet to go back tonight."

The man evaluated him, keen-eyed for all his rubicundity. In the bar, someone laughed, talking.

Prit took out his note case. " If you've a room, I'll pay in advance."

Suspicion vanished. The innkeeper nodded. " There's a small one at the back, sir. We don't have much call for rooms."

Prit followed him up steep stairs. The room was narrow, and had a small window over an outhouse roof. He put his case near the bed.

" This will do well."

He paid, refused supper, but said he might go down to the bar later. The innkeeper was friendly, disposed to help. Prit sat down. Perhaps a newcomer, such as Reiusel, would have been noticed. Reiusel had clearly prepared his hiding place and new identity with care, and would not abandon it lightly.

Prit took out a note, folding it pensively. " I'm new to this part. We sell everything for gardens." There were leaflets and literature to prove it, if needed. " Paths, walling, gardenscape improvements, implements, sheds, greenhouses—know anyone who'd be interested ?"

Keen eyes were on the note. The man scratched a fat cheek. " Not too much demand for such things round here, sir." He pondered. " There's been a new man up at Hundred House, and he's been making improvements, they say."

Prit's interest quickened. " Hundred House ?"

" A biggish place half a mile back up the road. Changed hands a bit ago. He came in here once or twice—a Mr. Russell, a biggish man."

Prit smiled inwardly. Russell. Reiusel. It was odd how variants always had this blatant weakness. They would make elaborate precautions, but leave clues. This similarity of names was frequent. When a good one went variant, he schemed and planned to remain free and prosper in crime. Yet every variant seemed to defeat himself, to destroy his own chances of escape. There was the clouding, the sudden inability to hide his mind. and this typical weakness for similar names which barely gave anonymity.

" Thanks," Prit said. " I'll call on Mr. Russell later."

Alone, Prit decided he must report to his immediate superior. The rain had stopped and the sky was clear. Stars shone

weakly. Somewhere up there was the world from which Reiusel came. An odd race, Prit admitted, and having a strange brilliance of mind. Reiusel had once been among the good ones. Now, his mind was grown dark, and he was a variant, to be caught no matter upon what planet he sought to hide, or how far he went from Castor. Earth, or the remoter planets of distant suns—it was all the same. A variant, a bad one, must be found, rooted out, like any faulty deviation from normal. Odd how some of the most reliable could change, quickly or slowly, until they were variants, Prit thought.

He cleared his mind, adjusting it for contact with his immediate superior. The contact came quickly, vividly, a voluntary giving and receiving that annihilated distance.

" You have found Reiusel." It was scarcely a question, rather a statement. " How long until you catch him ?"

" Not long. Tonight, I hope."

" Do, if you can. There is at least one other new variant on that planet."

" Another !" Prit felt astonishment. Variants were not numerous, a handful in millions.

" Yes. Jhouns, a young man once under me. I'll give you his description."

An image floated in Prit's mind—that of a pleasant looking man, sandy, with a slightly sharp face, and not heavily built.

" I'll go after him when I've finished with Reiusel," Prit agreed.

" Take care."

There was a friendly interchange of minds, then nothing. Prit gazed from the window at the weak stars, drawing in his lips pensively. It was unusual to have two variants to catch at once, like this. But Jhouns was probably half a world away, somewhere else on the planet.

Prit went down to the bar. The hour was early, there was time to spare, and he might learn something.

A youth and girl, obviously dressed for motorcycle or scooter were playing darts. The innkeeper sat near the end of the bar, smoking. A short, dark man occupied a low chair near the spark of fire, a pint at his elbow.

Prit got a drink, chatting, but conversation lagged. He tried a cursory examination of the minds of the four. None of them noticed, and none held anything significant. They had no

telepathy, no radiation, no sensitivity or feeling that it was being used.

Prit got another drink, watching the darts. The feeling of another mind began to dawn upon him, gaining strength. The other mind was dark, its impressions chilling. Reiusel, Prit guessed. Reiusel was coming to the inn.

The dark beacon was growing nearer. Prit finished his drink, wished them good night, and went to the stairs door, leaving it an inch open. The dark beacon was closer, unmistakably variant. Prit shivered, though it was warm in the stair passage.

He heard the bar outer door open, silence as the four looked at the newcomer, then a welcome from the innkeeper. The door closed. Prit's sensation of the dark mind was very strong. Voices murmured.

" Looks like clearing up, Mr. Jones," the innkeeper said. " It's lucky you happened along. If you're seeing Mr. Russell tonight, I'd take it as a favour if you told him I'm sending a man to see if there's anything he wants for his garden. Knowing how Mr. Russell is so interested, I thought he'd be pleased."

A shock ran through Prit. He moved a little up the stairs, from where he could bend and look in at the top of the open crack. He pushed with infinite caution, and saw the newcomer half from behind. The single glance was sufficient, then he straightened and went on silently up the stairs.

It was Jhouns, sandy, sharp-faced, the other variant ! Some freak of chance, or the affinity of dark minds, had brought them together. The innkeeper's words proved that Jhouns and Reiusel met. They also betrayed that Prit knew who Russell was. Reiusel had undoubtedly sensed that he was followed, in the lane, and little effort was needed to deduce that the follower had been someone sent to track him down, destroy him, because he was variant.

The situation had abruptly grown complex and more dangerous, Prit decided as he silently closed his bedroom door. Reiusel and Jhouns both knew they were followed. They also knew that they could never conceal the dark beacon of their minds from the searching of a trained observer. Therefore the observer must be eliminated.

Prit had felt confident, tracing Reiusel. Now, with odds thus doubled, he felt uneasy indeed.

Midnight was early enough to seek Reiusel's house, Prit decided. He checked his baggage. There was a small inner box containing six spherical crystal objects—highly valuable, and possibly the only ones on the planet, Prit thought, as he put the box in an inner pocket. A variant was not easily eliminated by ordinary means, was too tough and quick to be harmed by most types of physical violence. The way in which Reiusel had escaped the car substantiated that.

Prit lay on the bed, dressed. A scooter departed, popping. Prit wondered what factors made good ones go variant. Jhouns had had a promising future, apparently. But now, he must not live.

Noises came from below, then silence again. Prit rested, not trying to make his mind reach out to contact Reiussel or Jhoun. He was almost dozing when a tap vibrated the door.

He rose, opening it. The innkeeper looked apologetic.

" Mr. Russell and Mr. Jones want to see you, sir."

Prit retained his expression of mild interest. " It's late."

" So I said, sir. But they seemed very anxious." The voice dropped confidingly. " Mr. Russell has spent a lot of money so far at the Hundred House, sir."

A variant never lacked money, Prit thought. Crime came easily, paid readily. If Russell and Jones were nicely established here under aliases, they might not risk trying to kill him at the inn.

" I'll see them," he said quietly.

The man went, and soon footfalls came up the stairs. Prit withdrew until his back was at the window.

Reiusel was tall and wide, with a strong, broad face, cold eyes and lips tight and thin. Jhouns, sandy, years younger, looked slight besides him, but had a wiry toughness. They closed the door.

" You've found us sooner than I expected," Jhouns said with deadly quietness.

Prit smiled. " I like to be efficient."

He opened his mind momentarily to the radiation of the pair, but closed it sharply. There was deadly hatred, fierce anger, a very strong desire to kill him immediately, but a fear that their comfortable haven would then be lost. Prit looked into Reiusel's cold eyes.

" I believe you've been enjoying yourself nicely for some time, Reiusel," he observed.

Reiusel's eyes resembled a snake's. " I wish to go on doing so."

" That's understandable."

Prit's nerves and muscles were tight. Jhouns moved away from the door, to the bed. He sat down upon it, faking ease, feet tucked in.

" I also like things as they are," Jhouns said sharply. "From my point of view, everything is excellent—except that you're following us."

Therefore you'd like the following to cease ! Prit thought. He smiled at Jhouns, though it was dangerous, with the pair now separated across the room.

" I've never known a variant not like what's he's become," Prit observed. " Odd, isn't it. Ages ago it was hoped a variant could be reformed again. But none ever was. It didn't work. You're an off-shoot of the normal. What's more, you knew you'd be caught, one day, and what would happen then."

" We're not easily killed," Reiusal said acidly.

His eyes flickered towards the small suitcase, and Prit knew his thoughts. Prit laughed.

" I wouldn't go so far as to say that !"

Jhoun's feet were close together, under the edge of the bed, taking his weight. His body was a spring, waiting release.

" We'll see," Reiusal began.

He swept into movement as he spoke, his speed astonishing, projecting himself towards Prit. Simultaneously, as in a practised act, Jhouns sprang across the room towards the door, in the same movement gathered up the case, opened the door, and was gone. Reiusel's lunge halted, was reversed, and he was out of the door on his companion's heels.

Prit closed the door carefully, locking it. In one pocket was a soft pouch. He fitted it to a belt round his waist, and transferred the six electronodes from their box to it. Jhouns and Reiusel were welcomed to everything else his case contained !

They had meant to take the electronodes first, kill him second, Prit thought, as he opened the room window silently. They were very determined. Variants always were.

He lowered himself to the outhouse roof, and to the ground. A narrow yard joined the road. He listened, opening his mind. The dark beacon of Reiusel and Jhouns was receding. Appar-

ently they were sure they had the electronodes in the case, and would not investigate until back at the Hundred House. And that, Prit thought, was the place to go himself.

The Hundred House was old, in its own grounds, rambling, balconied and amid trees. Prit circled it at a good distance. Adjacent buildings might once have been stables. Lights shone in many house windows, but nothing moved.

He crept nearer, following a wall lined with fruit trees. A lit window was directly in view, almost ahead. Keeping to one side, Prit looked in.

A chair before a desk was occupied by a broad, heavily built man. Prit opened his mind, and sensed Reiusel near, for the moment submerging the dark, dimmer beacon of Jhoun's mind.

Thus might one die, easily, Prit thought. He felt in the pouch, taking out an electronode. He found a stone, and with it broke the glass, simultaneously tossing the crystal globe inside, directly under the chair.

The hollow sphere erupted with electronic fire, rising swiftly, surrounding chair and figure with flickering blue. Almost at once the leaping current was gone, spent. Watching, tension stabbed at Prit's nerves. The chair and figure remained. The chair should, but not Reiusel ! An electronode that close was invariable fatal, swiftly and finally.

There was an explanation, and the force of it struck Prit physically. The figure was a dummy. He had wasted one electronode ! Reiusel and Jhouns had anticipated he would come.

Somewhere the dark beacon of Reiusel's mind expressed triumph. Prit ducked, dodging back along the wall and through a barred door into the stables. A car stood under the high roof. Wasted hay was near steps rising to a loft, and he mounted quickly. A high door, once used to take hay into the loft, but now closed against birds by strong wire mesh, faced the house. Prit looked out, extremely cautious.

Everything was still. He could sense Reiusel and Jhouns, now, but not very near. The sensation had no directivity, and strain as he would Prit could see no one in the dim starlight.

Minutes drifted. The minds of the pair had a queer, distorted triumph, sinister, suppressed, yet fierce. Prit shivered, wishing he had not wasted an electronode.

Below, something slammed. Prit remembered the stout door. If locked outside, he could not open it. A confused crackling began, and red danced at the step ladder opening. Someone had ignited the old hay.

The fire spread as among tinder, sending up choking dense smoke. Prit felt terror. He tugged at the wire netting, but it was of strong expanded steel mesh, stapled securely outside.

Coughing, he ran the length of the hayloft. The smoke was unendurable, but the flames below showed there were no windows except spaces in the brickwork only as large as a man's arm. He recalled how the car stood near the waste hay. The stables would be an inferno within minutes.

Coughing, eyes smarting, he backed again from the netting. Flames were roaring through the stair opening as up a blast furnace chimney. He opened the pouch, and lobbed an electronode at the foot of the mesh. The sphere erupted in electrical fire, heat running up the metal. The mesh glowed red hot, but the electronode faded out, and the mesh was cooling visibly. Biting his lips. Prit lobbed another. The mesh was again licked by electrical energy, glowed red, white, and a piece in the middle dribbled down, melted. Prit ran for the opening, breath held, and jumped through it, landing heavily amid soft, wet rubbish. He was up instantly, running round the building, streaking for the part of the garden near the wall, where cover was better.

He had only three electronodes left. There was no other practicable way of eliminating a variant. These beings from near Castor were tough. The native planet was impossible, by Earth standards. To survive, they were quick, very strong, and could take knocks which would kill a human. He had seen a bullet pass through one as if through a sack of potatoes, and with no greater vital damage.

The stable roof fell with a crash, sparks and flames leaping high. An explosion added more fury, as the car petrol tank went. The Hundred House was no longer dark outside, but lit by red, fitful colour. Prit was glad that he had reported back to his immediate superior. If he failed personally, others would come to find Reiusel and Jhouns.

He retreated among the trees, circled, and approached the house from the opposite side. A french window was a few inches open—too obviously. He passed it at a distance, and finally discovered a small side window which he could unfasten.

The stable fire crackled, and rooms that side were lit intermittently. When he made his mind receptive the blackness of the pair assailed him. They had seen him leave the stable loft.

He went quietly upstairs, along a corridor, and found a glass door that opened to the balcony. There, he kept in shadows, listening.

A form crept from bushes near the garden wall. Jhouns. He was very cautious, but not looking up towards the balcony. Prit stealthily removed an electronode from his pouch, judging the distance, waiting.

Jhouns was only a few paces away, moving to go below, when Prit lobbed the electronode towards his feet. Simultaneously, some inner warning made Jhouns look up. One hand shot out in a flicker of blurred movement, catching the crystal sphere, and Jhouns sprang under the balcony, from view.

Perspiration beaded Prit's brow. Now, he had only two electronodes—and Jhouns had one ! It merely needed throwing carefully to crack at one's feet, Prit thought, shivering.

He moved hastily along the balcony. The first fury of the stable blaze was spent, but flames rose high from the destroyed building. Prit stepped into a room, waiting.

The black beacon of other minds was very fierce, with a new undertone of triumph. Prit could gather nothing to help him. But he sensed that Jhouns was looking at the balcony from a higher level, instead of from below. Neither of the pair could blanket his mind, but the impressions were fragmentary, unhelpful to a person not familiar with the house. Reiusel had once been quite important among the good ones, Prit remembered. It was strange how he had lost the power to blanket his mind, when he became variant. Prit had an inner curtain to block off his consciousness from outside appraisal. But no variant retained that ability, and Reiusel's mind radiated fear, hope, anger, determination.

An iron escape stairway was level with the end of the balcony. Prit went up it quickly, and in at a narrow window. He felt nearer to Jhouns. The room was unlocked, and a dark passage led to other rooms. The door of one was closing, showing a decreasing crack of reflected red light from the stables. Prit sped to it, tugging out an electronode, opened it, and saw Jhouns with one foot upon a second narrow iron stair as he looked down cautiously at the balcony. The electronode sped

from Prit's hand with a continued movement, landed at Jhoun's feet, and broke.

Electronic fire leapt up, covering Jhouns. Prit stepped back, shielding himself just beyond the door. There was no sound, no heat, only a surge of released current. It should abruptly double in intensity, as the electronode Jhouns had caught was ignited.

It did not, but faded, and was gone. Prit did not look into the room again. Jhouns was finished. But the pair had foreseen the danger of losing their advantage, and Jhouns had undoubtedly handed the electronode to Reiusel. There was no other explanation of the single release of energy.

Prit went along the passage, listening, trying to get some directive bearing on Reiusel. He watched the balcony from a window, but saw nothing. The fire was dying to a steady redness.

He descended the stairs quietly, reaching the ground floor. The corridor off the stairs was flagged stone and very dark. He moved along it cautiously, passed a table, and became aware of a quiet rustling. He halted, and the rustling ceased. He thought he could hear breathing.

" Puts us on equal terms, don't you think," a cold voice said.

Prit's first impulse was to lob the crystal electronode ahead, but he did not. The voice had an echoing, muffled quality, as if Reiusel stood behind an open door. If so, and the electronode discharged uselessly, terms would no longer be equal.

Prit withdrew, moving to the opposite side of the corridor. Reiusel dare not thrown the electronode until he was sure it would find its mark—dare not have it waste on the paved corridor.

" Jhouns is finished," Prit said warningly, very uneasy.

" I know." The voice had changed position slightly. " He had an element of carelessness which I lack."

Prit tried to estimate the distance and bearing. " That's not quite the whole story," he pointed out.

" No ?"

" A variant cannot keep his mind undetected. I can. When I leave here, I can keep trace of you, but you can't find my mind when I don't wish—"

" *If* you leave," Reiusel corrected.

There was silence. Prit wondered if he should contact his immediate superior at once, telling of the situation. His superior could come into rapport immediately, if Prit wished. But it would be difficult to anticipate any move Reiusel might make, with his mind open for contact with his superior, Prit decided.

" You variants all have the same weakness," Prit argued, perspiring, hoping Reiusel would talk longer next time. " You can't close your minds. I see your mind. So can my superior. You can never close it."

" I've done well enough."

It was stalemate, but Reiusel had the advantage of a complete knowledge of the house. That knowledge must not be used, Prit decided.

He began to feel stealthily back along the corridor. It was not wide, and he had passed a table against one wall. He found it again, and felt rapidly over its surface.

There was a heavy book, a telephone. Prit removed the phone silently, propping the book against the wall to hold the cradle down. He placed the phone on the paving against the opposite wall, drew its cord loosely across and made a curve in the flex at the table edge. On the loop, very near the edge, he rested the last electronode.

He withdrew until the corridor end pressed his back. He estimated that Reiusel had heard his retreat, but not his detailed actions.

" Why not give up, Reiusel ?" he said quietly.

" Why ? No variant ever does. We know what would happen to us."

The voice was louder, as if Reiusel was approaching. This was Reiusel's chance, Prit thought, sweating. Reiusel would know the length of the corridor, the position of its doors, and could judge if it was safe to risk throwing the electronode in the dark. If he did, that would be the end.

Stealthy movements grew louder. Prit held his breath, trying to make Reuisel uncertain that he was still there, so that he would not risk wasting the electronode.

A long silence dragged, then more sounds of movement, nearer. Very close the table position, Prit thought. There was a light scraping sound, a thin plop, and abruptly the corridor was full of electric fire, leaping up Reiusel's body like lightning up a conductor, and followed by a second similar flash.

It was all over. Prit did not switch on the light to look, but went out of the corridor, and put on the lights in the adjoining room.

He felt weak, exhausted from the tension. He would rest a little before contacting his immediate superior, he decided.

