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NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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The greatest science fiction film ever made !

The Day of the Triffids "X"

Starring HOWARD KEEL and NICOLE MAUREY
With JANETTE SCOTT and KIERON MOORE

A Security Pictures' production based on the novel by John Wyndham



NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

John Ashcroft

Shirdley Hill

Lancs



At the time when Guest Editor John Ashcroft first appeared in *Science Fantasy* nearly ten years ago, he was a teenage schoolboy who showed great promise as a writer. Subsequently, during a sojourn with N.A.T.O. forces in Norway, where he was a radio operator, he sent us several long stories which were bought and published in *Science Fiction Adventures*. Followed a period of post-Service quietude during which we heard little from him until recently. It is therefore not surprising to find that he is now a reporter in the telephone news room of the *Liverpool Echo* and *Liverpool Daily Post*, where he spends evenings with a typewriter and headphones, taking down reporters' stories from the surrounding counties.

He states, "The work is very interesting as one never knows what will pop up next. The night Glenn went up, I spent every spare moment watching the incoming snippets on the teleprinters, which can be handy if no-one has a radio."

His Guest Editorial in this issue is one of the best we have yet published and shows a degree of thoughtfulness far in excess of many writers with a great deal more experience.

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Guest Editorial

It seems that there is often magic in the most hackneyed of s-f writing—according to the eye of the beholder and the circumstances at the time of reading such material—but let John Ashcroft enlarge upon the theme.

Beer In The Wine Bottle

by JOHN ASHCROFT

Unmanned satellites are page-two Press topics. Yokels who said “B’ain’t sense, spaaayce-flight” seek dark consolation in, “B’ain’t *natural*, then.” From atomic power and automation, surgery and transport and photographing the moon’s rump, to the language of dolphins, life abounds with marvels. And authors delve desperately in sea, psi or sky, sweating to keep their toes one scuttle ahead of the mobile mousetrap of Fact, while all around rise wails of woe, laments for lost wonder, and grumbles of readers finally abandoning the grey parade of science fiction.

Space-flight need not dominate our themes, yet no speculation on the future can utterly ignore its potential impact; so cynics cry that science fiction is already obsolete—when Man dips one chilled foot in tidal pools beside the shallows of the ocean. Disregard such cynics: the deeps are ours. And if men sail coracles on inland lakes we’ll dream of trans-Atlantic liners.

Some deserters more justifiably say, “No guts, no freshness, and we’ve read it all before.” Well, the blame must be shared and swallowed, in a ratio of one tiny sour pill per jaded reader to several acid-bloated bellyfuls per lazy author.

Writers, rub your eyes and learn again to *see*. Who among you has adequately portrayed the emotions of the first man on the moon? And the next description published may surpass in puerility that of the lowliest hack, being headline-quotes from a propaganda-steeped Press Conference :— “Waaaaal, er, ya know—made me feel proud—and kinda humble, in a way, sort of—er, doooooin’ this swell thing for Democracy.” Or, as Radio Moscow said, quoting an alleged scientist, “Gherman Titov’s magnificent flight through Space shows what Soviet Man, with Communist Education, can Achieve.” Alas, filthy fingerprints begrime our dreams, and perhaps some readers are retreating disillusioned.

Others weep with nostalgia for stories of the Golden Thirties—yet, if John Carnell crammed *New Worlds* with work of similar average quality, they might well yowl in anguish. Contemporary science fiction is generally more competently written; but is also more complacent. Slickness has ousted erratic but often electrifying inspiration. And colour has faded from the picture.

The old metal walls and skeletal girders of the one-time cities were now bright red. The sea bottoms and endless acres of devastation were crawling with rust, flaking and destroying . . . At sunset, when the desert was a sea of ochre fire, the lone spaceship bearing husband and wife went swiftly out towards the frigid stars, turned in a vast arc, and headed for the distant orb of the third world . . . After a deep and sullen explosion there was nothing left but a drooping copper rod, embedded at a slant in the ice . . .