He walked through the house, putting on lights. It was an imposing place, nicely furnished. Reiusel and Jhouns had done well for themselves. Variants always did, he thought absently. Being a variant had its points. This planet was pure bliss, compared with the inhospitable world on which Reiusel, Jhouns, and he himself had been born.

He went through some of the bedrooms. Very comfortable, Prit thought. It would be nice to stay here a bit, now Reiusel and Jhouns were finished.

He walked slowly on, musing. It was a pity their home world near Castor was so harsh. He had no desire to return to it, or to begin another hazardous expedition, perhaps to some unpleasant planet, perhaps to find variants even more dangerous that Reiusel and Jhouns.

His own people were tough, Prit thought. A hardy race, on an inhospitable world, they managed. Here, on this easy planet, life would be paradise !

He went down again, and found Reiusel and Jhouns had prepared food and drink, presumably before alarmed. Sitting down, he ate ravenously.

A pity to give up all this at once, Prit thought. It would be easy to stay here. He would call himself Pritchard, telling the innkeeper he had retired, had bought the house from Russell.

Sitting there, musing on it all, he did not notice how the protective curtain dissolved in his mind. Pritchard was a good name, he thought. As Mr. Pritchard, of Hundred House, he would do well . . . He did not feel his immediate superior's investigation or dismay. Yes, it was pleasant to be Mr. Pritchard of Hundred House, Prit decided.

Francis G. Rayer

The solution to overcrowding will eventually be to build down rather than up. Two hundred and fifty years from now the inhabitants of Earth may not be able to live on the surface or know what it looks like.

THE THOUSAND DEEP

by E. R. JAMES

" Delphini !" swore Simon Hyatt. To people of his father's generation, and indeed to all the packed humanity left on Earth in the early 23rd Century, the name of that double star was synonymous with that of Hell—so terrible had been the experiences of the colonists on the seemingly Earth-like planet orbiting its lesser sun.

" Delphini . . ." he breathed, and read the photowire again, liking it even less than at the first reading. So *that* was where she had gone after the official ceremony at which he had been given his B.Sc. (Biochem).

The photowire said :

7 Sirius Terrace,
Latlong 000W 051N,
Thousand Deep.

7th Julio 2212.

Dear Simon,

Marrying someone like you was such a frightening step for someone like me that I felt I simply had to go back down amongst my own people to see what they thought.

And I'm afraid that my uncles and all my friends point out how silly it is for me to go on seeing you.

You see, Simon, you're actually going off-planet, while I've never been up on the surface of Earth. Please forgive me for not saying goodbye properly last night, but I was worried lest you would persude me to do something we would both regret for the rest of our lives.

Ruth.

Her uncles and all her friends ! Who did those low-livers think they were ? He would show them what he thought of their opinions ! What right had they to dictate to a grown and radiant girl what she should do with her life ?

Taut with rage, he banged down the photostat on top of the receiver which had produced it for him. He heaved at the end of his bed and sent it thudding into its " day " position in the wall. He wrenched open his wardrobe and climbed into the first pair of shorts and first shirt his hands touched.

He turned to his personal things on the occasional table where he had put them for the " night." The badge of his Level and that of his degree he slapped into place on the left breast of his shirt. He stuffed money and other things into his pockets and took an extra handkerchief.

But he had only taken one stride towards the outer door of his University study when the wire receiver hummed and a fresh photostat started coming up from its slot.

He hesitated, but curiosity made him halt and he waited, tapping his nails on the apparatus's cover until it switched itself off and the photowire peeled off.

He caught it before it landed in the In tray.

Office of the Director General of Population Dispersal,
(Extraterrestrial Division.)
7/7/2112.

Simon Hyatt, Esquire.
Dear Sir,

You have been granted a temporary commission of Major . . . (It was what he had been expecting. His brilliance at the University was at least appreciated by officialdom.) He skimmed the long sheet, still slightly tacky from the developer : Deep-space Ship *Burnham* . . . under Captain Schel . . . Destination double star Struve 2173 . . . object in view development of existing colony . . . Blah, blah, blah— Projected departure date 9/7/2112.

" Delphini !" Two days' time . . .

Zzzz ! That was his door. He stretched a hand towards the opening button, narrowed his eyes and halted it, moving it towards the one-way polarizer so that he could look out through the plastic door material without whoever was outside being able to look in. His university room-mate, Ally, had warned him that, if he was foolish enough to remain on the University

campus instead of losing himself sensibly in the crowded, three-dimensional world of the Earth's crust, he would have to be on guard against attempts to shanghai him aboard any of a dozen or so deep-space ships in the spaceport above, or indeed aboard any of the hundreds of such giant craft at any of the spaceports of the world. It was said that any captain would pay highly, and no questions asked, on delivery of anyone with high technical qualifications.

And it was said, moreover, that Earth authorities, hounded as they were by constant population pressure, turned a blind eye to such kidnappings. Technicians could always get a job on Earth. Not everyone wished to leave the highly organised civilisation of Earth to undergo struggle and privation on remote and dangerous planets around other suns. Yet without technicians and scientists, ordinary colonists—who had been drafted of necessity and by lottery out of swarming humanity—stood little chance of staying civilised—or even of surviving in many cases.

He had no desire to be kidnapped by some hard-bitten skipper.

At his touch the shiny plastic of the door became opaque.

Outside a man in the purple, immaculate briefs of the Interstellar Merchant Navy was gesturing urgently at someone further down the Wide which led into the main shopping centre of the area. If it was a kidnapping, the hour being very early morning for this 500th Level, there could not have been a better time.

The man must have glimpsed the faint glow of the polariser for he seemed to stop in mid-sentence and turned towards the door with his mouth still open and whole attitude tense.

On his cap was the merchant navy insignia and the lettering

D. S. S. BURNHAM.

That was the ship to which he, Simon Hyatt, had been assigned ! Evidently its Captain had sent an escort to make sure he reached the ship before anyone else reached him. But just at this moment he did not wish to be escorted anywhere... not before he had at least seen Ruth.

He swung around and ran across the little study, pulled open the door into the quadrangle and rushed out.

A shout greeted his appearance. Thirty yards away, a Merchant petty officer, truncheon bumping at his side, had just come through the main entrance to the Quad and was waving at him.

He turned the other way and pelted along the side of the now mostly empty studies towards the lecture halls. Behind him, men called to each other and many more pairs of feet joined in the chase.

He swung left through a Narrow into the main Wide where he turned right, away from the shopping centre. A single, early passer-by shied away from him.

Yells warned him that he had been seen by the officer, and he risked a glance and saw other crewmen, who had evidently been keeping out of sight on either side of the door, being urged to haste by their officer. Before he straightened his neck from looking over his shoulder the others had burst through the Narrow and the whole of the *legal* press-gang were in full cry after him.

For an instant a kind of panic blurred his thoughts. Then as he looked ahead the short Narrow leading to the nearest airshafts caught his attention and his brain started working again so that he actually grinned to himself.

He flung left into the opening. Luck was with him. Both the slow and fast down shafts had their doors open. He slowed, thrust an arm into the fast shaft as he passed and then ducked into the slow shaft.

He had not waited to see if he had activated the fast shaft, but the doors of the slow capsule were already closing behind him. He peeked out between them and failed to glimpse the arrival of his pursuers. The doors closed, the outer doors sealing the shaft and the inner closing and automatically moving the capsule into the lubricated shaft where it went down within the down draught of slow moving air.

He watched the level indicator. 501 . . . 502 . . . With any luck the pursuers would assume that he would take the fast shaft to make sure of his escape. They would not expect him to drop only three levels. He punched the button to let him off at the next, 503rd Deep.

The capsule shifted gently out of the shaft and stopped. He dodged out through the opening doors and down the short passage to the Wide off which Ally, his erstwhile room-mate was staying with his parents. People were going to work like a flood and he struggled against the throng. It was "afternoon" on this level.

He reached his side turning and pushed out into it. A glance at the street sign 70 *Ophiuchi Tunnelane*—most living quarter

tunnels were named after a star which had been landed on or colonised at about the time of its making—confirmed he had made the right turning, because he had been there only once before.

Then he met Ally's father coming out of their apartment. Mr. Brunk recognised him.

" Hello, my boy. You look out of breath ? Come to see Aloysius ?"

" Yes !" gasped Simon.

Mr. Brunk smiled. " You young people, always in a rush." He called inside the open apartment door. " Simon Hyatt's here, Aloysius."

" Send him in, dad," came the reply from inside.

Mr. Brunk hesitated. His face seemed to harden and his eyes stared for an oddly long moment in at his son as Simon approached. " Well, goodbye then . . ."

" See you . . ." said Ally's even voice.

Simon reached the door. Mr. Brunk caught his hand. " I hear you've got the highest marks in the University. Good luck, lad, all the colonies will be after you." He turned sharply away—so quickly that Simon stared after him in an instant's bewilderment.

" Come in, bighead, you idiot," urged Ally's cool voice and drove other thoughts out of Simon's head by adding, " you want half the spacers on Earth following you in ?"

Simon closed the door.

Aloysius Brunk, some eight inches shorter than he, looked up at him with shrewd eyes. " So they're after you, like I warned. Penalty of success, Simon. Nobody's after me. I only just scraped through my exams. Still, there are plenty of jobs open to me even as I am, and who knows. . . I may yet build a reputation . . ." He grinned lopsidedly with one side of his face while the other stayed in a deadly serious expression. " But you've heard my little spiel before and heard me call it sour grapes. You know I have nothing but admiration for your success. How can I help you ?"

Simon's gaze fell to the half-packed suitcase and garments strewn about the bed. " You off too ?"

" No sense in waiting for my number to come up in the emigration lottery," said Ally ; " Nobody gets anywhere standing still. Still . . ." he sank on to the edge of the bed, " I can spare you a few minutes with an Earthful of free travel by airshaft capsules ahead of me."

He pattered on in his half philosophic way. " Don't mind me. It's the psychologist in me. You know dad said he had been to Latlong 021N158W and I asked, well, what was it like? And he said just the same as here, but I wanted to see a man I knew on Delta Equulei III. But you've seen the movies of the old South Seas before every stretch of land was cultivated for food for us swarming here *in*—instead of *on* Earth. I looked up the spot on an altas. He'd been under Honolulu. Imagine it. Palm trees, brown skinned girls in grass skirts, magnificent men plunging into the foaming Pacific breakers. And he said it was just the same as here ! Not that it was any different deep under the surface, but why should anyone travel when there are films to see of the world as it used to be and of other planets without end. Oh . . . I can get a capsule any time. But you, what did you want of me ?"

" You know people, and you think about what they think, even if you're not so hot on exams," said Simon, still only half at ease in spite of his friend's confidence. " What—" He had recovered his breath by this time but . . . Yet Ally had been successful in taking out more girls than anyone else in the University. He held out Ruth's letter.

Ally scanned it briefly. He looked up and wrinkled his brow at Simon. " I thought you had a press-gang after you by the way you'd rushed here."

" I had—"

" You had ! Now the man tells me . . ." Ally was on his feet stuffing belongings into the case for all he was worth. He grabbed Simon's arm and hustled him out, talking as they went.

" First thing is to break the whole point of that letter by getting her up on to the surface. Sure !" He held up his hand to cut Simon's protest short. " That's not easy. But you forget my old man's a maintenance engineer. Sewage and refuse from the human warren in these parts comes to a processing plant close to the spaceport. The spaceport is one of the few things left that's actually on the surface of England besides green fields. Fertilizer from the processing plant goes in pipes all over the countryside and the maintenance staff actually take off in helicopters from the spaceport itself, just the same as the farm staff do. Look, leave the end part to me. Go get that girl of yours and get her up to Proxima Centauri Subway terminal on Level One just below the spaceport itself, say at 1700 hours and I'll get things organised ready for you. O.K.?"

" O.K.!" Simon caught hold of Ally's hand, shook it and started to turn into the Narrow out of which he had come from 500 Deep.

Ally pulled him back. " You simply aren't bright at this sort of thing. That bunch of air shafts may be watched. Use the shopping centre cluster."

Simon nodded and hurried on as directed.

The sight of a crewman—who although he seemed to be viewing the girls more than looking for any fugitive—was enough to send Simon dodging into a Wire Office. Once inside, he had an idea. He asked at the counter for the shaft plan and got the number of the one he meant to use. He wrote a letter to Ruth asking her to meet him beside the opening to that shaft, dialled her number on the wire and fed it into a Photostat transmitter.

The crewman was no longer in sight as he came out amongst the shoppers not on duty in the factories. He recalled what Ally had said about every part of the underground world of Earth looking very much like every other part. It had not occurred to him before.

He got into the shaft with several others bent on high-speed descent, and the floor sank.

They stopped to let off a man at 509 and to take on two girls at 587. Thousand Deep registered on the dial and the doors slid open.

Warm air pushed into the capsule. Simon gasped. He had never been so deep before, never had any reason to come down here before. He had forgotten the pressure increase 1000 levels below the surface . . . at about 10 feet to the level, that was 10,000 feet, or about two miles down.

" Phew !" He breathed deeply.

The other passengers were already scattering down the short Wide into which the capsule opening had spilled them. Only the two girls, immediately in front of him, still stood, giggling and laughing at each other, enjoying the sensation.

Then they too parted a little and one dragged the other out. And between them, he saw a girl standing just outside the capsule as though waiting for someone. Her trim figure and somehow determined round head with its close-cut curls brought him quite out of his momentary daze.

" Ruth !"

As she turned, he glimpsed the unmistakeable uniforms of crewmen coming towards the capsule. One shouted, pointed. They all lurched forward towards him.

Simon grabbed Ruth's firm, satiny arm and drew her inside. As she started to protest, brown eyes wide, he flipped the close switch.

The doors slid together in the faces of the crewmen. The capsule slid sideways into the up shaft and the floor pressed at them as they gathered speed on the upward rush of the never ceasing air circulation of the levels.

Ruth's face, still bewildered, was very close to his. Her parted lips invited his. She half struggled as he kissed her, then responded, then pushed him away.

" No, Simon. You mustn't." But she stayed half in his arms. " Simon, I was hoping you'd reply to my wire. When I got yours, I came straight away. But . . . I'm afraid it is impossible. You remember when you found me first. Even on the 500th Deep near your university, I was ill. I don't think you understand what it's like. My father says it's the lower air pressure. The bends or something. And nitrogen in the blood coming out. What'll I be like near the surface ? How could I ever be a wife to you ? I'm so pleased to see you, but let me go back—"

" Can't !" he said. " Didn't you see those crewmen coming to get me ?"

" Crewmen ?" She looked startled, almost terrified. " What do you mean ?"

" I've had my papers come over the wire. With my honours degree I'm apparently fair game for press-gangs."

Her eyes seemed to search into his. Their gliding, cushioned upward rush made whispering noises.

" My uncle could find you a good job at Thousand Deep, and no questions asked," she said. " Come back down with me. Uncle has the biggest hydroponics farm in all the underground."

" No, you're coming with me," he murmured.

When she moved restlessly, he added, " I won't force you to do anything, but you've got to give me a chance. Wouldn't you like to go to some wonderful new world where there is room to live properly ?"

She looked at him doubtfully and it seemed her eyes almost fell under his enthusiastic regard.

He felt he was making his point, glanced at the Deep indicator—coming up to 950—and resumed his argument. " Certainly, you'll be ill again if we go rushing up non-stop. It's only sudden changes of pressure that harm us. I remember reading that there used to be a town called Quito somewhere in South America—Latlong OOOS 078W, not that the figures mean anything to us any more than the place does now, it's just fields—but it seems this city was about two miles above sea-level, so that people who lived there were breathing air that seemed thin to people who came up from lower places. Yet those who did go there got used to the change. If they can do it, you can too, if you want to . . ."

She looked at her small feet and seemed to be examining her sandals.

He pressed the stop button, just too late to set them on a "late evening " Deep, 900, as he had meant, and they stepped off into the " afternoon " crush of Deep 899 shoppers, so that he took her hand. He felt elated that she did not resist. When he glanced at her, there seemed to be a faraway look in her eyes.

" Come on," he cried, and they laughed at each other like truants.

They looked into store windows. " Think of it," he said, " worlds to help conquer. Out there, we'd be important. Here, everyone is a cog, everything is the same no matter where you go, vidio, pics—drugs for the eyes and imagination, no bother over money or anything—no challenge because everything's free except space."

People jostled them, gently but inevitably away from the window. " Well, there is nothing I want," said Simon. " I want to do something with my life, not to be like everyone else. And I want you to be with me ?"

" Do you ?" She seemed dreamy-eyed as though the stars were indeed beckoning.

He glanced at his watch and guided her towards arrows indicating elevator shafts.

At 801, after a silent ascent under the eyes of two elderly matrons, Simon was gratified to note that he had judged this stop right. Except for maintenance men cocking knowing eyes at them, they seemed to have the sleeping level to itself and wandered hand in hand as though they had already found their very own world.

He watched her round bright face, tanned from the ' ponics ' lamps of her uncle, change its expression, now hesitant, now almost guilty, now all alive with pure anticipation.

" Dreams . . ." he said, and laughed, intoxicated with the magic of the future which they might make for themselves.

At 403 when he told her where they were heading, her eyes widened and she swallowed quite fearfully, and he couldn't make her smile at all.

On 303, she persuaded him to let her call her uncle. He waited impatiently outside a Wire Office, and hurried her away as soon as she came out as though he had almost lost her there.

But the call seemed to have changed her mood. She clung to his arm, and laughed at his smallest sally. He sensed people looking at them, but did not care. Perhaps such people only envied them. Perhaps such people had forgotten what it is to be new to everything, to have the whole world of sensation to explore.

To imagine having vast new worlds to conquer . . . The joy of having struggled and even perhaps the bitter-sweet experience of having suffered somewhat.

" Together," said Ruth and trilled a laugh, " that's what counts, isn't it ?"

She seemed out of breath, just a little, but he could see no other ill-effects from their controlled rise towards the surface.

At 106, he made their last stop brief. A sharp-eyed crewman standing on a corner, turned him in his tracks, although Ruth mocked and teased him.

On level 6, he changed the shafts for horizontal travel on an electric tube. He led her on to the platform of the terminal below the spaceport under the very noses of a score of crewmen who seemed only interested in getting on board the tube train for a gay time somewhere else. Two of those still on the platform were spaceport police.

" I suppose," whispered Ruth, " that nobody would ever dream of you coming here."

Not many civilians wanted to come here, Simon knew. They would be here soon enough if their numbers came up in the electronic lottery machine. Most people simply wanted to go on in the safe, controlled world of subterranean Earth where there were no discomforts, no worries—and to his mind, nothing.

He was aware of curious glances as he led Ruth towards the spaceport entrance. He looked around anxiously for Ally's

comforting presence. Ally would know how to handle a situation like this. He began to get uneasy. Time almost 1700 hours . . .

" Hey there, Hyatt !"

He swung around at the cry. A train had stopped.

" It's him ! The nerve of the guy ! Go get him !"

Five burly crewmen went like hounds off the leash straight from the train. *D. S. S. Burnham* glinted on their caps. The two uniformed policemen were actually turning their backs to the incident.

Simon felt Ruth pulling at him. From a long way away she seemed to be calling to him. Commonsense told him that there was no chance of escape. Five crewmen and an officer blocked the way back into the Levels. And the direction she was urging him there would be crewmen galore to cut them off. But he let her have her way. They pelted madly down the platform.

A dozen crewmen came running out at the end of the platform—just as he had somehow expected in his worst fears. They spread out purposefully as he hauled Ruth to a halt, and they came warily forward. Ruth was saying something. The name on these men's hats was not *Burnham* ; it was *Brisbane*. She was half weeping, half scolding. " You must forgive me," she was saying. " We'll be together. That's what matters. You'll like it on my uncle's ship."

The implications of her words washed over him like a cold douche. For the first time he really wanted to escape. He looked across the rails. Crewmen of other ships were watching the drama with interest. Perhaps they had served on or been victims of similar press-gangs. The jaws of the rival crews were closing in, both chary of losing their victim and wary of each other.

Ruth tugged at his arm, but he wasn't budging until he was taken or could see a way out. Teeth clenched, tense, he seemed to see everything happening in slow motion, so rapidly did his thoughts and sensations race.

Almost at their side a metal plate flapped up and Ally's grinning face looked out and his free hand waved them towards him.

Simon's anger seemed to have given him more strength than he knew he had. He pulled Ruth after him.

Furious cries from the crewmen sounded like the baying of hounds on their heels. Ruth panted at his side. Ally pulled down the plate and the clang of its shutting was followed first

by the grating of bolts and then by the pounding of fists and truncheons on its outside.

" This way," said Ally, as he squeezed past them.

Simon and Ruth exchanged glances. Neither was having time to sort out impressions, but the attempt by Ruth to lure Simon into the trap laid by her uncle on *Brisbane* was like a gaping chasm between them.

He pulled her roughly after Ally. With little more than a token resistance she let herself be dragged along.

Ally halted. In the semi-gloom—for the place was lit only by ventilators at the tops of concrete funnels out of the roof, and in the unfamiliar chill—Simon wondered if it were spring or autumn, or even winter on the surface above those ventilators. " This is right below the spaceport. Do you two still want to go out on the surface ?"

" I don't," said Ruth and pouted.

Simon shrugged. " I couldn't care less, now."

" O.K.," said Ally. " I'll just get you clear of your pursuers and then let you sort things out for yourselves. I tell you, Simon, I'm glad I'm not in love. I thought you'd had it back on the platform. Lucky I remembered this old luggage way."

They tramped after him, turned left and went up a ramp. They followed him into a lift. It took them up a few yards. They got out. There was a clanging sound below them.

They were in an odd kind of metal room, the floor of which was fitted here and there with slots and hooks. The only way out apart from the lift seemed to be a vertical ladder behind some fastened down packing cases.

Simon looked blankly at Ally.

Aloysius Brunk spread his hands expressively. " In order to get off Earth," he said, " a man without a degree has to go to extremes. He has to prove that he has ability."

He glanced up as there was a ringing clang above . A trapdoor had opened at the top of the ladder and uniformed legs appeared. Just as gold braided sleeves made it apparent that these legs belonged to a high ranking officer, Ally continued so suddenly that Simon started.

" He seems a decent fellow. It's a fine ship. The place it's going to has been colonised a longish time. He told me the worst is over, and you should find plenty to interest you—"

" So !" said the officer from the top of the ladder, and coming no further down, " you have managed to do it, young Mr. Brunk."

" Yes," Ally replied to him expectantly.

The officer nodded. " I'll honour our arrangement, never fear." He turned to Simon. " You are Simon Hyatt ?"

" I am." Simon felt too surprised to react.

" Excellent. And the girl with you ? Why should I take her into space, when I can get the subsidy money from the government for someone who's drawn a number in the official lottery ?"

" We are actually in your ship ?" When the officer nodded, Simon considered a moment. On the spaceman's immaculate cap was the insignia : *D. S. S. Trondheim.*

Beside him Ruth chuckled, a hint of hysteria in her voice.

Simon turned to her, and found himself grinning. He burst out laughing, until he remembered the officer and sobered, looking up, wondering what to say.

But she answered for him. " I have an uncle who has the biggest of the underground hydroponics." She was having trouble speaking through her laughter. " Another of my uncles is Captain of the *D. S. S. Brisbane*, and he wanted me on the voyage he's about to make."

" Good enough," said the officer. He called up through the hatchway, " Tell Spaceport control that we've rectified the fault we reported, and that we are now ready to take off." He looked down again, frowned to see the unexpected hilarity of his press-ganged passengers, but shrugged and addressed a final piece of information to them. " You'll be able to send any messages home you like once we're spaceborne."

But they weren't taking much notice of him. Neither Simon nor Ruth had ended up on the right ship, in spite of their efforts; each could laugh at the other, and they were together and in space, which was what they had wanted.

Simon shook his head at Ally, " All right then, where are your plans taking us, you double-crosser ?"

" Well . . ." said Ally, " I told you I had trouble convincing a captain that I might get you on his ship. Captain Eriksen of this ship was the only one willing to take a chance on me. He has been trying to get a trained biochemist ever since he landed on Earth, but no one would believe him that it is much better now on Delphini—"

" Delphini ?" gasped Simon, and this time it was not a swear-word.

E. R. James

The crisis developed by the compulsory wearing of Emotion Registers in Britain threatens to reduce the country to anarchy as the closing climax of our satirical drama draws to a close.

MINOR OPERATION

by BRIAN W. ALDISS

Conclusion

foreword

England is in crisis. In a few days it will be illegal for a British citizen not to wear an ER on his or her forehead. The ER's (Emotion Registers, also known as Norman Lights) are small silver discs that turn pink when the wearer feels sexual attraction. Many people, such as VINCENT MERRICK, a noted psychiatrist, regard ER's as inventions that will bring freedom from convention. Others, such as 'BIG BILL' BOURGOYNE, who leads the revolutionary GREP group, regard ER's as a blow against the liberty of the individual.

JIMMY SOLENT has more personal preoccupations. He is much attracted to his brother AUBREY'S fiancee, ALYSON YOUNGFIELD. At the same time, he is dogged by the thought of ROSE ENGLISH, with whom he enjoyed a brief affair. Rose is connected with the Norman Laboratories, the firm manufacturing the ER's. An acquaintance, GUY LEIGHTON, who also knows Rose, discovers that her real name is RACHEL NORMAN, and that she played a vital part in the invention of ER's. Even at the IBA (International Book Association) where Jimmy works, he cannot evade the pressing personal and national problems now rapidly coming to a head.

twelve

Jimmy did no work that afternoon. He sat at his desk in a brown study, the sound of traffic coming to him like Matthew Arnold's melancholy, long, withdrawing roar. Nor was anyone else in the IBA building much more active. Nor was the IBA alone in this. Bourgoyne's circular making a last appeal for support had gone out in its hundreds of thousands, sowing dissention everywhere. A week earlier, it might have been screwed up and forgotten ; but the timing was good. On Monday—everyone felt it—the world would be changed. It would be a new, an ER world.

Even the great majority who had scrambled to be first to wear the new toy, even those who genuinely saw in the Norman Light a new, better, way of life, paused and wondered. An epoch was ending ; nostalgia blossomed for it overnight, and the universal fondness for the safe, unalterable past burst baying like a hound on to the scene.

It found eloquent expression the next morning, Thursday, in a procession of stage and cinema actors and actresses who made a three mile march round central London. Some of the best-known names in show business were there ; although the press raised a delighted, high-pitched shout about it, the procession itself observed the utmost decorum. Indeed, everyone was dressed in black and carried black umbrellas, though the sun shone bright. They mourned the death of the drama.

At Hyde Park Corner, a mock funeral was performed, and over the corpse of past glory the First Lady of the Stage pronounced these words : " We come not to praise drama but to bury it. Its death is our death. How can we any longer face the footlights when, from Monday on, all of us will wear headlights ? Equipped with a flashing disc, would King Lear have the power to make us weep ? Would Oedipus's plight seem anything less than ridiculous ? Would Eliza Dolittle make sense ? No, my friends, we are cut off from our past by the Emotion Register. To act in any play written before this year is to falsify it and ridicule ourselves. The modern world has finally eclipsed all that was good or valuable. Therefore we weep today, and on this ancient and honoured body I do not throw rosemary—that's for remembrance."

The actors mourned for artistic reasons. The strikers struck for financial reasons. Following closely in the steps of Switzerland and Belgium, Japan announced that it too would adopt the Emotion Register. This caused more consternation and excitement than the two previous announcements ; Japan turned the whole business into a competition. In no time other countries would join the scramble. It was felt that they hung back only to see whether or not the British constitution had saddled itself with something it could not support.

Faced with this inrush of orders and the prospect of more, the country's industry trembled. A breath of inflation stirred the leaves of paybooks everywhere. To the discontents of those who were forced to work overtime were added the discontents of those unable to work overtime. It only needed the dismissal of an arrogant shop steward at Cadaver Alloys and machines idled everywhere as what the workers regarded as a fight for fairer conditions developed into another round of the teratogenic struggle between trade union and government.

The members of the armed forces who mutinied did so at first for very simple reasons. They were ordered to polish their *ER's*.

To soldiers whose nerves were already tried to the utmost by the rigours of peace, this order came as the last affront to their personal pride, the last straw in a haystackful of disciplinary needles. Almost overnight, the British Army became as active a group of freethinkers as the French Army in 1916.

In yet another group, that amorphous mass vaguely castigated by Mr. Noel Coward as " This Happy Breed," discontent was also rife. The Happy Breed—happy even at the worst times because of their ability to find consolation in small things—had an uneasy feeling that something was awry. Mrs. Pidney put her finger deftly on the matter when Jimmy came home that Thursday evening.

" You look a bit brassed off, Mr. Solent," she said, emerging from the kitchen as he let himself in.

" I was just going to say the same about you," he remarked.

" Go on ! How did you guess ? I been out this afternoon and bought myself a new dress just to try and cheer myself up, but somehow it didn't work." She shook her head sadly, making her veritable gazebo of hair tremble with regret.

" What's the trouble then ?"

" Well, I suppose it's silly of me at my age, but you know it's these here ER's we've all got to wear. I was quite excited at first, I must say. I suppose I was expecting too much from mine. I mean, we all have our disappointments in life, of course, but these things come along and somehow I reckoned—well, it was just a feeling, if you get my meaning—that I'd get another chance, like. In the lists of love. You know, the beginning of a new era, see what I mean ?"

" I do indeed," Jimmy said, leaning sadly over the banisters. Hilda Pidney was but echoing what he himself had said when dancing like a fool round the Hurn's swimming pool.

" The trouble was, they cracked these ER's up too much to start with," Mrs. Pidney said. " The Government at fault as usual. Here, I've got some tarts in my oven—I must go. But you see what I mean. We were all sort of excited at first. But now—well, nothing's much different from what it was before, see. I mean the baker pinks at me, but so what ? We don't neither of us *do* anything about it. It was rather a lark at first, but we don't take no more notice of it now. It's all a bit of a let down, really."

She retreated sadly to deal with her tarts.

Wearily, Jimmy went upstairs. He lay on his bed reading until nine o'clock, when he took a bath and retired to sleep, resolving not to dream of Rose-Rachel. He had started with her on a Thursday, he wanted to finish with her on a Thursday —this Thursday.

On Friday a spurious peace reigned over the land. The nation, or such of it as was not on strike, unemployed, in mental homes or similarly disqualified, went to work as usual Friday, even in time of crisis, is one of the more attractive days on which to be incarcerated in shop, office or factory since it both precedes the week-end and is commonly pay day.

At the IBA the business of diluting culture for the common good went on at almost its normal speed. Trefisick remained in a pet ; Scryban remained in his room. Only in the evening was Jimmy Solent jolted out of that sunny complacency which never deserted him for long.

He was alone in the Charlton Square flat finishing his late tea when Alyson Youngfield came in. Aubrey still had not appeared ; he usually worked on at the BIL until after eight o'clock these evenings. This explained—and Jimmy regretted that it was so—why Alyson appeared so little at the flat of late.

He stood up as she came in. He had forgotten how tall she was but not how delightful. She looked at him as if looking was not something just everyone did, smiling with that deceptive friendliness beautiful women achieve so easily.

" Hello stranger ! Long time no see. Wur you bin all my life, honey ? How the hell do you think your poor old uncle James survives without you, eh ?" Jimmy asked, hoping desperately she could see through this asinine way of talking.

She could.

" I haven't exactly liked staying away, Jimmy," she said, coming over to him. She dropped her small handbag on to a chair and eyed him speculatively. Then she smiled, patting his arm.

" Er—Aubrey's not back yet."

" I know," she said. " I've been to see Vincent Merrick this afternoon. You know I was immediately taken with him when I met him."

" He's powerful, isn't he ?" Jimmy agreed, instantly cast down by this news. " You don't mean—I mean, you aren't actually attracted to him, are you ?"

" If you mean physically, of course I am not," Alyson said briskly, emitting a tiny laugh. " That's something you will be able to determine for yourself quite easily, when I get my disc. I went to ask Vincent's advice. By the way, the new Merrick-Kind clinic—Kind is his Canadian partner—opened this week. He has invited me along on Monday afternoon and asked me to bring you as well. It should be interesting, don't you think ? Apparently he has some sensational new method of treatment. Societal therapy, he calls it."

" Wait a minute !" Jimmy exclaimed. " Do you say you are going to get your ER at last ?"

Alyson dropped her gaze and then turned away in a sort of embarrassment Jimmy could not understand.

" I think I really must," she said. " That was one of the things that I went to ask Vincent Merrick about. "

" Oh, why ask him ?! Why not ask me ?!" Jimmy exclaimed. " I've been saying so for months. And all this week I've been worrying, Alyson—really I have. The thought of your having to go to prison—I should have gone mad or something. You mean so very much to me."

He had never understood why she had hesitated. In his delight at her capitulation he took her bare arms and swung her

round. She had to smile at his overjoyed face. Pink light seemed to swirl round them like candy floss. Thoughtlessly he kissed her.

Throughout his system, corpuscles, chemistries, and compounds leapt into action, like firemen on a practice alarm. Her lips stirred a powerful confusion in him ; his arms went round her in dizziness and love, making the confusion worse. The firemen, unsure of their proper posts, ran hither and thither, madly.

" Darling," Jimmy said, drawing breath, " darling, oh Alyson . . ."

Over her shoulder, through the gold strands of her hair, he saw the door open and Aubrey enter, neat, precise and self-contained.

Immediately the firemen retired to their bunks. The fire had gone out. Alyson, Aubrey and Jimmy just stood there, looking and not looking at each other.

" You've got your Norman Light !" Jimmy exclaimed, at last taking in his brother properly.

The welter of guilty annoyance being caught kissing Aubrey's mistress momentarily vanished under the crowning astonishment of seeing, in the middle of his brother's forehead, that blank silver disc.

His exclamation gave Alyson all the chance she needed to recover herself.

" I'm so glad you've got it, Aubrey," she said ; and then, to Jimmy, " I rang him up from Vincent's to tell him that Vincent advised his getting it."

Still Aubrey said nothing.

Alyson spoke again.

" I had just come round to ask Jimmy to escort me down to the Installation trailer, to give me a little moral support while I had mine installed."

" *Moral* support !" Aubrey echoed ironically.

" I knew I should capitulate in the end. I couldn't hold out any longer. Unfortunately I'm not the stuff of which martyrs are made." She seemed not to be addressing either of them in particular ; it was even doubtful whether the capitulation she mentioned referred to wearing an ER or to Jimmy's charms.

By accepting the former alternative, modesty and prudence dictated to Jimmy a way of escape from this trying tableau.

" I'll come down with you at once," he volunteered.

As he and Alyson moved tentatively to the door, Aubrey said, " I'd rather you stayed and spoke to me, Jimmy. Alyson will be all right ; you don't feel a thing. It's only a minor operation. She can come back here afterwards if she cares to."

" How hospitable of you," Alyson said coldly. Seeing Jimmy halt, she gave him a meaning look he was unable to interpret and left the flat. The brothers listened until they heard the flat door close behind her before either of them stirred.

Moving in an abstracted way, Aubrey went over to feel the teapot Jimmy had recently been using, nodded to himself, and fetched a cup from the kitchen. Having poured himself some of the lukewarm brew, he raised the cup as if toasting Jimmy.

" The old panacea !" he said, unsmiling.

" Aubrey, this is an extremely beastly situation," Jimmy began, but Aubrey interrupted him at once.

" I should like to explain to you exactly why I have gone against my better judgment and equipped myself with an Emotion Register," he said. " First of all, perhaps I had better tell you that I have ascertained just what will happen on Monday to anyone without a disc. The police are empowered to arrest them on sight. By mid-week summonses will be issued to all those whose names are not down on the Installation Centre rolls as having undergone the operation. They will be told to present themselves at the local court within twenty-four hours. So you can understand that by the end of next week all believers in the freedom of the individual will be under lock and key.

" As I have tried to explain before, I believe these discs are evil ; they encroach on territory always regarded as sacred—a man's right to his private feelings. A few years ago brain-washing was universally condemned. How the ER, something infinitely more immoral, has come to be accepted, is beyond my comprehension."

Moodily, Jimmy looked out of the window, only half listening. He had heard Aubrey's sermons through before, believing it his duty as younger brother to listen, or appear to listen. He knew, moreover, that all this talk—however Aubrey himself regarded it—was merely a smoke screen behind which an attack on the Solent-Youngfield position was developing ; and he resented the indirectness of the manoeuvre.

Looking down, Jimmy saw the grey trailer standing deserted in the middle of the parched space. The inhabitants of the square had ceased to notice it, although after tomorrow, when it was gone, they would doubtless miss it. In the doorway a man appeared in white overalls. He smoked a cigarette and looked across the cracked earth where grass had grown. Somewhere inside, behind him, Alyson would be lying back in a surgical chair while the little drill or whatever it was bored a neat hole through her forehead bone.

As his mind veered queasily away from that thought, Jimmy became aware again of what his brother was saying.