Thirteen years ago such writing boosted my imagination into orbit, when, as ‘Vargo Statten,’ the late John Russell Fearn taught me science fiction themes and terminology. Many wooden characters, often ludicrous ‘science’ and occasional self-contradictions didn’t entirely spoil the appeal of wild concepts described with occasional flickers of power or poetry. Mature analysis demolishes much of *The Avenging Martian*, from which I quoted, and once my Great Favourite; yet some of its magic lingers. Why? Because it had huge scope, vivid scenery, unforgettable characters, and a wealth of wonder!

Later the Great Favourite title fell to Deegan’s *Old Growler*, which retained the imaginative breadth and impact of Fearn

The Loafer series of stories is beginning to build into a fascinating picture of colonial world development against an alien environment and author Joseph Green once again, in this complete story, projects yet another new turn of events for the humans involved.

The-Old-Man-In-The-Mountain

by JOSEPH GREEN

o n e

Micka felt the strong, comforting hand of her mother on her shoulder, gently urging her forward, felt the tall, reassuring presence of her cousin Timmy at her side, but still she hesitated. She had seldom been inside the odd buildings the smooth-faced Earthpeople kept putting up in such large numbers, and they frightened her. Her delicate features, half-hidden behind their covering of fine brown hair, showed the depths of her fear.

The small girl turned suddenly and looked up at her mother. "I do not want to go to the Hairless Ones' school!"

Tharee knelt swiftly opening the *wirtleaf* cloak that was her only garment and gathering her daughter to her hairy breast. "You must, little one. Your cousin Timmy, and your uncle the head councillor, are depending on you and the other children."

Micka, torn between the duty she owed her people and the pressing fear of the oddly squarish building with its harsh straight lines, so unlike the rounded shape of her beautiful *waquil* pod home, started to cry. Timmy knelt by her side, his lean brown face compassionate. Her mother patted her shoulder tenderly, and when the tears came she gently wiped them away with a calloused hand. When she saw that the child would not be comforted, Tharee closed her eyes and projected :

Warmth-Comfort-Peace . . . Play-Happiness-Love . . . the warm flowing tide came rushing into the young mind like an avalanche, burying and hiding the fear, the sense of strangeness. The sturdy tower of her mother's strength was there, irrevocable, as solid and enduring as the world beneath her feet. The tears ceased, and for a moment more Micka basked in that warm golden glow. It was abruptly withdrawn, and Tharee raised her dark head, then rose lithely to her feet.

"I am always there, little daughter. You have only to call loudly enough and I will hear."

Timmy was smiling at her encouragingly. The little girl nodded, subdued, and turned back toward the schoolhouse. The ugly children of the Hairless Ones would be inside the ugly building. She would feel their dislike, the peeping, prying minds, but her mother was always there, only a thought away. She would endure.

A boy of about seven came out of nowhere and rushed past them, stopped as abruptly as he had appeared and waited as they walked past. His bright, brown eyes never left Micka's face. After they had passed him he broke into a hard run and beat them to the door of the small schoolhouse.

The three Loafers were among the first to arrive, but the two teachers were already there. The younger one, Marge Anders, a tall, stout, rather pretty blonde, had arrived on Refuge as a small chi'd with the first wave of colonists twenty years ago, and during the years when relations between the Earth colonists and the native Loafers had been cordial she had played with the Loafer children frequently. Miss Kaymar, a quiet, colourless woman who was desperately trying to snare a husband before the remainder of her fading looks yielded to middle-age, was the other teacher.

Marge stepped forward, smiling, to welcome Micka and speak to Tharee and Timmy. Before she could say a word the

door opened violently inward and a heavy, scowling farmer, holding a small tow-headed boy by the hand, marched purposefully into the large room. It seemed to shrink with his presence and become suddenly small and narrow.

His voice was loud and harsh, and he made no attempt to keep it down. "I heard those stinkin' Loafers were going to try to put some of their unclothed brats in our school this year. Well, I'm here to tell you I won't stand for it! I came down with my boy this time to see for myself, and I have. Either that hairy thing goes or I don't let my son start."

Timmy, who understood English quite well, turned and stared the burly man in the face. His rangy form stiffened and he stood a little taller, as befitted the son of the head councillor. He started for the farmer, but Marge moved swiftly forward and stepped between them.

"Mr. Issakson, you know very well it's against the law to keep children out of school until they're eighteen. And you also know Central Government passed a law this summer permitting full and equal education for any Loafers who wished to attend our school. There will be three Loafer children besides Micka in our beginning grade this year, and I'm afraid there's nothing whatever you can do about it. Now please be sensible and let Jay come to school."

"And if I don't? asked Issakson, his voice shaking the walls.

Marge's face turned white before the obvious challenge, and her stance stiffened. She folded her strong arms across her heavy breasts, took a deep breath and said firmly, "The law states that I must inform the District Administrator of any known delinquents. I'll do so. He in turn will file a request with the Security Section, and one of them will be out to see you. If you still refuse to let Jay come to school, charges will be filed against you and you will be arrested."

"And then I'll be brought before a jury and tried, won't I? And that jury will be made of all my friends and neighbours, won't it? And do you think they're going to fine me, or put me on government labour, when they feel just like I do? No, Miss Smarty, I don't have anything to worry about. But you do." He thrust his heavy head forward, until their faces were only inches apart. "I'm starting a petition today to have you sacked! We don't need your type in this school, Earth education or no!"

Issakson turned and stomped out of the room, dragging Jay behind him. As they reached the door little Jay glanced back at them and made an ugly face.

Marge stared after them, her plump face a mixture of anger and despair. Issakson was not making idle threats. It might well be that if he could get enough signatures—and the way hot feelings were flaring all over the country he probably could—he might have her dismissed. Not that the job mattered so much to her, but she was the only teacher in the area who had been back to Earth and was familiar with the new technique of automatic memory retention that was scoring such gains on the basic problem of giving the child the tools with which to learn. If she were dismissed, this whole integration experiment might end in failure, and they would never know the true mental capabilities of the primitive Loafers.

“What’s wrong with old man Issakson?” asked a cheerful voice, and Carey Sheldon’s broad young shoulders filled the doorway. Micka, recognising a friend, ran to him with a squeal of pleasure and Carey picked up the small form and walked to the little group.

“I expect I can answer my own question,” continued Carey, smiling. “The old boy was a little upset to find Micka here.”

“That’s putting it very mildly,” said Marge grimly. She was four years older than Carey Sheldon’s twenty. Carey had been the first human child born on Refuge soil, though there had been many thousands since. The population of the bustling agricultural world had been growing slowly but steadily with the twice-yearly shiploads of colonists, and providing schools and other services of government for the never-ending progression was a constant struggle. Now that Doreen, Carey’s younger sister, had discovered a method of transmitting people safely in the matter transmitters, over two-hundred and fifty each day were walking out of each of the ten transmitters on the planet of Refuge. Fortunately for the educational system the number of children was comparatively small. Children lacked the capacity for intense concentration which was necessary for safe transmission. On the rare occasions when the members of a Called One’s family chose to accompany him, the younger children were sent by spaceship, keeping their movement orderly and slow.

“We knew that a few hotheads were going to oppose educating the Loafer children with our own, but we were hoping the more sensible people would see it our way,” said Carey.

"They'd better," said Marge, with a snap to her voice. She stared at him, narrow-eyed. "Is it true you took the Controller initiation rites with the young Loafer adults two years ago?"

"Yes, it's true. I'm not really very good at it, but I can Control."

"You're going to need your abilities to control these angry citizens," said Marge with a wry grin.

Micka had lost interest in the conversation. She wandered over to the row of small seats, each with its glass-topped tri-di screen turned up at a forty-five degree angle in front of it and sat down. There were no chairs in her home in the *waquil* pod, but she had seen the Hairless Ones use them.

Miss Kaymar, armed with a pad and pencil, appeared and asked her name.

The large room, which would seat over fifty children, was slowly filling. Some of the children looked sharply at Micka and some ignored her. She sat quietly in her seat, except when three more adult Loafers came in leading their children and were duly registered. She motioned one of the boys to take the seat behind her.

Marge let the children talk until she was certain there would be no more latecomers, then rapped for order. When the children were quiet, she took the roll Miss Kaymar had made and smoothly and quickly made changes in the seating. When all the little bodies had transferred as directed, the four Loafer children were surrounded on all sides by Earthchildren. And yet the big room was only a little over half-full. Most of the people who felt as Issakson did had not bothered to bring their children in at all.