". . . only my difficult position at the BIL has persuaded me to overcome my moral objections. I cannot afford to be absent over the next fortnight serving a prison sentence. Our organisational problems increase daily ; so much Iral sub-contracting has had to be switched to other plants at an hour's notice owing to impending strike action. If I were to let down Sir Richard now—well, I could hardly hope for consideration in the future. So I swallowed my principles and submitted to the operation.

" But I want you to understand how much anxious thought has gone into my—"

" Oh, I understand well enough," Jimmy said. " You can't afford to be locked up or you'd lose your precious chance of promotion. It's as plain as black and white Now let's talk about Alyson instead."

" Very well," Aubrey said, lighting a cigarette from his case with hands that shook slightly. " You realize for a start, don't you, that after what has occurred you will have to leave the flat. You have broken faith, haven't you ? I won't pretend I'm not pretty disgusted."

" Ah, for heaven's sake, stop turning everything into moral riddles. Where does it get you? Why don't you face the facts?"

" All facts happen to have moral connotations. I've no wish to lecture you, but the sooner you realise there are certain definite rules of conduct the easier you'll find life."

" Let's go back to Alyson ! I didn't mean to kiss her. It's something I've wanted to do for a long time, but all the same I didn't plan it that way. But do you think I'd have done it if I hadn't felt that, in theory at least, she also wanted me to do it ? You can tell, Aubrey, you can always tell, unless you've blinded yourself with theories."

Aubrey was very pale now.

" And what if you can tell ?" he asked. " Does that make it in any way right ?"

" Does it make it in any way wrong ? I know you've got a good old Christian theory that any natural instinct is wrong, but I've got a good old pagan idea that what a man wants is ultimately the best thing he can have. Where's the use in arguing with you about it though ? We're just opposed. I think all the evidence proves my view is right, but that doesn't stop you clinging to your bigoted, outworn—"

He stopped.

From the corner of his eye, he saw movement in the square. Two people were moving by the trailer. The man in the white overall had tossed aside his cigarette and was leading Alyson down the ramp. She thanked him, coming on slowly alone. She was heading towards the flat. In the middle of her forehead, looking flat and dead in the waning light, was an Emotion Register.

" She's coming back here !" Jimmy said. " And she's got it on."

His hands felt decidedly clammy. He wanted Alyson ; it had been a hypothetical need before she had actually been pressed against him. Now it was something for which he would fight Aubrey to the death. In a few minutes, however, Alyson herself would involuntarily show her own preference ; that was something she was no longer able to conceal.

Jimmy looked furtively at his brother. Aubrey was adjusting his tie, smoothing his hair, lighting up another cigarette. Jimmy cleared his throat unhappily ; smoothing his hair and adjusting his tie, he said, " Give me a cigarette, Aubrey, will you ?"

As Aubrey held out his case, they heard Alyson coming slowly up the stairs.

" The car's round the corner in Gower Street," Mrs. Wolf said, as she and Jimmy emerged into the sunshine from the cool interior of the IBA. She was in excellent form, her creased face matt-surfaced and thrust well forward. She took Jimmy's arm in a manner half predatory, half motherly.

It was the Saturday lunch hour, and the streets ran with determined, rapid people. The week-end was upon them, the desire to leave London had them by the tail ; already their inner eyes were upon some dusty picnic spot in Epping Forest, some flashy rendezvous in Surrey, some creaking deck chair at Brighton. And over the animated scene, cyclamen-coloured

flashes played an erotic semaphore which no one heeded—or very few. Londoners had settled down to rubbing shoulders with sex in the same spirit that their seventeenth century counterparts had mingled with the plague.

" I'll get a paper," Jimmy said, jostling his way over to a news vendor.

" I must stop as we go through Chalfont," the she-wolf said. " I want to get some face tissues."

" It'll be wonderful to be away from London. The last few days have been pretty exhausting as far as I'm concerned."

" Me too. But Jimmy, you know we're the only two at the IBA who really believe ERs are a benefit to society."

They had been shouting at each other over intervening heads. Now, as Jimmy stuffed the newspaper into his pocket, they rejoined ; again Mrs. Wolf ardently took his arm. It started a certain trail of thought. His Norman Light stuttered at her.

" I'm terribly sorry," he said, confused.

" Jimmy, you absolutely don't need to be. The car's down here. Soon this kind of thing will be accepted ; nobody will take any notice of it, and we shall all be the freer for it. By nature I am no optimist ; my life has been full of disappointments, but here I really see great hope for a more balanced future."

Their arrival at the car saved Jimmy from delivering a reply more cautious than might have chimed with Mrs. Wolf's mood.

In a few minutes they were edging into the rapacious summer streams of traffic in Southampton Row. Nothing is more pleasant on a pleasant day than to drive through the streets of London. On the one hand, the stop-and-go method of proceeding gives one a heady sense of competition with the vehicles packed tight on either side, on the other hand, the congestion promotes companionship, one passes and is in turn passed by drivers who faces soon grow remarkably familiar ; while on the third hand, the heat and petrol fumes rising in the narrow thoroughfares gradually induce a gentle euphoria in the voyagers. Jimmy slumped back in his seat relaxedly, fished his paper from his pocket and opened it.

His heart sank like shares in a Wall Street recession.

GREP COUP
NORMAN INVENTOR AND HEIRESS SEIZED
Bourgoyne Warns P.M.—" Take My Terms "

Beneath this barricade of headlines was a staggering tale of the kidnapping of Rachel Norman, daughter of Gwendoline Norman. Her name came up and hit Jimmy hard between the eyes. His Rose by any other name . . .? She had been abducted from her London flat at breakfast time. Half an hour later a message had been received at 10 Downing Street from Big Bill Bourgoyne. He stated that Rachel Norman was in his hands and would be surrendered only upon a published governmental assurance that no proceedings would be taken against the minority of the population who had refused to adopt ERs.

That, in effect, was all the news. But of speculation there was plenty. Would the government yield to this blackmail? And if they did not, what would become of this rich and beautiful girl who had so unselfishly, so inventively, served her country? Either alternative raised forbidding issues. If P.M. Gascadder and his government weakened, it was intolerable to think of the few people without Norman Lights remaining without for good, thus creating another privileged minority in a land already so overstocked with privileged minorities. But if Gascadder remained unmoved—well, nobody liked to think of that fantastic Bourgoyne posting that poor girl to Number 10 in little parcels just like wedding cake!

This last desperate act of Bourgoyne's placed him, of course, outside the law. There was a reward on his head; police and military units were already combing the country for him. But Bourgoyne had gone to earth; no trace of him or his captive had been found.

"What's the news?" Mrs. Wolf asked, glancing round momentarily from her driving.

Jimmy told her, naturally omitting any mention of the way his and Rachel's paths had crossed.

"Don't sound so upset," Mrs. Wolf said. "They'll catch the blighter. He has made his last and biggest mistake, that's all."

A soggy mixture of lust and guilt settled on Jimmy. He loved Alyson; for her he would spend his years in toil and respectability, given the chance. But with Rachel it had been precisely the lack of the necessity for such prosaic ingredients in their love that had made it a thing unique. The best fed of us can remember all our lives an ice cream stolen in childhood.

"Cheer up!" said Mrs. Wolf, smiling flashily as she drove on.

And Jimmy did cheer up.

Chez Wolf was a comfortable house standing in about four acres of land on the outskirts of Surrogate. Surrogate itself was inconsiderable. The hill at its northern end formed an eminence from which Grey Cotes—for such was the name of the house—surveyed an acceptable amount of the surrounding countryside.

Mr. Kenelm Wolf was roughly twice the size of his wife and half as bright. He had a big, beefy face with a good nose and shiny complexion. His manner was invariably genial, though in repose his expression was glum ; although he talked a great deal, chiefly about the glories of the insurance business, this hardly mattered to Jimmy since Mr. Wolf spent most of the week-end in a potting shed converted into a dark room. Microscopic photography was his hobby. A twice decorated colonel in the Korean War, Kenelm had since worked his way up to one of the loftier pinnacles in the insurance world.

It would hardly be necessary to give even this brief precis of the life and works of Kenelm Wolf were it not that such facts, and many others, were the common stuff of almost every conversation Jimmy was submitted to in Grey Cotes. Mrs. Wolf and her mother, the aged Mrs. Crinbolt, spoke of practically nothing but Kenelm. It became evident that the installation of an ER upon a man hitherto regarded by those nearest and dearest to him as sexless had greatly increased his attraction From a failure he had turned overnight into a mystery. Mrs. Wolf, with an avidity only the sex-starved can show, had seized upon every implication of the affair.

" You see Kenelm is different," she told Jimmy as they strolled down the drive after lunch on Sunday. " As he explained to me, there are many kinds of love. The ER's register only sexual love don't they ? But many other varieties of bond exist between couples. Spiritual bonds, and that sort of thing —I did tell you Kenelm studied Buddhism when he was in Korea, didn't I ?"

With wonder, Jimmy reflected on the way Mrs. Wolf was made : perceptive one hour, self-deluded the next. It gave them, he felt, plenty in common.

On impulse he began telling her of the entanglements which existed between Alyson, Aubrey and himself. They reached the end of the drive as he began to speak.

The country lay brown and heavy and still all around them. Thick cloud piled up overhead, seeming to increase the heat. A jeep rattled down the road with an officer driving and two other officers sitting alertly in the back, headed for Surrogate.

". . . So Aubrey and I had what was for us a pretty bad row," Jimmy said, " and then Alyson came back to the flat with her Norman Light installed."

" It must have been a nasty nom ent !" Mrs. Wolf murmured.

" It was. I thought Aubrey was going to be sick. And you see until Alyson came in and saw which way her Light pinked, I really believe she wasn't sure how she felt about us herself. Your mind can be confused, but the Lights bypass your mind. So she had to confront us with the truth."

" And which of you . . .," prompted Mrs. Wolf.

It began to rain, the slightest, lightest patter in the beech trees, the first rain the Home Counties had experienced for weeks.

" She pinked at me," Jimmy said. " She couldn't help it, but she pinked at me. Just as I've been doing at her for months."

Mrs. Wolf squeezed his arm in congratulatory fashion.

" I hope we'll get married ; I don't want to mess about as my brother has done," Jimmy continued dreamily. " But Alyson and I have had no chance to talk it over yet. I shall have to look out for a small flat of my own tomorrow after this row with poor old Aubrey. There's such a lot to do . . . She's such a wonderful person. She seems to understand life ; I mean, she's capable of judgment without judging all the time. Do you think we'll be suited ?"

This unpretentious murmur was hardly intended as a question, but Mrs. Wolf answered it by saying, " How can I tell until I see her ? You must bring her here one week-end."

They moved under the shelter of a beech tree, idly watching the rain scamper across the faded green countryside.

" But even if you saw her, how could you tell if we were idealy matched ?" Jimmy asked in a sudden agony. Appearances never told you who was suited to whom. He had a memory of the formidable Vincent Merrick, for whom Alyson showed such respect, pinking at his dowdy little wife, Jasmine. There was a happy couple ; it was a weird thought. The question arose, why were they happy ? *How* were they happy?

Could it be because Merrick, as a psychiatrist, was intellectually capable of choosing the ideal partner to match his own inward nature? Or had he for this occasion put intellect behind him and trusted to his emotions, his intuition?

Would a time ever come when Jimmy might be able to formulate these questions in words to Merrick? No. That was certainly out. English society had so developed that the important questions might never be asked.

Mrs. Wolf did not reply to Jimmy's outburst. Instead, she said with forced brightness, "This must be the first rain for weeks. It will damp the ardour of the GREP Protest Marchers. Poor Conrad! We had better get back to the house before we become too moist."

The rain fell very gently. Under the beech trees the drive remained parched and dry. As they walked up it, a helicopter flew by, low over their heads. Since it seemed to be descending towards Surrogate, Jimmy turned to look at it. They had gone far enough up the drive for a section of the road on the other side of the village, hitherto eclipsed by nearby hedges, to rise into view.

Exclaiming aloud, Jimmy stopped and pointed at it. No more than a mile away, the stretch of road was clearly visible through the light curtains of rain, which had yet to reach it. A mass of people filled it from side to side, with vehicles and banners interspersed among the melee. The Protest March was on its way through Surrogate to Chequers.

"Grey Cotes stands in a very strategic position; let's go and watch from the house," Mrs. Wolf said. "They'll pass by the bottom of the drive. I only hope they are orderly and don't break down the rhododendron hedge."

As they climbed the front steps and entered the hall, with its genuine Brangwyn and reproduction Russell Flint, Mrs. Wolf called to her mother. Mrs. Crinbolt appeared almost at once, coming down the corridor and beckoning anxiously. Although nearly seventy-five, she was still a large, solid woman who bore herself well. Her white hair was fashionably but simply arranged. Through her thick, horn-rimmed glasses, she bestowed on the world the same vigilant and penetrating stare her daughter did.

"Veronica!" she said now. "I'm so relieved that you have come back. A man has just walked across the paddock—I saw him from the sun room window. I'm sure he has gone into the orchard to steal apples."

" Then you should fetch Kenelm, mother," said Mrs. Wolf. " Where is he ?"

" He's in the potting shed."

" Then the man will have to help himself to apples. I have no inclination to go and confront him. There's nothing but maggotty windfalls this year, anyway, with the drought. Come up into the attic with us, mother, and watch the people going to Chequers ; they'll be past the gates soon."

" How very wet the poor things will get. And perhaps the rain will drive the man out of the orchard. I shouldn't mind betting that it's one of the Spinks brothers ; they're a real bad lot."

So saying, she followed slowly up the stairs after Jimmy and Mrs. Wolf, pausing on each landing for rest.

In the attic they arranged themselves in ancient, dusty chairs and looked out. The view was indeed magnificent, although its full extent was concealed by the rain, which still hesitated and withheld itself like a coy lover. The village of Surrogate lay in plain sight at the bottom of the hill, a genuine sample of rural England. It consisted of a corrugated iron cinema ; a Strict Baptist chapel ; a filthy garage ; several delapidated chicken farms ; a seedy general store selling sweets, socks and jazz LP's; the Farmer's Boy Inn ; a gigantic station like an aerodrome, labelled *Grass Research Establishment ;* two military rows of council houses ; three nondescript cottages ; one nondescript bungalow ; one wooden cafe, permanently closed ; one power sub-station ; a Low Baptist chapel ; and several piles of gravel by the roadside.

The column of protest marchers had reached the village. Its head halted opposite the filthy garage while the rest of it was dispersing with curious alacrity into the ditches, back yards and fields on either side of the road. Of the cars also taking part in the procession many turned suddenly to left or right and bumped over the adjoining fields ; none attempted to drive on through Surrogate for that way was closed to them by a tank parked sideways across the road. Its gun pointed menacingly down the road, its turret was open ; from the turret an officer in a beret was haranguing the marchers through a megaphone.

" They've been stopped !" Jimmy exclaimed. " Good God, they're being turned back."

" But they aren't turning back," Mrs. Wolf said. " They're simply flowing round the obstruction."

" Oh, this must be the result of the special announcement on the radio," Mrs. Crinbolt said. " I was going to tell you about it—it sounded so serious—and then seeing the fellow going into the orchard quite drove it out of my head."

" *What* special announcement ?" Mrs. Wolf asked sharply.

Mrs. Crinbolt looked flustered.

Listening closely to what was being said, Jimmy was still looking out of the window watching the tiny figures down in the village. The rear part of the GREP procession was still moving up as the front dispersed. Meanwhile more soldiers had appeared, strung out thinly in lines on either side of Surrogate ; they carried light machine guns aimed at the civilians and and plainly meant to let nobody pass. This new move had caused many of the more determined marchers to seek a way past the obstruction through the gardens of the council houses. At this the owners had acted. Several fights were in progress. Jimmy saw a row of bean poles, heavily loaded with foliage, heel over as two men fell against it. Khaki figures ran up the road to squash the trouble.

It was all as remote and unreal as something happening on a military sand table ; yet its very remoteness and smallness lent it an unnerving air, like something dreamed.

The officer with the beret, perched in the tank, suddenly doubled up and fell out of the turret. With the tank obscuring his view Jimmy could only see one leg kicking as the man rolled in the road. The GREP had fired its first shot in anger. Many of them now surged past the tank, which looked helpless with its slowly swivelling gun. A soldier jumped up in the turret and hurled something at the crowds.

As the smoke cleared over the road, toy figures could be seen clasping their eyes and blundering about.

Mrs. Crinbolt's clear voice was saying, " The announcer said a state of emergency has been proclaimed throughout the country. There had been rioting at Coventry and Bristol and somewhere else—Edinburgh, perhaps it was. Somewhere North, I know. A lot of people were hurt. The Prime Minister has forbidden demonstrations of any sort, and the police and military have special powers—oh, and there's a curfew, Veronica. I was so appalled, I'm afraid I didn't get all the details. They are going to be repeated again at half past three."

" It's nearly that now," Jimmy said. " We'd better go down and hear what's happening. By the look of things a battle's about to begin in the village. The government are certainly doing their best to break up the protest march."

He ran down the stairs ahead of them, full of a strange excitement, far from unpleasant, rather as though he was going to see the second act of a good drama. As he took the last flight a plane roared over the house. He ran full tilt into the drawing room where the radio and television were. An army captain was just entering the french doors from the terrace. Jimmy stopped abruptly.

" What do you want? " he asked.

The captain drew a revolver, pointing it at Jimmy. He was a rugged man of about forty-five, with a big, rectangular face and an unmistakably pugnacious expression. A large square of sticking plaster covered his ER. As if to confirm that this was the man Mrs. Crinbolt had seen going into the orchard, an apple leaf adhered to the grizzled hair protruding from his beret. Wrapped round the gun butt, his right hand was large and red and hairy. He gave Jimmy a fighter's grin.

" How many others in the house, Jack ?" he asked Jimmy, ignoring the other's question.

" What are you doing here ?" Jimmy asked, staring at that raw beefy hand. " I suppose you realise this is a private house ?"

The joyless interchange of questions was broken by Mrs. Wolf's entrance, her mother following closely behind. With grim authority the captain made them sit together on a sofa near the fireplace. Standing in front of them he surveyed them. He kept the revolver in his hand and looked very much in command.

" No harm'll come if you sit still," he said. " It just so happens that this dump is in a nice handy spot for us. We'll be using it for a couple of hours, and then you can have it back. *If* you behave. If you *don't* behave, I shall be forced to use this on you." He patted the gun.

" You have no right to speak to us like that in our own home," Mrs. Crinbolt said. " Don't think you'll be allowed to get away with it."