Marge started at the left and went down the line, asking each child to stand up and introduce himself. The large majority of people on Refuge lived on farms and most of the children knew only a few others in the room. Micka knew only the three other young Loafers. This small school was for children of twelve Eryears or younger, and had only three classes, of which only the beginners class had two teachers. Once a child had automatic memory retention perfected he needed only a guiding hand through the rest of his scholastic life, and this was all that was taught to them during the first two years.

Miss Kaymar passed out the first loose leafs to each pupil and Marge inserted the first matching sheet into the projector in her desk and began to talk. School had begun.

two

He paced back and forth on the rough rock floor of his cave, singing an anthem of hate to the unyielding rock, his great bass voice reverberating in the large room like thunder echoing in the mountain passes, the sound rising to the roof and escaping into the cleft that led upward and opened as a wide gash in the top of the mountain the people thereabouts had named Old Baldy. A small fire burned in a natural pit in the stone floor, the smoke, diffusing as it rose in the cleft, emerging at last in a thin, wide stream that would not be visible a hundred yards away. An almost round rock, four feet in diameter, fitted neatly into the mouth of the only tunnel that led into this sheltered spot. He had lived in this cave for almost twenty years and never been attacked, but each night he exerted his great strength and rolled the rock into the tunnel.

His name was Brian Jacobs, and he stood six-feet four and weighed two-hundred and forty pounds. On a world where the average height was five and a half feet he was a giant. He had not fitted too well into the circumscribed routine of existence on crowded Earth, but nevertheless had not volunteered as a colonist. And when his number came up and he was called, shortly after his second period in Rehabilitation Hall, he had been certain of what he always secretly suspected. The Call was rigged. Earth Central saw to it that the dissatisfied, the maladjusted, received a Call. And he had been picked up and sent out into space, leaving behind all the comforts and conveniences of civilized life. He had been in the second group of colonists to arrive on Refuge.

He had not been so large, then, though he did have his full height. None of the tiny women on board the ship had wanted to marry him, and in the end he had remained a bachelor. It had not been long before he was in trouble again. This time, though, there was a place to run, and run he had. They had made one or two half-hearted trips into the mountains after him, but given up when he proved hard to find.

They called him The-Old-Man-In-The-Mountain now, and used his name to frighten little girls into obedience. His sentence of Involuntary Government Service was long dead, the Earth Central Statute of Limitations holding a man liable for the crime of fighting for only five years, but he had not chosen to return to civilization. In the wilderness, for the first

time in his life, he had found freedom from the heavy, oppressive sense of *people-people-people* all around him. He did not choose to return to it.

It was time to be going. He stopped his singing, and listened to the echoes dying around him. He rolled the great door rock to one side with a single tug, then paused to look back into the cave. The room was spotlessly clean, as always, the bed, covered with materials stolen off colonists' clotheslines, made up and neat. The dried fruits and berries which, along with many succulent nuts and tubers, were his only food, hung from the ceiling on long strings. He had not eaten meat in twenty years, nor desired to now. The animals who laired in the nearby forest knew and did not fear him.

The other furnishings and comforts he had accumulated in twenty years of petty thievery were all in order. The fire would burn for at least twelve hours, and there was ample dried wood nearby.

He pulled the rock back into place and walked, bent almost double, through the low tunnel to the steep west slope of Old Ba'dy. He went down the barren face at a fast walk, and once within the heavy forest that began at the edge of the timberline a short way down the mountain he began to trot. By the time he was on comparatively level ground he was running, and gloried in the strength that would have let him run all day if necessary.

Two hours later he crouched in the heavy brush bordering the path from Loafertown to Refuge, feeling again the presence of the thousands of people in the little Earth town, and the hundreds of farms on all sides of him. It was faint, diluted by distance, but very real and apparent. Even in his cave he could, by concentration, detect their presence, but he did not often choose to concentrate. As a small child on crowded Earth, lost in the maze of grey skyscrapers that covered the habitable southern hemisphere on almost all available land, he had first become aware that he was different. The feeling of separateness had grown stronger as he grew older, as did his awareness of the people around him. At fifteen, when the strains of puberty racked his already large body, his sense of awareness had sharpened, becoming almost painful in its intensity, and he had performed the first of the series of anti-social acts which led to his eventual isolation in a cave in the mountains. He attacked a grown man, and with his awkward young fists he beat him into insensibility.

He had tried to explain to the security men that the urge to fight had exploded inside him like a small bomb, causing an almost complete loss of self-control, but it had done no good. The man had been a suitor of his divorced mother and he had seemed to personify all that was small and petty and mean in a small mean world. He had made the mistake of mocking young Brian because of his size, and deep frustration found an outlet in uncontrolled violence. His mother had married the man while he was serving his year in Rehabilitation Hall, and he had refused to return to their home when he emerged. This almost put him back for another term, but they finally placed him with his father, where he managed tolerably well for a year before starting another fight.

This time he was closeted with the psychotherapists before starting his term, and treatment had continued for his two years in the Hall, but none of it had changed him. He still suffered from feelings he could neither define nor explain, and sometimes his only outlet for pressures that mounted steadily every day was the release he found with his fists. The psychotherapists, baffled, had at last given up on him, not believing his story of his ability to receive impressions of the people around him, nor his statement that he could always tell how people really felt toward him. And few people liked him.

They had tried every way in the books to prove him insane, but except for their inability to shake his belief in his illusions, he was as sensible as anyone else in a society not in itself too sane. He had tried seriously working with his curse, or gift, after that second time of confinement, but had barely started getting results when his number came up and he found himself on Refuge. The sense of being crowded was not so strong here and he might have calmed down and become a good citizen, but the habit of fighting had become settled, formed a definite need.

On a frontier planet no one had paid much attention to his first fight, or even his second, but the third gave him the reputation of a trouble-maker. When he had failed as a farmer after three years and been ordered into Involuntary Government Service he had refused to comply with the order, and left a security man bleeding and unconscious on the ground when he fled into the mountains. And strangely, it was in exile that he found what little happiness he had known in his tortured life.

The sound of childish voices fell like light rain through the woods and he was abruptly jerked back to the present. He crouched lower in the brush, muscles tensed, and enlarged his peephole to the path with one grizzled finger. Two small girls in *wirtl*leaf cloaks were walking toward him, discussing in the Loafer tongue the events of their first day in school, their fair young faces animated and lively.

Jacobs studied the two children with growing eagerness. He got along well with children, of any race. They had little guile, little of deceit about them. He could tolerate their company much better than that of their elders, and played with them often while a member of civilization. This, too, had aroused suspicions, but they were groundless. He would not have harmed or molested a child under any inducement. And he had grown too wise to try to explain to their parents that he could partially read children's minds.

During his twenty years of hermitage, Jacobs had come in close and frequent contact with the Loafers, and had come to recognise and respect the little-understood power they possessed. He had seen the mighty *grogroc*, a horned herbivore of great size and tremendous power, yield his surly will to their demands, seen the giant pelagic *whampus* females coming to the cold grey shores of the nearby sea to be milked like cows. He had seen, and partially understood, and tried mental projection himself, and after more years than he cared to remember he had made some small and faltering signs of progress. But it was slow, far too slow, and he would be older than his white hair and beard indicated before he mastered their ability without help.

He had gone to the Loafers in secret, gone to three separate tribes and begged the boon of knowledge from each, but they had rejected his plea, rejected it with the sad wise smiles that said there was no hope, and had not believed him when he tried to explain that he had already made some progress alone, And so he had resolved on this dangerous course, and once he had made up his mind there was no turning back.

Micka and Hasel, in typical Loafer fashion, were discussing their experiences and sharing them, though they had been very similar. Both agreed that the Hairless Ones' school was nothing like the one they attended every day at home, and was far more interesting, if very strange. "In the house of Carey Sheldon, where I have gone with my cousin Timmy, I have seen a box

like that into which we looked," Micka was confiding to Hasel. "It is called a tri-di set, and in its face pictures of people appeared and did those odd things the Hairless Ones do. It was not as much fun as a story by one of our teachers, though, for it had only sight and sound."

"There was no feeling?" asked Hasel in a tone of mild contempt. "How could you enjoy a story which you only saw and heard, rather than shared?"