" I'm not going to argue the toss," the captain said, looking very ill-tempered. " Just bloody well keep quiet, that's all. Sit still and shut your traps and we'll all be okay."

Jimmy risked a side glance at Mrs. Crinbolt ; her appearance suggested that she had never been sworn at before. The captain turned his back on them, walking over to the far side of the room, where a phone stood in an alcove. Perching himself on the flimsy phone table, he picked up the receiver, dialled "O" with the muzzle of the revolver and waited.

" Hullo," he said at length. " Who's that ? Put me through to Major Hobbes. This is Captain Biggs here. Put me through to Major Hobbes and buck up about it . . . Major Hobbes ? Ken Biggs here. Yep, I'm in the house. No trouble at all. No, in the bag. How's it going with you ? Good-o ! Okay, yes, I'll stand by. Roger, good-bye."

" They must have captured the telephone exchange," Mrs. Wolf whispered agitatedly to Jimmy. " That's at Amersham. There is a barracks there."

As he hung the phone up, a clock struck three-thirty. The rain redoubled its strength.

" Excuse me, do you mind if I close the French doors ?" Mrs. Crinbolt said. " The carpet is getting wet."

" It won't hurt. Leave it," Captain Biggs said. Going over to the radio, he switched it on.

A state of emergency existed, said the tinned voice, gathering strength. Strikers at protest meetings throughout the country had been causing damage in several main centres of population. Some Army units had mutinied en masses and were causing trouble, chiefly by disrupting lines of communication. Agitators had stirred up violence, and there had been much damage to shops and government property, especially at Coventry, Bristol and Glasgow. Hand-to-hand fighting in the streets was still going on in parts of Liverpool and London. Everyone was advised to stay indoors. It was hoped that all unruly elements would be crushed before dark ; in the meantime, a curfew—

" They'll be lucky," the captain exclaimed. " They've got a civil war on their hands, did they but know it." He switched the set off with unnecessary violence.

Nobody said a word. The captain grew restless and walked up and down, thrusting his jaw out.

He turned with obvious relief when another khaki figure emerged from the pouring rain to stand at the French windows.

" May I come in ?" the newcomer asked.

" Of course you can come in, Mainfleet," Biggs said. " You don't have to ask. Where are your blokes ? You've taken long enough."

" On the contrary, we are ahead of schedule," the man addressed as Mainfleet said. He entered, closing the glass doors carefully behind him. Like Biggs, his ER was covered with sticking plaster. Also a captain, he was some years younger than Biggs, presenting a contrast to that gentleman in almost every way. The first difference that hit the eye was that where Biggs was dry, Mainfleet ran with water. He brushed wet hair from his forehead and nodded with a certain embarrassment at the three on the sofa.

" Meet the owners," Biggs said.

" Sorry about this," Mainfleet said, and Jimmy took heart. He saw in the other's pleasant, rather soft face, a type he liked and recognised : his own.

" There's a towel in the kitchen," he said. " You look as if you need one."

" Just keep quiet, please," Mainfleet said and turned to talk in low tones with Biggs.

My mistake, thought Jimmy.

After a minute's discussion Mainfleet hurried through to the front door. He flung it open and blew a whistle. A vehicle had evidently been waiting with its engine running at the drive gates. It roared up to the foot of the front steps. A tailboard crashed down. Three soldiers appeared smartly in the hall, two of them carrying piled boxes of ammunition, the other with a machine gun over his shoulders. Under Mainfleet's direction they all proceeded upstairs.

" What are you doing with my house ?" Mrs. Wolf groaned.

The scent of action had done wonders with Biggs' temper. Though he still cuddled the revolver, he smiled.

" Your house will be okay, lady. It's the blokes outside who have to worry. We're bringing off this *coo*, see, and one of your top rooms happens to be an ideal spot for a temporary machine gun post."

" Good God, you really mean you're prepared to kill people over this business ?" If anything, Jimmy's sense of unreality had deepened.

" That's right, chum. That lot in Surrogate'll be wiped out by now. They're the enemy as far as we're concerned. We've got a fleet of captured lorries waiting to take all Bourgoyne's marchers on to Chequers, those still fit to fight. Chequers is already under siege. No mucking, I tell you ! All the government will be dead by morning."

" What's the machine gun going to do upstairs ?" Jimmy asked stupidly as they heard the sound of breaking glass somewhere above them.

" Pick off any intruders coming either way, of course. There's going to be a lot more blood shed here before we're through, believe you me. But you lot sit tight and you'll be okay."

" We can't sit here for ever."

Biggs' affability vanished instantly.

" You sit there till I tell you to get up," he said, " and not before. Get that in your thick noggin, chum."

Rising, he went over to the phone. For five minutes he was busy dialling, talking, dialling, talking. While he was sitting at the instrument, Mainfleet came downstairs again to report the gun in position. Nodding, Biggs passed this information on to his superior. Mainfleet brought out a cigarette case and offered it to Biggs ; Biggs picked a cigarette out and produced a lighter.

" *Could* I have one ?" Mrs. Wolf asked.

" Why not ?" Mainfleet agreed. He came over and presented his case. Since Biggs made no move with the lighter, he produced his own and held it out to her.

" Thank you," Mrs. Wolf said, inhaling smoke gratefully. " Now why don't you let me make us all tea, revolution or no revolution ?"

" Splendid idea," Mainfleet said, smiling.

" No !" Biggs said. They all looked a him. He dropped the freshly lit cigarette and ground it savagely into the carpet. " For God's sake, don't let's turn this into a picnic. Go thirsty for once in a good cause. Let's keep on our bloody toes."

Rather sulkily, Mainfleet went over to the window. In the rain-filled silence they heard a distant explosion.

" I keep wondering how Conrad Scryban is faring," Mrs. Wolf whispered to Jimmy after a while. " It's so terrible to think of him out there in all that fighting and rain."

Jimmy nodded dumbly. He felt that their own position might very well be worse than Scryban's. The phone rang. Everyone jumped.

" Biggs," Biggs said, grabbing the receiver.

He listened intently, his face set.

" Black sedan. Heading for London. Right. We'll get it, sir. Ring you back."

Slamming the phone down, he called to Mainfleet, "The C.O.'s escaped. Heading this way. Hang on here," and ran upstairs to the gun position. The three on the sofa listened to his footsteps ascending and turned their eyes to Mainfleet, who had now drawn his revolver.

"Can you please tell us what is happening? I find it very unnerving not to know," Mrs. Crinbolt said.

"The situation is quite simple," Mainfleet told her. "A growing section of the community, including a proportion of the army, believe the present government, and the measures imposed by the present government, to be corrupt. We intend to overthrow the government. To that end we are cutting communications to London and seizing the Prime Minister."

"You're only a handful!" Jimmy exclaimed. "Once they get organised you'll be wiped out."

"We intend not to be. With the Prime Minister in our hands we shall be in a position to negotiate a strong peace. The attachment to which I belong is mopping up the forces opposing the GREP marchers. We then load the GREP into lorries from our Amersham base and proceed north to take Chequers. Captain Biggs and I will probably remain here to provide cover from the rear."

A rich and deep-piled silence fell over the room.

"You mean you are going to kidnap the Prime Minister . . ." exclaimed Mrs. Crinbolt at last. "I never thought I'd live to hear such wickedness."

Mainfleet ignored her.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to switch on the electric are," he said. "I am rather damp."

As he bent to do so, the machine gun in the attic opened fire. Jimmy had already detected, through the rain, the sound of a car travelling fast along the road. Now the house echoed with noise. Mrs. Wolf jumped to her feet; Mainfleet's gun was instantly levelled at her. Clenching her fists, she sat down again.

From the road came a squawk of tyres on wet tarmac and then the racket of a car battering itself to pieces among trees.

Mainfleet went to the inner door where he could see through the hall window and down the drive. Biggs and one of the machine gunners came thundering down the stairs; they ran out into the rain to investigate their target.

A minute later a solitary shot sounded. Two minutes later Biggs and the private returned, looking grim and beating the rain from their uniforms. Biggs returned to the phone.

" Major Hobbes ? . . . Major Hobbes. Biggs here. We got the blighter . . . Yep, Roger."

Unexpectedly Mrs. Wolf burst into tears. Mainfleet turned to the private, who stood on the threshold of the room, gazing in with a sort of gormless awe.

" Robinson, go and see if you can rustle up a cup of tea for all of us," he said.

The private departed.

Mrs. Crinbolt looked up from the task of patting her daughter. " Well, I'm glad to see you still have some manners," she observed.

Despairingly Jimmy tried to analyse why he thought this remark one of the most ghastly he had ever heard. He had already decided that if he tried to make a dash for the door, it would be Mainfleet who would shoot him first. Mainfleet believed in the cause. Biggs was only doing his duty. Biggs was rough and ignorant and probably covering his envy of anyone who owned a nice house in the country with a display of aggressiveness. Mainfleet, on the other hand, was a man who disliked having to incommode anyone of his own social class. He would shoot first and answer questions afterwards. It was precisely this mixture of the genteel with the murderous that so appalled Jimmy.

He became increasingly aware that Kenelm Wolf would soon be emerging from the potting shed in search of tea, like a mole blundering topside after insects.

With some surprise Jimmy saw there was indeed someone coming to the French doors. With more surprise he saw it was not Kenelm Wolf but Guy Leighton.

thirteen

" This is a scandal, an absolute scandal, and considering that I am completely in sympathy with your cause, I think you're both behaving abominably," Guy Leighton said, a few minutes later, wiping his wet face on a cushion as he addressed the two captains.

" Just keep quiet," Biggs said, going back to the phone.

Little more relish for the newcomer was shown by Jimmy, Mrs. Wolf and Mrs. Crinbolt. Room on the sofa was limited and Guy was very wet.

Irritably he explained what had happened to him. Driving towards Grey Cotes, he had almost reached Surrogate when a mortar shell exploded in the road a few yards in front of him. Flying fragments struck his car as he swerved into a ditch. Although Guy was unhurt, the car was wrecked.

Climbing out, he saw three armed men, one in civilian dress, running towards him. They shouted at him. Taking fright, Guy plunged through the nearest hedge. A bullet pinged over his head. He hid in a deserted chicken run. The armed men made a cursory search, lost heart in the rain, and retired.

After some meditation and one cigarette, Guy decided to make for Grey Cotes on foot. This he managed to do by avoiding the main road and keeping to the cover of hedgerows. Happening, by luck, to strike the grounds by the kitchen garden, he had approached the house behind a brick wall, thus avoiding notice by the machine gun post in the attic.

While he was telling his tale, and as Jimmy explained what he knew of the Surrogate coup, they heard lorries rumbling along the road towards Amersham. Several aircraft droned by overhead without making any attack on the rebel forces.

The private brought in tea and disappeared upstairs.

" What I don't understand, Guy, is why you were coming here in the first place."

Guy, whose usual savoir faire had deserted him, snorted.

" I hope you are not being deliberately obtuse, Solent," he said. " I called for you at the IBA yesterday morning but just missed you. Someone there—a facetious sort of individual called Hortense—gave me this address. Unfortunately, owing to pressure of important business, I was unable to get away from town yesterday. But doubtless you can guess what I wish to talk to you about."

" If it's about Rose—Rachel—again, I don't want to hear it."

" Not so loud !" Guy hissed. His own voice had already dropped to a mutter. " It's not about Rachel—or only indirectly."

He looked round hopelessly, as one embedded in a sea of fools. Biggs was having a long glum talk on the phone.

" Have you got a plan for escape ?" Jimmy whispered, huddling into a corner against a bowl of dahlias.

" Now, Solent, you and I are in rather an awkward spot. Things have turned nasty, as I long ago predicted they would. This bit of nonsense, for instance, is going to hit the nation where it'll feel it most—in the pocket. However, you know my views on that. The point is this. Rachel Norman has been kidnapped by Bourgoyne ; you know that much, I suppose ?"

" For heaven's sake, Guy—"

" This is what I'm trying to tell you, Solent. On Thursday, you will recall, I manage to establish the true identity of this woman we so unhappily became entangled with. I passed that knowledge on to you with the genial feelings one has towards a fellow sufferer. You and I, in other words, are the only unofficial holders of this important secret."

Guy's was not a volatile face ; it registered as a general rule only two expressions, the imperious and the impervious. Nevertheless, searching it now, Jimmy found something else there, something he instantly connected with all he knew of Guy, and in particular with his casual parting remark on Thursday : " If I'd had more cash in the bank . . ." In that moment he saw the cogs that drove Guy on.

" Leighton !" he exclaimed. " You *sold* that information ! My God, you sold it to Bourgoyne !"

" Not so loud !" Guy exclaimed, looking round. Mainfleet was watching them suspiciously. " All information has a cash value. *We* couldn't use it."

" You're mad, Guy. Why—then it's through you Rachel was kidnapped !"

" Do we owe her any love ?"

It was an unfortunate way of phrasing it. Jimmy did not feel about love that way ; he did not feel about anything in Guy's way. A flood of resentment at everything in his present position rose up in his throat ; it obscured his senses. Swinging forward, he hit Guy Leighton on the jaw.

The bowl of dahlias and the table on which it stood went flying as Guy sprawled on the floor. Mainfleet was there in an instant. Grasping Jimmy's arm, he swung him half across the room. Caught off balance, Jimmy fell into an armchair. It skidded backwards, crashing into a glass-fronted cabinet. The room swam with breaking glass and shouting. Both Biggs and Mainfleet looked as if they would shoot everyone at a moment's notice.

" Are you all right, Jimmy dear ?" Mrs. Wolf cried, running over to him.

One of the privates came charging downstairs to see what was happening. Pulling a shattered Guy to his feet, Mainfleet pushed him on to the sofa. The phone rang urgently. The rain stopped of a sudden, leaving a restless silence behind.

" The next to cause trouble will be shot out of hand," Mainfleet said savagely.

" Biggs," Biggs declared, grabbing the phone, still pointing his gun at the party. He listened for a while, answering in low, angry tones. Jimmy, still straggling over the armchair and therefore nearest the phone, caught the words, " but if that's so, we can't wait for him . . ." An argument ensued, which Biggs evidently lost. Looking at his watch he announced grudgingly, " We'll give him till 1700 hours then," and slammed the phone down.

" What was all that about ?" Mainfleet demanded.

" Looks as if Amersham has had it," Biggs said. His face was red and sullen. He did not even bother to keep his voice down, so the others heard all he said. " Hobbes tells me the tanks have been called in and the RAF are strafing the barracks Our lads and the GREP lorries are cut off up the road. The whole blasted operation's come unstuck. An armoured column's moving up from the south, and if we don't get the hell out pretty smartish, we're going to get it in the seat of the pants. They'd lob a six inch shell into this house soon as look at it."

He ran out to the foot of the stairs and bawled up to Robinson. "All you lot come on down with the hardware. Move to it pronto and get it mounted in the back of the truck. We'll be with you in a minute."

" We'd better get cracking," Mainfleet said. He had gone very pale.

" Hang on till five o'clock," Biggs said. " It's only ten minutes. We've got to act as escort to a V.I.P., across country, dash our luck. He'll stop his car in the side lane, and we get round and join him there. Where's the side lane, you ?"

He directed this last question at Mrs. Wolf by sticking a finger at her.

" If you originally entered by the paddock, you must have come from the lane," she said.

" You lot'll have to be locked in an upstairs room," Biggs said. " We can't have you running about yelling your heads off. You'll have to take a chance on being shelled."

" Please, we'll be no trouble—" Mrs. Wolf began, but he cut her off. Someone was coming round the side of the house from the back, their footsteps audible on the terrace. With one accord Mainfleet and Biggs dived for shelter, revolvers aimed towards the french doors. Everyone tensed, Jimmy with a horrid certainty that Kenelm was about to appear.

Instead, a tall, bearded man with a powerful presence stepped into the room.

Mainfleet and Biggs rose sheepishly.

" Are you my escort ?" the newcomer enquired. " Are you ready to move ?"

There was no mistaking the owner of that resonant voice. It was Big Bill Bourgoyne himself. In a plain grey raincoat he looked entirely in control of the situation.

" We'll just get this lot locked up, sir," Mainfleet said respectfully. " We had word you were due to arrive." He motioned to Mrs. Wolf and her mother to get up.

" We have no time to waste," Bourgoyne said. " The enemy are moving on this position rapidly. We will evacuate as soon as you are ready."

As if to reinforce his statement a low-flying squadron zoomed overhead.

" They'll have seen your truck outside and be back to investigate it."

" Please don't leave us here to be bombed !" Mrs. Crinbolt cried.

" Get 'em out of here," Biggs said savagely, hoisting Guy to his feet. " Get 'em upstairs and lock 'em in somewhere." Guy broke away from him and ran in front of Bourgoyne.

" Don't leave me here," he said. " I'm one of your men ; these officers have no understanding of the real situation. We've not met, but I spoke to your secretary over the phone. I've done a lot for you. My name's Guy Leighton ; you'll know it, of course."

" You'd better come with us," Bourgoyne said, hardly pausing to consider the matter.

In a sudden zest of relief Guy bounded over to the window. As he went he indicated Jimmy without actually looking at him.

" My friend here also knows all about Miss Norman," he said.

Jimmy was so surprised at this he hardly realised that Bourgoyne was calling to him to follow Guy.

" I'll stay here, thanks," he said, " and take my chance with the ladies."

Bourgoyne, striding over, seized his arm.

" You'll come with me, young man. If you know so much of my business, I don't want you about loose at a time like this."

At this remark Guy's face clouded considerably, as he perceived he might be less rescued then doubly captured. But no time was allowed for further argument. Biggs had ushered the two protesting ladies upstairs, locking them in a bathroom. He ran out of the front door, driving off with the gunners to keep the rendezvous in the lane with Bourgoyne's car. Meanwhile Mainfleet stayed with the rest of the party as they made off through the french doors towards the paddock.

Outside the potting shed a soggy figure lay on its face in a puddle, its old raincoat rucked up about its knees. Jimmy stared at it with horror and remorse as they passed it ; he knew now why Kenelm Wolf had never made his expected entrance. He must have emerged from his hideout just as Biggs was prowling through the grounds wary for trouble. Ever since then he had sprawled in the pouring rain with his skull broken in.

The two vehicles headed westwards for the best part of an hour, Bourgoyne himself driving the lead car, Biggs tailing grimly at the wheel of the Army truck. In the early stages of their journey they passed several tokens of the unrest sweeping the country : a smashed car, a wayside inn with a hastily dug trench in its front garden, a line of light armoured vehicles with their drivers smoking peaceably on the grass verge, a bullet-riddled caravan, and a still smouldering cottage with the village fire brigade in attendance. Very few people were about.

These melancholy evening reminders of the morning's ambitions prompted Captain Mainfleet to ask Bourgoyne if Herbert Gascadder, the Prime Minister, had been captured.

" The whole grand plan has failed, my friend," Bourgoyne said, not without a gloomy relish. " The English have less fight left in them, than I had hoped. They're a great disappointment to me. From now on we can only count ourselves as a decadent nation. The struggles we would once have staged on the battlefield are now to be confined to the bed."

Still recalling Kenelm Wolf sprawling on the terrace, Jimmy said, " I should think that shows an advance in civilization."

" Naturally you would," Bourgoyne remarked tartly.

The somewhat fruity silence which now fell was broken by Guy, who began to speak in low tones to Jimmy.

" I'm still trying to forgive you for that loutish incident back at the house, Solent," he said. " Though I must admit I find it uncommonly hard to do so. When you attacked me, I had not even made plain the purpose of my visit—my ill-timed visit. Are you listening ?"

" Continue."

" Solent, this is a delicate matter. I am trying to make you a little present. After all, I can afford to ; it would give me pleasure to. Between you and me, Bourgoyne paid very generously for that information. I feel it would be a nice gesture on my part to . . . more or less split the proceeds—that is, if you will promise me never to reveal to a soul the nature of this deal. You see, I may have acted rather on impulse ; and if the truth ever came out, well it might be rather difficult to explain."

" Damned difficult, I'd say."

" Well then, how about fifty-fifty ?"

" Go and jump in a lake, Leighton !" Jimmy growled, and the fruity silence fell again.

After a prolonged tour of narrow byways, during which the following truck lagged further and further behind, they came on the closed double gates of a big estate. A notice fixed to the wrought iron announced that the property was for sale. Fifty yards further on the wall which bounded the road had collapsed. Swinging the wheel over, Bourgoyne drove the car across the rubble and so into the grounds. They bumped through a small plantation.

The house, when they came up to it, stood in sinister decay. It was not old but neglected, not large but cumbrous. Nobody could love it now. It had been constructed (perhaps about the time that Galsworthy was painfully building Robin Hill) of the yellow brick sometimes referred to, adequately, as " lavatory brick." Evidently it had been deserted for some while ; the windows were grey and uncurtained.

Approaching from the rear, they drew up in a rough courtyard formed by a number of outbuildings, a garage, a stable, an anonymous outhouse, a greenhouse with smashed glass, a

corrugated iron bicycle shed. Grass grew between cobbles. Ivy crawled in at a downstairs window. Nettles flourished obscenely in the shattered greenhouse. A masterly touch of dereliction was lent by a wooden farm cart loaded with hay, which had evidently stood by the house for many summers ; on top of the hay grew a splendid crown of cow parsley, burdock and dandelion.

Three spinsters with sporting rifles ran up to challenge the car, their pugnacious front melting in cries of delight as they recognised Bourgoyne.

He was very brisk with them.

From the questions and answers which followed, Jimmy gathered that Bourgoyne had been in hiding here for a couple of days, together with a number of loyal supporters—most of whom had forsaken him in the last hour or two, after learning of the afternoon's reverses from the B.B.C.

" We must all be out of here within half an hour and the whole place cleared," Bourgoyne said. " Captain Mainfleet, please take these two young men upstairs and lock them in separate rooms. The nursery rooms with bars at the window will do best. We shall move the quicker without being encumbered with them."

" Come on !" Mainfleet said, waving his revolver at Jimmy and Guy. " You heard ; up the stairs, please."

" I should have thought you could see by now you've picked the wrong side," Jimmy said to him. " Bourgoyne's a spent force ! Why don't we all get back into the car and move as fast as possible in the direction of the nearest policemen ? Guy and I would then say you had rescued us from Bourgoyne, and you'd probably get a light sentence."

" On your way," Mainfleet said, but he looked as if he might be privately considering Jimmy's proposition. Whatever his personal feelings, he did as Bourgoyne bid him. Jimmy and Guy were pushed upstairs into separate rooms and left.

By now Jimmy was far from his usual sunny self. An unexpected dislike of being ordered about rose in him. Looking round the room, with its frieze of mildewed teddy bears, he determined to escape at once. Mainfleet had locked the door ; the window was firmly barred. No sort of weapon lay anywhere about the room : window, grate and door formed the only breaks in its box-like aspect. As he roved round looking for something, his heel went through a patch of dry rot in the floor.

Jimmy was down on his knees at once, peeling away huge wafers of floor board. This done, he could get a grip on a sound board and lever it up. Wedging this board under the door handle so that nobody could get in to bother him, he returned to his hole and had soon enlarged it sufficiently to climb into. He imagined that with any luck he might be able to crawl between floors until he reached an unlocked room.

The ceiling below seemed capable of bearing his weight. Testing cautiously, Jimmy lowered himself slowly into his hole. He let go of the cross beams, putting his full weight on the lath and plaster. It was as rash as letting go of morals and trusting to conventions ; the ceiling caved in.

With a squawk Jimmy fell, and the whole ceiling fell with him. It came down like an avalanche about him, dust and lath and plaster, until he felt he was being pelted with wedding cake. Vaguely through the choking white mist Jimmy discerned the outlines of an empty room with a broken window at one end. Groaning, he picked himself up, found with astonishment that he was unhurt but for a twisted ankle, and hobbled over to the window. Pushing it open, he fell through it before anyone could come to investigate the noise.

He lay breathing hard, covered from head to foot in chalky dust.

He had tumbled out behind the garage ; it cut him off from the rear courtyard with the haycart, while the house cut him off from the front. In effect, he was in a little isolated square, the other sides being formed by ragged elder bushes. A small helicopter stood untended in the middle of the square.

But it was not the helicopter which held Jimmy's attention. Even as he fell through the window he had heard a vehicle roar up to the front of the house, and now someone was bellowing through a megaphone.

By standing up and peering through the room he had just left where the dust was now settling, Jimmy could look through an open doorway and a further corridor window. There, drawn up facing the building, was an Army truck. Over its raised tailboard the snout of a machine gun turned to and fro, as if seeking a target.

From the concealment of the truck the megaphone bawled its message again.

" Bourgoyne ! Big Bill Bourgoyne ! We know you're here. Come on out with your hands raised. Don't try to mess about,

or you'll be shot down like a dog. Anyone else in there, you better come out quick with your hands raised before the shooting starts. Come on, everyone out ! You've got two minutes."

Distorted though it was by the megaphone, Jimmy recognised that voice. Captain Biggs, for all his lack of education, had been more intelligent than his colleague, Captain Mainfleet ; he had recognised the winning side when he saw it and hastened to join. What was more, he looked like hitting the jackpot.

Jimmy could now make himself useful by sabotaging the helicopter. As he turned to do so two shots rang out from the building, answered at once by a burst from Biggs' machine gun. The noise, Jimmy reflected, was fairly intimidating. He had not yet come to the age where the idea of dying is a familiar prospect and was still inclined to regard it as a rat-trap to be avoided at all costs.

As he hesitated he saw that he was being watched from one of the ground floor windows in the wing. A woman stood there, looking out. It was Rose—Rachel Norman.

Immediately Jimmy fell prey to the old sickly mixture of ambivalent feelings. The sight, touch, smell of her, her unbearable outspokenness (" You didn't give me a thing "), the passion to which—one night long ago !—she had so admirably given free rein—all were vividly before him again. He loved Alyson, yes, but this was the woman who had given him the glimpse of another world, wild and trackless.

Of course it was logical to find her here—Bourgoyne's captive at Bourgoyne's headquarters !—but Jimmy hardly thought about that. From the main part of the building behind him shots were being fired. Bourgoyne, Mainfleet, the three women, and anyone else who might be around were sniping at Biggs' truck. With a roar and an answering burst of fire it backed into a more sheltered position. Ignoring the racket, Jimmy sprinted across to Rachel's window.

Her wrists were tied against her body with a wealth of bandaging. She wore a tweed skirt and a green cotton blouse streaked with dirt. Her hair was untidy, but her long, rough-hewn face looked out composedly at Jimmy. His immediate feeling was one of awe to find this impressive woman, so strong, so vital, standing quietly helpless ; this changed to sorrow as he saw that she did not recognise him in his present literally plastered state. Once more she was giving him the cold shoulder.

Rachel's window had rough bars across it on the inside. Waving and pointing, Jimmy signalled to the captive that he would go round the other way to let her out. She nodded, giving him a faint smile. As she did so the door of her room burst open behind her ; she turned to confront a tall, thin man with a face like a baby's coffin.

Jimmy ducked down out of sight below the sill. Like everyone else, the thin man was armed. The outlook for Rachel was obviously threatening. Sighing, Jimmy saw he would have to do something about her. " I'm sure that being mixed up in all this violence is not good for me," he muttered.

Running round by the garage, he found a good, solid two-by-four about a yard long lying in a patch of couch grass. It would serve as a useful weapon if he could get behind the thin man. Peering out from the other side of the garage, Jimmy surveyed the desolate rear square, with its clutter of decaying outhouses and haycarts. Someone was moving behind the bicycle shed.

The thin man emerged from the building, holding Rachel by the arm. Her wrists were still tied ; she walked briskly, even eagerly, her assured, top-heavy walk. They were coming towards Jimmy. He shrank back, but they went down the other side of the garage.

At the same time a man by the bicycle shed half rose, hurling a spherical object towards the house. It struck the wall and rolled over, hissing. Jimmy flung himself down on the ground. Sheepishly, he stood up again. A cloud of mist spread from the bomb towards the house : tear gas. And in the bushes beyond the bicycle shed a line of figures was advancing. Rescue or arrest was at hand for all and sundry !

Running back behind the garage, Jimmy saw that Rachel and the thin man had climbed into the helicopter. As he ran into the open the engine burst into life, the blades beginning to rotate. Looking up from the controls, the man reached for his gun and took a pot-shot at Jimmy. Jimmy flung his two-by-four and swerved. Dodging round to the other side of the machine, he seized the handgrip and bellowed to Rachel above the noise.

" Get out ! Get out ! The rescue party's here ! They're just coming !"

He thought she said, " I'm going with this man."

" He must be one of Bourgoyne's chaps ! Get out, for God's sake ! Rescue's here ! Rachel !"

The din increased. A gale raged round Jimmy.

Jimmy put his foot on the step as the helicopter shifted. Next minute it was lifting. Rachel made no attempt to move. The thin man was shouting. Jimmy was shouting. Someone —a dizzy glimpse revealed him—was shouting and waving from the roof. Bullets were flying. The motor roared. Of all the noises Jimmy's yells were loudest.

Staggering under its unbalanced load, the helicopter climbed with a reluctant crabwise motion over the garage, barely missing its roof. Jimmy hung on frantically, shouting. He saw the thin man, his dark, narrow face wizened in anger, lean across Rachel and strike out with the clubbed gun. The butt came down on Jimmy's knuckles.

He let go. He was falling, the helicopter seeming to lurch away from him. Next second he hit the ancient haycart, landing bottom first on the pile of antique hay, sprawling among cow parsley and nettles. Under his sudden weight the rotten axles of the cart broke, the wheels crumpled outwards, the body crashed to the ground. An immediate exodus of rats was partially screened by a vast outward-bound cloud of hay particles which obliterated everything from view.

fourteen

Mrs. Pidney placed the baked custard reverently on the table in the dinerette, adjusting the frill round the dish as she spoke, much as a mourner will adjust his tie at the graveside even when the coffin is being lowered into the earth.

" It ought never to have happened to him," she said. " Such a nice inoffensive young man. But there you are—as always, there was a woman at the bottom of it. Shairch-ay la femme, as Mr. Pidney would say."

" She must have been a horrible creature," agreed Alyson.

" Horrible," emphasised Mrs. Pidney. Shaking her head, she looked towards Jimmy's bedroom door. " And there poor young James Solent lies . . . I've had such a job keeping the reporters off ; they got no respect at all."

" He's only tired," Alyson said. From Mrs. Pidney's tone one might have assumed that Jimmy was dead on a slab rather than asleep on his bed. " The police questioned him for hours."

" Having his picture in the papers and all," Mrs. Pidney said, shaking her mop of hair in anguish. " And to think none of us knew a *thing* what was going on, us living in the house with him. He always seemed to get on so nicely with you, dear. I wonder he didn't tell you."

" He's been keeping rather to himself lately," Alyson said.

" Well, what I always say, everyone ought to have someone they can talk about sex to, no matter who. It's a sort of outlet, like. That's why I bless these nunchasers, as the boys call them ; they sort of give people more of a chance to come out with things."

" They've brought Jimmy a lot of trouble, Mrs. Pidney."

" Maybe. But when everyone's settled down with them they'll be a blessing in disguise, you'll see. I'm ever so glad you got yours in time, dear—it does suit you, you know, suits your complexion. And I saw you pinking at him when the police brought him back home."

The look of discomfort on Alyson's face deepened.

" I'm in rather an awkward position at present," she said. " I'm afraid I have obligations towards both the Solent brothers."

When she had gone, Alyson stood in the middle of the room. She was struggling with a desire to cry. It was Monday afternoon, and she had not bothered to go to work.

A sound made her turn. Jimmy was standing on the threshold of his room in pyjamas. He yawned, stretched, and smiled at her. Both of their ER's began to glow.

" What's the time, Alyson ?" he asked. " My watch has stopped."

" It's half past three and high time you woke. How are you, my dear ? How are the bruises ? Are you hungry ?"

" Yes. Yes, now you mention it I'm ravenous. And just a bit stiff ; my behind's slightly black and blue."

" Mrs. Pidney has just brought you up a baked custard. She's been terribly concerned about you."

" How nice of her. What's in the larder ?"

" An apple pie I made yesterday."

" With six cloves ?"

" With six cloves as usual."

" You're wonderful, Alyson. I'd rather eat that than the baked custard. Come and sit down and talk to me as I eat."

" I'm sorry, Jimmy, I oughtn't to stop. I'm about to go out."

" I see. You sound rather formal, Alyson. Is anything the matter ?—I mean, apart from the fool I've been making of myself over the Norman woman ?"

" Apart from that, no."

Still not entirely satisfied, Jimmy fetched the pie and commenced to eat. Watching Alyson from the corner of his eye, Jimmy saw that instead of making ready to go she was delaying her departure. He put his fork down.

" You don't have to pretend with me, Alyson," he said. " What is bothering you ?"

" Nothing," she said. " It's just that I've got an attack of nerves. I'm about to go round to the Merrick-Kind clinic. You know I promised Vincent I would."

" Vincent Merrick's experimental clinic ?" Jimmy said. " Good Lord, I'd forgotten about that in the excitement—he asked us both round, didn't he ?"

" In the circumstances, he'll be sure to forgive you for not turning up."

Jimmy looked hard at Alyson, aware for the first time how anxious she seemed.

" Would you like me to come with you ? A dose of other people's troubles would be like a tonic to me now !"

Jimmy much liked the way her eyes lit up.

" I'll wait for you, if you're sure you feel up to it," she said.

" This is probably the last meal I shall eat here," Jimmy said, as Alyson seated herself opposite him. " There's a spare room in the house where Donald Hortense digs, and I'm going over there this evening ; I can stay there until I find something more exciting."

He refrained from mentioning Aubrey. Alyson did the same. An awkward silence fell between them. Jimmy began to tell her such details of his eventful weekend as he had not related the night before. He broke off suddenly.

" But here I sit chattering . . . tell me, Alyson, what's going on in the big world ? Why aren't you at work ? Is the country plunged into bloody revolution ?"

" England ? Of course not ! I stayed away from work just to be about here in case I was needed. No, Jimmy, the collapse of your haycart was pretty well synchronised with the collapse of all organised opposition to the Emotion Registers. Bourgoyne's house was surrounded by loyal troops, Captain Biggs will receive a citation and promotion, your little dark friend Guy

was rescued, everyone else there was arrested — except Bourgoyne. He managed to escape by car but was caught down at Deal this morning. Quite exciting really."

" And the helicopter ? What happened to the helicopter ?"

" It was found deserted in a field less than a mile away. The occupants are still missing."

Helping himself to more pie, Jimmy asked about the country generally.

" Oh, now the big attempt at a rising over the week-end has failed, I don't think anything else spectacular will happen. After all, the trouble-makers in the army are now either shot or arrested. Over two hundred people were killed yesterday. The Amersham business was a storm in a teacup compared with the pitched battle at Glasgow ; you must read about it in the papers when we come back from Vincent's."

Her nail varnish was chipped, her skirt crumpled. He saw that although she spoke carelessly enough, she was still tense. A longing to go round the table and hug her assailed him, but he was not sure enough of how they stood.

Finishing the pie, he stood up.

" I must phone Mrs. Wolf before we go," he said.

" She's phoned you twice, once this morning, once after lunch."

" My God, what did she say, Alyson ? Was she O.K.?"

" I didn't much care for the sound of her. She seemed to be taking the death of her husband very lightly."

" Nobody loves that woman but me," Jimmy said, heading for the phone. Seeing the look this remark summoned on to Alyson's face, he added, " And don't forget she's twenty years older than I am."

He dialled the IBA. Mrs. Charteris put him through to Mrs. Wolf. An incessant shower of talk poured from the receiver. Mrs. Wolf was apologising for Jimmy's harrowing weekend. She was saying that she should probably sell the house ; that her mother, Mrs. Crinbolt, had been sent home ; that some nice RAF Regiment men had rescued them from their bathroom prison ; that she had to come to work to get away from the dreadful atmosphere ; that she hoped Jimmy was all right ; that even Bloody Trefisick had been kind to her ; that there had been shooting outside the IBA that morning ; that she had Jimmy's suitcase safe in her office ; that dear Conrad had at the last moment never gone on the GREP march

to Chequers at all owing to a slight cold ; that he had shown himself personally interested in her future ; that he had said he hoped she would not forget he would be thinking of her while he was in prison ; and that had he an ER it would undoubtedly be registering at the member of his team he valued most.

Out of breath himself, Jimmy put the phone down.

" She's going to marry Scryban, our managing director ; so that lets me out," he said.

" What, today ?!" Alyson exclaimed.

" No, silly, after the funeral."

He went and shaved and dressed, presenting himself to her within twenty minutes, ready to go to the clinic. Jimmy wanted to take her arm but did not.