Micka opened her mouth to reply, and there was a crashing in the brush, as if some large animal were charging toward them. The girls looked about for a place to hide, but there was none. Micka had just time to scream once, soundlessly, and then Jacobs was on them, his big hands fastening firmly in their long hair. He held both girls, looking down into the small frightened faces, for a long moment, then made his decision and released Hasel. She backed away, wide eyes intent on his red face, until she could turn and run, then flew for Loafertown and her father. He was a Controller, and he would deal with The-Old-Man-In-The-Mountain.

Jacobs slung the unresisting body of the girl over one massive shoulder and trotted down the path after her. After a few yards he reached an intersecting path that led toward the low mountains to the East. He stepped up the pace as he rounded the turn and ran lightly through the woods, hardly feeling the slight weight of the girl. He could cover fifty miles in a day's time without strain. He would be at home in his cave above the timberline by moonrise.

t h r e e

Nyyub, head councillor of the small native community the colonists called Loafertown, had called a council meeting, and there were three Hairless Ones there in addition to his own people. Two of them, Carey and Doreen Sheldon, were adopted members of the clan and Controllers, but the third, Sam Harper, was a stranger to Nyyub. His oldest son, Timmy, had insisted the big Earthman be allowed to attend. He had come in company with Brixta, a member of the council of the clan who lived at the head of the Sweetwater Valley, and a distant relative.

The council members sat on *wirt* mats spread on the floor of the large *waquil* house which was reserved for their use. Nyyub

opened the meeting in the formal Loafer manner by rising to his feet and giving, in English, a short speech of welcome to the visitors. When he sat down Timmy got to his feet and addressed the group.

"O my father, head councillor of Loafertown, friend Brixta of the Sweetwater Valley, of the clan-that-grows-its-own-homes has words for us. His people have fed the powder called borax, supplied by Carey Sheldon and his friends, to the sacred *breshwahr* trees, which they have guarded and protected to the-time-that-has-no-memory. He will give us the results of that feeding."

The slim, rangy young Loafer sat down again and the black-haired Brixta rose to his feet. He was a powerful man at the height of his strength, a hundred years old by Earth reckoning, and his luxuriantly thick coat of black hair gave him the look of an Earthly bear in the shadowed interior of the windowless house. Like all Loafers he had a remarkable ability to assimilate strange languages, and had acquired a working proficiency in English in less than two Eryears of association with Sam Harper and the other farmers in the upper Sweetwater.

He swept the seated men with a glance from sharp black eyes before he spoke. "The trees-that-live, within the past two changes of season, have thrived and grown in a manner such as we have not seen for generations beyond count. It is as if all had become young again, young and vigorous, even the ancient ones whose thoughts were so slow and heavy as to be almost not there, almost a not-living tree. Some of the sprouts have shot up in growth as much in a single season as formerly they grew in ten.

"One young tree, which our sister-Controller Doreen-of-the red-hair has adopted as a particular friend and given extra training and attention, has flowered and grown until it is the equal of many trees much older than itself. There has come into being a much stronger bond of friendship between Loafers and trees, and the Loafers of Sweetwater are at last reaping the harvest of many years of attention and care. The trees talk to us more often, and give freely of their knowledge as never before. Our foodplants grow and thrive, our larders are filled with fruit and grain, and this is accomplished with less time and work than before. We in turn have passed parts of our accumulated store of knowledge, and the new things we have learned which he can use, to our friend Sam Harper. He has

made his fields to grow as no other fields grow on Refuge, and Earthmen come from miles around to admire the size of his corn and the quantity of his peanuts. The other farms in the Sweetwater we have not aided, at the request of our wise young friend Carey, who feels three farms sitting side by side, one of which has received Loafer aid and two who have not, will be a strong way of showing the effects of applying our knowledge. The Earthmen have seen, and now they know."

He sat down and bowed his dark head. Carey Sheldon rose slowly to his feet, his wide shoulders and heavy chest looming large in the small room.

"I am abashed to raise my young voice in the presence of my elders," he began, a time-honoured ritual for young Controllers which Timmy had omitted in his speech. There were approving nods from the older council members present, and Carey went on, "My friend Brixta has mentioned my sister-of-the-red-hair who last year, with the help of the young *breshwahr* which she has befriended, solved a problem which has plagued Earthmen for many Refuge seasons. How to send a living creature through the space-that-has-no-time with no harm to the creature. Once she had proved she could do this a great trouble on the home planet of the Earthmen was resolved, and now the Earthmen and their families come through the transmitters at the rate of two-hundred-and-fifty each day, for each of the ten transmitters on Refuge. These people must be fed, housed, clothed; their children must go to school, their hands must be set to toil, that those coming behind may be fed and clothed and schooled.