Alyson talked cheerfully as he walked to the bus stop, but he sensed that she was still quietly disturbed, and that the cause of the disturbance did not lie in him. Becoming aware of this momentary perceptiveness in himself, a perceptiveness based on no acknowledged powers of reason, Jimmy asked himself how many other such abilities had died out since man began to cultivate his intellect, and whether, especially, the increasingly intense study of man as a psychosomatic unity had not—like the sunbeam which puts out a fire in a grate—damped down those same delicate effects it had set out to investigate. Perhaps in Jimmy Solent then there was a vision, however vague, of the future as we are now living it, when ER's are as universal as foreheads ; for under the intense scrutiny which Emotional Output has enjoyed since ER's came in, sexual activity has slumped to an unprecedented minimum, and birth rates everywhere have dropped to a small percentage of their previous levels. One happy result of this decline is that the world famine so frequently and zestfully predicted throughout the forties and fifties of this century has been, like Utopia, indefinitely postponed.

Merrick's clinic, though established in a fashionable part of town, looked disarmingly ordinary from the outside. If hell is a city much like London, it follows that purgatory may resemble an address in Mayfair. Even the dazzlingly new plate on the portal saying the Vincent Merrick-C.B. Kind Societal Therapy Clinic did little to warn them of what they were about to find. Alyson and Jimmy entered and were ushered into a waiting room.

Alyson stood looking out of the window at a white-washed wall three feet away, drumming her fingers on the sill.

" We don't have to be here if this place gives you the whim-whams," Jimmy said, going over to her.

She turned and rested her hands in his.

" I've got to stay, Jimmy," she said. " You see, I persuaded Aubrey to come here. He should be here already."

" Oh, yes, that does make it rather difficult. What did you ask him for? He doesn't know Merrick. We shall only quarrel ; you know he's at my throat since he found that you and I—"

" Aubrey's coming here for treatment," Alyson said.

There was not time to say more. The door opened and Merrick came in with his confident tread, the thick lenses of his spectacles gleaming. He held Alyson's hand warmly before turning to Jimmy.

" I must congratulate you on the part you played in one of yesterday's episodes," he said. " I'm delighted that you feel fit enough to come here today."

" Just a few bruises here and there. May I ask how you heard about my insignificant part in things ?"

" I was told privately by somebody who is on the premises at the moment," Merrick said mysteriously. " I do hope you will both come out with Jasmine and me one evening soon, when I can spare the time, and tell us all about it."

" Is the national situation settled enough for us to be able to plan ahead ?" he asked.

Merrick laughed as he produced a cigarette case and offered it round.

" Absolutely," he said. " Absolutely. I think the whole pattern of the next few years may be predicted with some confidence. Whatever is new is questioned ; that is both inevitable and reasonable. One saw the same thing a few years ago—you would both be at school then—with the introduction of TV. All kinds of side-effects, arising from factors in society such as unequal distribution of income, awareness of class difference, bondage to family shibboleths, make themselves felt. But their very expression—and we must regard the troubles of the past weekend as such an expression —dissipates them and becomes, in fact, the first stage towards the acceptance of the causal innovation. No, ER's are a fait accompli ; all we have to watch for now are the minor irritations inseparable from a time of adjustment. And this clinic, I fancy, will be able to deal with most of them."

Merrick was about to add something more when Alyson, looking strained, broke in with an enquiry about Aubrey.

" My dear Miss Youngfield, you have nothing to worry about," Merrick assured her. " Your fiancê is here, has been examined, and is already undergoing societal therapy. My colleague, Mr. Kind, and I have both talked with him, and we are in agreement that his condition is one which will yield to curative measures."

" It did not seem to yield to my curative measures," Alyson said diffidently.

" Aubrey Solent's is a fairly uncommon kind of impotence," Merrick said. " As I told you before, the essential point for you to remember is that it is in no way a reflection on your own—delightful qualities."

" Impotent ! Aubrey impotent !" Jimmy exclaimed. " I don't believe a word of it !"

" You were perhaps less advantageously placed to discover the truth than Miss Youngfield," Merrick said. "The condition, in any case, is only intermittent. And now, if you will come with me, I will introduce you to my co-partner in this venture, Mr. Kind."

Mr. Kind, Mr. Croolter B. Kind, was an unfrocked Canadian alienist with advanced ideas and a slight stammer. He wore, unexpectedly, a Harlequin sweater with a giant letter K sewn on the back and a pair of black pin-stripe trousers. He greeted Jimmy and Alyson amiably, although some of his cordiality vanished on finding they had not come for consultation.

" Sorry," he said, laughing and scratching his crew-cut, " I thought you were obscures rather than what we c-c-all c-c-c-clears. Well, any friends of Vince's are friends of mine. We've got q-q-quite a set-up here, and if you have a loved one here undergoing treatment—what we c-c-call c-c-c-clearance—you'd better come along and look in on the session that's just started. How do you say, Vince ?"

Vince Merrick nodded his head.

" Yes," he said. " I think you would be interested. As intelligent young people you ought to be. You may find it all rather startling at first, of course ; societal therapy is revolutionary."

" Ah, we'll shoot them full of dope and they'll take anything without turning a hair," Kind said, opening a swing door into

a surgery. " Just c-c-come into here, boys and girls, and we'll set you up."

Entering the surgery, he selected a hypodermic syringe from a bowl and commenced to fill it from a small phial. Seeing the indecision on Alyson's and Jimmy's faces, Merrick put a hand on their elbows and led them into the room.

" This is not going to hurt at all," he said. " We have here a drug we have recently synthesised called Peyocalan. Originally it was derived from the cactus peyotl. It is a harmless euphoric which will induce in you a feeling of withdrawness from and indifference to your surroundings. A small injection would be advisable ; at first glance our treatment is, as I say, apt to be startling."

Jimmy enquired, with an attempt at humour, " Do we bare arms or buttocks ?"

" Hell, you choose," Kind said. " It's all the same to us."

He brought the syringe over to them, squirting out a little peyocalan for practice. Alyson and Jimmy took the needle in the arm ; Kind swabbed their punctures with cotton wool and said " O-k-k-kay, let's go. This way for the freak show. Have your tickets ready, please."

Merrick led them up a corridor to a sound-proof door. They went through this and found themselves in a small cinema. " The programme has only just started," Merrick said, peering towards the screen. The differences between this and a normal cinema were several. They had come directly on to the balcony, which was divided by thick plate glass from the rest of the auditorium and contained only six seats. Down in the stalls some thirty seats, only half of which were at present occupied, accommodated the " obscures," those mental sufferers who were undergoing the Merrick-Kind societal therapy.

The obscures all wore dominoes over their eyes and sweaters on which large numbers were sewn, so that Jimmy was reminded of a Harvard football team preparing for a masked ball. The pit in which these people sat was draped with black in contrast to the ginger and orange stucco which serves many cinemas for internal decoration. But the most radical point of departure from tradition here was the four screens set one beside each other.

Different films were being projected on to each of the screens. The thirty seats in the pit revolved, each on its own

axis, so that their occupants might view each film with equal ease. They rotated slowly and ceaselessly.

Now a curious effect began to steal over Jimmy. The peyocalan was at work. He found himself, from eyes as blank as the ports of a bathysphere gazing out at the eerie ocean depths, nonchalantly watching the screens on which men and women, as much under pressure as any denizen of the Pacific deeps, underwent a thousand postures and humiliations. Sometimes in pairs, sometimes in solitude, occasionally in solemn groups, the human race filled four screens with its gyrations in search of fulfilment. With the same sort of baffled earnestness, Jimmy muttered to himself, " Yes, yes, yes . . . This is terribly important."

" This balcony is soundproof, so I can tell you something of what is going on," Merrick said. " Basically, of course, all mental healing is concerned with adjusting an individual to himself. Many individuals have to be helped to find a balance; Croolter and I offer such help. But we offer much more—and here, as I think you will appreciate, revolutionary ideas creep in. All over the world, mental sufferers are being sent back into the world labelled ' cured ' by their psychiatrists. They *are* cured, in the sense that they are adjusted to themselves, but they are not adjusted to the other personalities around them. The random impingement of these other personalities knocks them off balance, and in no time they are back at the ward door begging for readmission.

" We have changed that ; at this point societal therapy steps in. Here, in this theatre, we show our obscures (so termed because their view of the right external object is obscured) that the world teems with idiosyncrasies—perversions may be the word you are more familiar with—many of which are more grotesque than their own. Once they have faced and accepted it as an irrefutable fact and faced it in the presence of other obscures, they are suitably prepared to adjust to and to accept themselves. By the end of this course they will be different beings. Now just look at this variation coming up on the second screen and see if you don't think it one of the most fascinating . . ."

The respectable little man in pince-nez was creeping through hotel rooms, disarranging beds, selecting pillows by their smell; he removed the pillow cases, carrying them furtively with him

until he had collected six of them. His nose twitched uncontrolledly. He then bound various parts of his body tightly with five of the cases, fell on to his hands and knees, and crawled into the sixth case.

On adjacent screens a cunning attachment to a mangle was giving a woman the beating of her life, a strange creature danced in white nightdress and gumboots, a boy of fifteen stroked an Alsation dog and smiled angelically.

It was hard to believe that out of this unsavoury chaos would emerge a balanced world.

" What you have to grasp," Merrick said, glancing at the fish-like, hypnotised countenances of Alyson and Jimmy, " is that these scenes have a definite connection with what you regard as the ordinary world. They are merely, one might say, a slight parody of it. Man has free will, but he is also under compulsion. Some compulsions are acceptable to our present society, many are not ; what I hope to see—what ER's may bring about —is a disintegration of the present society. But it must be a slow disintegration, not the crude GREP attempt to shatter it, which would inevitably have brought economic chaos in its wake.

" I firmly believe we shall see an *evolutionary* disintegration. Society will rearrange itself on lines more in alliance with reality ; it's inevitable—when everyone daily gets an insight into the workings of sex through the ER. It is ignorance which creates tabus, not morality."

" Mmm . . . Terribly important," Jimmy murmured. He had hardly grasped a word in his efforts to concentrate on the antics of a gigantic negress and a bald man in suspenders.

" Terribly important, but I don't like it," Alyson sighed.

From the fuggy dark behind their seats Merrick's partner loomed. He nodded his crew cut at the quadruple screens.

" These movies are only available to members of the medical profession," Croolter B. Kind explained. " No doubt you have heard of a very excellent association c-c-c-called AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, which aids anyone afflicted with alcoholism. These films are shot by an equally courageous outfit calling itself PP, Perverts Pseudonymous. Their obscures act out their idiosyncrasies for the c-c-c-cameras."

Before the posturing images the clinic's fifteen obscures revolved in their seats like chickens on spits, as if commended by some modern Dante. All of them bar two wore ER's, which

fluttered and blinked, gleamed and dimmed, as their wearers reacted to the varying stimuli of the screens ; they resembled rose-tinted searchlights seeking out enemy bombers. To add to the frenzy of the scene some of the obscures were twitching or pointing at shots which particularly roused their errant genes.

With an effort Jimmy turned to look at Alyson ; her face was momentarily illuminated by the light reflected off giant thighs ; she was crying. The sight did a good deal to clear Jimmy's head. He had forgotten that his own brother was turning on a spit down in that thigh-blown purgatory. Perhaps Aubrey was No. 5, or perhaps No. 12, curled up there quietly in his sex dodgem-car.

Heaving himself forward, Jimmy raised his hand and touched Alyson numbly attempting to comfort her.

" That's right, you kids, go ahead and neck," Croolter said. " These movies do have that effect on some people. I might inform you that on the black market they fetch quite a whale of a price."

" I ought to tell you that some of the obscures in our audience below," said Merrick, resuming his commentary, " occupy trusted positions in industry and in society. One holds an important post in the Treasury, one is a key woman in ultra-sonics, one, indeed, is a Minister. Croolter and I can tell which each is by the number on his sweater, but all obscures are anonymous to each other."

" I don't want to hear anything more ; I think it's all terrible —ghastly—inhuman !" Alyson said.

" Terrible and ghastly maybe," Croolter replied, " but all too human." He chuckled appreciatively.

" Well, I want to get out into the clean daylight again," Alyson said, rising shakily. " And I want to take Aubrey with me ; I'm sure this can do him nothing but harm."

Pulling himself together, Jimmy went over to her. When he took her arm, he could feel how much she was trembling.

" Please calm yourself, Miss Youngfield," Merrick said. " Do leave, by all means, if you feel you must—though I should be sorry to see you go—but you must believe me when I say you would be ill-advised to remove your fiancé ; he needs this opportunity to come to terms with his life. You should leave him here unless—" He paused abruptly.

" Unless what, Mr. Merrick ?"

" Forgive me. What was that noise outside ?"

" I heard it too," Croolter said. " Sounded like firing to me. Some guy downstairs told me there was more unrest in London today, after the news that Bourgoyne had been put in the c-c-c-cooler, than ever he managed to stir up here when he was loose ; I'll never understand you British if I live to be a hundred."

" That's nonsense," declared Merrick. " Naturally there is some unrest after the climatic week-end."

" What were you going to say about Aubrey, Mr. Merrick?" Alyson persisted. But Merrick was saved from answering by a minion who entered the gallery to announce that a truck-load of men armed with rifles were firing on the police in the street outside.

Merrick tut-tutted as if he, too, sometimes had his doubts about the British.

" You'd better haul the Minister out of the pit in case there's any trouble," he told the minion, peering down into the aptly named pit where his seekers of the right external object still rosily revolved. " He's No. 8 and we can't afford to lose him. Drag him out and give him the pheno-barbitone routine, then bring him up here."

" Yessir." The minion showed a dirty pair of heels.

A solitary shot sounded outside, followed by the spanging howl of ricochet. Jimmy, who had had his fill of guns for a while, said uneasily, " What good do they think hooliganism will do ?"

" It's a valuable outlet for the hooligans," Croolter said without taking his eyes off the changing pictures.

" Bourgoyne had a good case," Alyson said. " These fools outside just spoil it ; everyone spoilt it, he spoilt it himself. I can't comprehend why he never got more enlightened backing than he did. It seems amazing to us now that less than five years ago nations were exploding H-bombs without any effective protest being raised. Yet future generations will be equally amazed that we did not make more ado over this tampering with the life of the individual. I suppose we're all too absorbed in the personal aspects of the problem to heed the general ones."

" Ah, you're just being archaic," Croolter said. " It was high time someone did something like this. It's a real advance, honey, take it from me."

" I don't much like the tone you take to Miss Youngfield," Jimmy said. He did not quite agree with Alyson, but he took a dislike to anyone else who disagreed, particularly when they wore sweaters and pin-stripe trousers with crew cuts.

" Permit me to repeat : archaic," Croolter said. " She talks about tampering with the life of the individual ! Jesus, man, ever since homo sap formed itself into groups and societies, the life of the individual has been tampered with—that is, made to c-c-c-conform. C-C-C-Conformity is c-c-c-comfort. That's all we aim to do here in this c-clinic, make folks c-c-c-comfortable. Why, they'd be quite happy with their little k-k-k-kinks if it weren't for the element of nonconformity in those said k-k-k-kinks."

" Never mind all that, Alyson," Jimmy said. " Let's get out of here if you don't like it."

" You are welcome to leave by all means," Merrick said. " The shooting seems to have stopped."

" Yes, I want to go," Alyson told him, " but first I want to know what you were going to say about my fiance. I had an idea it might be important."

" Sit down again, my dear," Merrick said. " Perhaps it is important. You see, the affliction from which Aubrey Solent suffers is a mental condition—impotence caused by a physical defect is rare. The sense of inferiority which produced the condition is reflected in other facets of his make-up. He is reserved, conservative, never talks much about his work and conforms by going to successful plays, reading currently popular books, visiting church every Sunday—in short, by adopting a usual upper-middle-class conformity pattern ; and sometimes he gives himself away—for instance, in his recent outburst against a nonconformist group or in adjuring Jimmy to behave towards you as if sexual attraction were non-existent."

" But all that happens to be part of Aubrey's nature," Jimmy protested. " There must be hundreds of people like Aubrey in London alone."

" I agree with both of your points," Merrick said urbanely. " And these latent stresses were brought to the surface when Aubrey met Miss Youngfield."

Jimmy turned away in disgust—these people had you over a barrel which ever way you jumped ; arguing with them was like trying to do Euclidean geometry on a perpetually expanding or

contracting rubber sheet. As he turned he was in time to see two minions in the pit reach the chair of Obscure No. 8 ; by their actions he realised for the first time the audience was strapped into its chairs. No. 8 was now undone and half carried through the gloom to a guarded exit. Still slightly dizzy from the drug, Jimmy found himself peering to see if the minions carried pitchforks.

Leaning towards Alyson, Merrick was talking again.

" Now you, Miss Youngfield, are an exceedingly attractive young lady, if I may say so. Aubrey recognised that when he met you ; but with his desire for you came a dread that he might be proved inadequate. It is a tragic situation ; in the old phrase, he is his own worst enemy. He could see that you were sympathetic and perhaps even inclined to mother him. No—don't protest ! Every woman is a latent mother. Aubrey was intelligent ; he hit on a scheme which appealed to all levels of his being. He *told* you—did he not ?—of his disability and he sought your help to try and cure it ; in effect, it was a way of flaunting his weakness and his strength at the same time. You fell in with the scheme."

"I was fond of him," Alyson protested. "And I sympathised with him. I thought I could help."

" Exactly. As I say, you fell in with his scheme," Merrick agreed.

Now Jimmy was listening with great attention. Nothing engages us more closely than unpleasant revelations about members of our family. He flinched slightly as the psycho-analyst, still talking, turned towards him.

" At this juncture James Solent came up to London and began to share his brother's flat."

" This is where it gets good," Croolter gloated from behind them.

" Aubrey's love-making had been, thanks to Miss Young-field's tact and patience—to say nothing of her pulchritude—fairly satisfactory until then," Merrick continued. " But he sensed—quite rightly—a rival in his younger brother. He was unsure of his powers ; he said to himself, in effect, ' Alyson cannot love me, for I am not worthy of her ; she stays with me only through pity, therefore she must have something to pity me for.' And from then on his trouble grew rapidly worse. That's so, Miss Youngfield, isn't it ?"

Alyson nodded her head, not speaking.

" If you could persuade yourself," Merrick said, " to abandon Aubrey, we could then treat him successfully by showing him his basic fears are groundless. By aligning your-yourself with Jimmy you have become for Aubrey a symbol of his failure that we should remove as far as possible from his life. Incidentally, he has already admitted to me that his main reason for getting an ER, however he has rationalised it, rests on a fear of not being able to make it pink. It was this fear alone that turned him for several weeks into a nonconformist in the BIL camp."

" That at least—" Jimmy began to say, when there was a loud explosion and the building trembled under their feet. The plate glass cutting off the balcony from the rest of the auditorium cracked horizontally without smashing. At the same time a section of the wall in the pit above the left-hand screen puffed and wrinkled and fell outwards. The building shook again as bricks and mortar hit the street. The collapse made a ten-foot square hole in the cinema wall. Through this gap the watchers saw an immense curtain of dust and plaster rise ; as it cleared, the outer world was revealed—or if not exactly the outer world, a large poster on the opposite side of the street, on which, above and beneath a delineation of a young woman in her bed, stood the proud boast, THERE'S NINE HOURS BEAUTY SLEEP IN EVERY CUP OF VIGACOFF. It contrasted oddly, Jimmy thought, with the lower part of a hypogastric region which undulated in juxtaposition on the next screen.

For in spite of the explosion the films ground inflexibly on, and the obscures perforce remained in their rotating seats. But the light filtering through the cavity into the cinema dimmed the moving images to a faded brown ; they now wore in consequence a quaintly old-fashioned air ; the post-Kinsey researches of PP were turned into pornographic postcards long treasured in some fusty bureau drawer. The earnest and ungainly antics had acquired a period charm.

Recovering from his shock, Croolter B. Kind jumped to his feet. He waved his arms with the curious retrograde movements of a lady driver learning to signal.

" We're being attacked," he shouted. " Leave everything to me and don't panic. Just k-k-k-keep c-c-c-c-c-cool ! Make for the emergency orifices !"

He plunged out of the door and his footsteps padded along the corridor. As they died away, Merrick's minion entered clutching Obscure No.8, a stocky figure still garbed in mask and sweater ; he was panting.

" It's nothing to be alarmed about, sir," the minion told Merrick, referring to the explosion. " Just a few malcontents and Bourgoynists having a last fling, that's all. The police chased them up on to the roof and cornered them there—but not before some young fool let off a grenade. We can claim off insurance, sir, can't we ?"

" I suppose we can," Merrick said. " A stone flung at me at Stipend, my livelihood damaged in Mayfair ; what traumatic times we live in ! Perhaps we should go outside and view the damage. By so doing I might perhaps recover my nerve. Would you kindly phone my wife and tell her how my life has been spared ?"

Jimmy turned and caught hold of Alyson's arm as she followed Merrick and Obscure No. 8 from the balcony.

" Listen, Alyson," he said. " I know it's hard to check either way on these psychology blokes, but is the Great Panjandrum right about Aubrey ?"

" I believe so," she said, sighing. " At least Vincent seems to have unravelled a part of Aubrey's troubles, and believe me, he has more knots than string—I just hope you aren't going to be such a handful . . . Oh, it's so confusing—I wish I'd never come here."

He brushed back her fair hair as if trying to brush her remarks aside. Vincent Merrick and the masked obscure were disappearing down the corridor. A schwarmerei of pink light surrounded Alyson and Jimmy as he said, " Just don't worry ! I worried for so long about your not getting an ER, but I can see now why you hung on."

Alyson struggled in his arms, wrinkling her face in a sort of irritated-amused expression.

" You're so diffident, or you'd have seen long ago. Oh, Jimmy dear, you heard what Merrick said. I was attracted to Aubrey and then hooked by—oh, by pity, I suppose, though I hate to say it. Then you turned up. I knew if I had a disc it would pink at you. I didn't think it would pink at Aubrey and could guess how that would hurt him. Once I knew I couldn't control my genes, I knew I couldn't risk getting a Norman Light. Not with you about. It was only at the last moment I knew I could not bear to go to prison for Aubrey's sake."

A lilting waltz was being performed by all the parts of Jimmy which normally functioned at a stolid plod. Letting go of Alyson, he backed away, unaware of how blank his expression had become.

" Yes," he said. " I see."

Alyson burst into ragged laughter.

" Don't just say ' Yes, I see,' you unloveable man !" she said. " Do something about it. We can't look after Aubrey any more. Vincent Merrick said that himself—and besides, the strain's too much ; I've aged years these last few weeks. From now on it's out of our hands."

" Yes," Jimmy repeated, overcome to think of the dilemma in which Alyson had been trapped. " What a bit of luck, eh ?"

" Come here, Jimmy," she said, very softly, making it an invitation rather than an order. As he approached he watched with interest the way her face grew pinker. She was not blushing. Taking his face in her hands, she kissed him tenderly with parted lips.

fifteen

Turning to follow Vincent Merrick and the quaint figure of No. 8, Jimmy clutched Alyson's arm tightly. The gesture was only partly one of affection ; he needed steadying. Optimism crawled through his arteries, surprising him by its presence. Rachel had not turned him into the little withered thing he had feared.

" How wonderful to be out of that ghastly cinema !" Alyson exclaimed, taking a deep breath and smiling at him.

As they went along the corridor the masked No. 8 tapped Jimmy's arm and said, " Forgive me, but Vincent has just told me who you are. You've been having an exciting time lately, eh ? As we have met once before perhaps I may remove my domino."

He slipped the black velvet from his eyes, and obscure No. 8 was revealed as Health Minister Dr. Warwick Bunnian.

" Surprised to find me in Vincent's beastly clutches ? I'm undergoing treatment for a mild touch of gerontophilism, nothing serious," the Minister of Health said, smiling genially. " Comes and goes like catarrh, you know."

" You stood us a drink at Stipend," Jimmy said. " Perhaps you will come and have a drink with us now ? I certainly feel in need of it."

" I expect you do," Bunnian agreed. " But you must allow *me* to get the liquor, old laddie ; *I* can get it on prescription. Ministerial privilege and all that, you know." Uttering a laugh, he clapped Jimmy on the back and winked salaciously at Alyson ; it was obvious that a spot of societal therapy had worked wonders on him. " I say, I've been informed that you were involved in the raid on old Willy Bourgoyne's hideout. Weren't you the chappie who nearly rescued Rachel Norman out of the helicopter ?"

" I didn't get there soon enough, sir," he said.

" Just as well you didn't, by jove !" Bunnian exclaimed cryptically.

The four of them emerged into the upper class sunlight of Mayfair. Growing crowds trampled over pavement and roadway, necks curved as they stared up at the damage wrought by the grenade. Some police were already throwing a rope barrier round the masonry which had collapsed in the road, while others escorted four dejected rioters into a waiting Black Maria. Of all this Jimmy absorbed little, so busy was he mulling over the Minister of Health's last remark.

" I'm afraid I don't see what you mean. Is Rachel Norman safe ?" he asked.

" Safe enough for our purpose," the Minister said, placing a plump little hand on Jimmy's arm. " I may as well tell you this, Jimmy, that fellow who took her off in the helicopter was a Russian agent. I happen to know that by now Miss Norman is well on her way to Moscow . . . Don't look so worried ! You see, we *wanted* her to leave England. The crux of the matter was that she is a young woman of considerable drive and power."

" I found that out," Jimmy said.

" Did you ? Not only did she practically invent the ER's but she sold this enormous dream of fitting everyone in the country with them to the Prime Minister and me. Which of these two feats is the greater I leave to you to decide. The point is, once she had done all that, Miss Norman was in a more powerful position than ever. Then she revealed to us the terrible truth that the installation of ER's was only half of her scheme ; the best was yet to come. The PM and I, being rather committed —we had, er, accepted some gifts of shares in Norman Laboratories and other Iral holdings—could not back out. It became imperative to get rid of Miss Norman for the country's good as

well as our own. And at that juncture, as good fortune would have it, MI5 informed us that Russian agents had contacted her. I say we can't talk out here ! I don't mind giving away State secrets, but I'm not properly dressed. Where's the nearest pub, Vincent ?"

The nearest pub was just across the road. They crossed the road. Bunnian resumed his domino and they settled themselves in the lounge bar behind an assortment of glasses.

" If you want him to talk, make him talk now while he's still partially under drugs," Merrick said in an aside to Jimmy. " I've got more government tips out of him that way . . ."

" Do go on, sir," Jimmy said, clutching Alyson's hand under the table. " This is all most instructive."

" Bottoms up, old boy !—Or perhaps with Vincent here I shouldn't say that," Bunnian exclaimed merrily, sipping his double whisky. " Anyhow, as I was saying, the Russians contacted the Norman woman and offered her any resources she cared to name if she went over there to work for them, much to our delight. She liked the idea, remembering how free her step-father, Demyanski, had been to experiment. She was about to do a Burgess when this damned idiot Bourgoyne somehow got wind of who she really was and pinched her himself. However, all's well that ends well. Some of our Secret Service chaps—unknown to the Russians, naturally—saw that she and the agent got safe passage to a submarine which was waiting for 'em off the South Coast in the early hours of this morning."

Bunnian looked with evident glee at the amazed expressions of those around him.

" Rachel was quite a handful, I can tell you. I don't suppose you'd have met her socially . . . Ah, well, that's another tale; I'll leave that one for my memoirs." A smile hovered on his face for a moment, until he continued in a different tone, " Herby—the PM—and I had the wind up, I can tell you, when it looked as if she might miss the boat. Her step-father, Ivan Demyanski, originally located what we know now as Demyanski's Bundle in the hypothalamus of the brain, where the biological engages with what he would have termed the infra-spiritual. So the ER, like all good inventions, is Russian in origin. But it was Rachel who did all the delicate circuit work of connecting the Bundle to an external output register, the disc. There aren't half a dozen people in the world with that girl's

knowledge. So you can see why she was too hot to handle. She had to be out of our way quickly—before the next general election."

He drained his glass. He smacked his lips. " Have another drink, Jimmy, dear boy. And you, Miss Younghusband. And you, Vince ; do you good."

" Is that really the way policies of state are settled, Dr. Bunnian ?" Alyson asked curiously as the second round of drinks arrived.

" It is in this case," Bunnian said. " Of course, Herby and I were personally interested, naturally."

" Naturally," Alyson echoed.

Jimmy said nothing. He sat back and relished the sensation of a weight lifting from his shoulders. Never mind how, never mind why ; she had gone, Rachel had gone, and he would never see or think of her again. She hadn't taken a thing. The profound gratitude he felt had to be lavished on someone ; he turned to Dr. Bunnian.

" How can I thank you," he said, " for all your kindness ? I must admit in the past that I've sometimes run with the mob and regarded politicians as cynics, hypocrites and self-seekers. Well, I know better now. Dr. Bunnian, sir, thank you a thousand times for your honesty and your outspokenness. I do hope you will come to the wedding—Alyson's and my wedding, I mean."

Smiling widely, Bunnian nodded his head a dozen times in acknowledgement, swallowed his second double whisky, and called for a third.

" We do the best we can, laddie," he said. " I know we're not a popular breed. You must remember how opposed my job is to Vince's here. Vince's job is to encourage the badness out of people ; the politician's job is to keep it in them. You have in the NL's an ideal compromise—they keep the badness flowing back and forth all the while. Ah, humanity's a damn bad lot, and I can't see there'll ever be any real changing us."

His sudden plunge into pessimism was most noticeable and affecting.

" Cheer up !" Alyson said kindly, watching with awe as he tucked the new whisky away. " The country's going well now. At least Vincent will tell you that we have a time of progress to look forward to. Everyone is starting again with a new outlook on life."

Bunnian pouted dismissively.

" Oh I know what you mean. GREP destroyed, opposition routed, business climbing again in the city, exports up. But the strikes are still spreading—ruddy dockers now. It'll be the railways next, mark my words. And as for the moral outlook . . . Oh well, it doesn't do to be gloomy ; no good ever came of worrying. I'm having dinner with Herby tonight, and you daren't breathe a word of pessimism to him. He bites your head off if you suggest that things aren't all they should be."

With sudden heartiness the Minister laughed and all was well again.

They finished off their drinks in a glow of self-congratulatory good humour, and Merrick stood up.

" I must be moving," he said, polishing his spectacles on the end of his tie. " I must see how Croolter is getting on over the road. Are you coming back to change, Warwick ?"

"Just call me No. 8," the Minister of Health said expansively. " Yes, I suppose we'd better be moving. Well, Solent, it's been interesting to run into you again ; I hope you don't feel too much like a pawn in the affairs of state . . . Thanks !"

This last remark was addressed to Merrick who, seeing the difficulty the Minister was experiencing in rising from his chair, had caught him under the armpit and hooked him to his feet. He began to walk uncertainly to the door, Merrick still clutching him.

" Just a minute, Dr. Bunnian," Alyson said. " You haven't told me what the end of the Norman Light scheme was that Rachel had in mind or why it was something that required so drastic a remedy as getting her out of the country."

" Not just out of the country !" Bunnian protested. " Not just out of this country but *into Russia ;* that was essential. If she had carried her ER scheme through—as undoubtedly she would have had done she remained here—it would have meant the ruin of Great Britain and all it stands for. Democracy would have met its downfall."

He put on his House of Commons voice to say this, and Alyson and Jimmy were duly impressed. He drew himself up, beckoning to them both, seized their arms and led them into a corner where, resembling an old rugger coach in his sweater, he bent down and whispered in their ears. Merrick by the door was completely ignored ; in a fit of cold anger he strode over to the bar and bought twenty Benson and Hedges.

" La Norman will go over to Russia, where they do nothing by halves," Bunnian was saying confidentially in his corner. " In a year all their teeming millions will be provided with ER's and no ifs nor buts about it. Then Rachel will put over the second part of her scheme, which we jibbed at. Within a second year all the Russians will be wearing *two* discs on their foreheads.

" Now I don't want to go all technical on you young people, but these ER's, clever little things that they are, plug into a part of the brain, as I told you, called Demyanski's Bundle, through which pass other impulses than just erotic ones. By running an extension, with a suitable filter, from the first disc, you can get a different reaction on the second ; and this, our Miss Norman plans, will light up with a *green* light.

" Once you've sold a population *one* disc, you see, the second is no trouble at all, particularly when you promise them that this second disc, the green light, is going to make life even simpler than the first one did."

Merrick had caught the minister by his sweater and was dragging him slowly to the door. Alyson felt sympathy towards this move ; after all, if Bunnian thought the NL's had in any way mitigated the complications of life he was obviously due for some more treatment.

" So in a couple of years all Russians will wear two discs, one flashing pink, one green on occasions ?" Jimmy asked meditatively, following the slow shamble towards the exit. " We know what the pink one's for ; what terrible thing is the green one for ?"

" Perhaps you know," Bunnian said, tottering towards the threshold, " that Rachel Norman had her own ruthless moral code ; it was twisted, perhaps, by our standards, but by hers it was crystal clear. She would admit of no compromise, ever ; that was what made her so formidable."

" Certainly she was always painfully frank," Jimmy agreed, a faint, fading, echo of " You never gave me a thing," still in his ears.

" Exactly. She had an obsession with truth," Bunnian said. " The green lights will light up when anyone tells a lie."

" But surely . . ." Alyson said, puzzledly. " Surely that might be a very good thing. Surely you haven't allowed such a splendid invention deliberately to fall into Russian hands."

" Absolutely !" Jimmy exclaimed, drawing back in horror. " Think how it would simplify English life if everyone in the country had such a device on his forehead."

Merrick's last vicious tug sent the Minister of Health reeling out of the pub door.

" It would have meant a death blow to British diplomacy," Bunnian said in his most ministerial tones.

Arm in arm Alyson and Jimmy emerged after him into the London air, evening-calm, gasoline-sweet.

Brian W. Aldiss

Editorial Note : The complete unabridged edition of this serial, entitled **The Primal Urge,** is now on sale throughout the UK (Ballantine Books, 2/6).

Guest Editorial (continued)

dimensional flats. The great writer creates a complete and unforgettable world, and thus lets us return to our own world enhanced and enriched.

Science-fiction is escapist. Of course. All imaginative writing is escapist. Where the critics are going astray is in attacking us for our escapism, and not for our literary faults. At its best, s-f is magnificently escapist, and should glory in it. Who could not return from a visit to the world of Jack Vance's novel *The Dying Earth*, to cite an escapist work that has never received its due, without feeling that he had been somewhere unique, that he had experienced things unavailable in our mundane world ? What of Stapledon's escapist *Last and First Men* ? S. Fowler Wright's *The World Below* ? The list can be extended to formidable lengths.

Science-fiction at its poorest is trivial and thin-blooded stuff which fails precisely because it is *not* escapist, because it deals too prosaically with the things of today, with our transient preoccupations and cliches. Its failure is a failure of the imagination. But at its finest, s-f offers a myriad of new worlds, worlds of the imagination, harbours for the mind seeking escape.

Escape is necessary. We escape from the city on weekends, we escape from our livelihoods for weeks at a time. The human organism, if it is to grow and prosper, needs change, refreshment, periodic escape.

Literature offers one form of escape. Proust offers it, Balzac offers it, and so does this magazine. So long as the critics on high get no closer to science fiction than is necessary to determine, redundantly and pejoratively, that it is " escape literature," they will never understand what it is we look for, and what it is we find. Nor will they really comprehend the joys of fiction, science or otherwise. We are all escapists, here in the field of s-f, and make no apologies for it. The world of reality—the reality of the telly and the stock market and the corner pub and the latest international crisis—cannot be shrugged off, at least not if sanity is to be retained. But, if sanity is to be retained, that world must be periodically abandoned for others.

We have our own private exit. We call it science fiction.

Escape literature ? Of course !

Robert Silverberg

Boris Karloff

continued

viewpoint. Loathing the word "horror" (he prefers "macabre") I found him most unassuming when discussing many of the great roles he has played. For instance, when mentioning my own favourite, "The Old Dark House," Mr. Karloff immediately enthused over the part Charles Laughton played in that film (a point I had forgotten) and averred that in his view "it was Laughton's finest performance." Later, speaking about his successful role in the long-running Broadway production of "Arsenic And Old Lace" (he also played with Cary Grant in the film version), his praise was all for the performances of other members of the cast.

Asked about his first direct contact with science fiction, he replied, "Delightful. I think science fiction is a natural development from the macabre stories of a generation ago. With space research now a reality, it is modern fiction in the world of today." Jokingly he added, "In fact, it is 'out of this world!'"

Both he and producer Leonard White agreed, however, that one of their major difficulties has been in learning the vocabulary of the science fiction writers—the interpretation of science fiction terms, especially futuristic ones, being seen differently by script writers, directors and actors. Before a play could go before the cameras a common understanding had to be worked out to ensure that everyone agreed with the final interpretations, visually or orally.

During the next few weeks Mr. Karloff will introduce *Botany Bay* (July 28), an original script by Terry Nation; *Medicine Show* by Robert Moore Williams (August 4); *Pictures Don't Lie*, from a story by Katherine MacLean; and *Divided We Fall* by Raymond F. Jones.

J.C.