"Still, there are great masses of my people left on the planet Earth, more people than is conceivable to those who have not seen their great metal homes towering into the sky, and there is little good soil on Earth in which to grow the crops to feed them. Therefore we people on Refuge, and many other planets like it, must grow great amounts of food and transmit it to Earth. The lessons Sam Harper is learning from Brixta and our friends in his clan, much of which comes from the *breshwahr* themselves, will aid our farmers greatly in producing more food from each acre of ground under cultivation. We in turn are supplying Brixta with all of that powder called borax which his people need to feed the *breshwahr*. To this time all have benefited, none has lost, from this exchange of information and help."

Carey sat down, and it was Sam Harper's turn to rise and face the small group. He was a big man by Earth standards, almost six feet tall, though not as heavy in the chest and shoulders as Carey. "I have learned much of growing things from my friend Brixta and his people," he began slowly, his deep voice filling the small closed room. "Much of what I now know can be used only on Refuge, on the plants that grow here, but a great deal can be used as easily on Earth, or in desert lands under far-away stars, or the rich forest on the worlds that neighbour ours here in the system of Antares. I am building two—tales-you-look-at—for my people, one for Refuge alone and another for all other worlds. What we have learned from the Loafers and the *breshwahr* will benefit all Hairless Ones."

Carey nodded in grave approval. Sam's books, especially the one dealing in farming on Refuge, were going to rock this world back on its heels. However, there was his farm, only now bringing in its second harvest, to back up what he said. He was producing more yield per acre, on all crops, than any person on Refuge, including Carey. He had welded a clever blend of *breshwahr* and Loafer knowledge to Earth's power-machine techniques, and was reaping the benefits of both intensive and extensive methods of cultivation.

There was a sudden and dramatic interruption of the council. The *wirtlleaf* curtain over the door in the giant *waquilpod* was thrown aside, and a Loafer woman entered. She was panting, as though she had run a long way, and her breast heaved with emotion. Like all Loafers in mild weather, she wore no clothes while in Loafertown.

Nyyub got to his feet in alarm. The woman was Tharee, his sister.

Tharee breathed deeply for a moment, composing herself, and then spoke rapidly in the Loafer tongue. "I heard my oldest child, Micka, call me. I do not know what has happened but she screamed in fear of some attacker, and I could receive no more. Now little Hasel comes down the path at a run, and ahead of her the fear moves like a heavy wind."

Carey jumped to his feet, alarmed. Had Issakson or some of his more violence-minded friends abducted little Micka? If so, it showed even less good sense than he would have expected. Central Government would crack down hard and

fast, and there would be some new involuntary government workers in the town very shortly.

They had only a moment to wait. Little Hasel, like all her people was a minor athlete. She came flying into the central compound on winged heels and caught the powerful impulse Tharee was projecting to come to her. The child hesitated a moment, searching with both perception and eyes for her father, then realised he was not available and came to Tharee.

Tharee scooped her up and comforted her, while she sent a ringing mental call for the girl's mother. Hasel calmed herself and regained her breath at the same time, and then swiftly babbled out her story. Micka had been kidnapped by The-Old-Man-In-The-Mountain.

Carey swiftly interpreted for Sam Harper, and explained how Brian Jacobs had come to be a hermit. His history of trouble-making was well known in Refuge, and there were dark, suspicious memories of his habit of playing with children. He was sometimes seen by hunting parties in the mountains. This was the first time he had been guilty of a major crime since leaving Refuge, and C.G. had made only half-hearted efforts to bring him back to resume his government service.

Carey glanced out over the ocean, hesitating. Purple Antares was angling hard toward its choppy surface. Finding Jacobs after dark was a virtually impossible task, even with the perceptive powers of the Loafers. Also, Jacobs had to be surprised and taken. There must be no chance to harm Micka in the time between attack and submission.

"Let's work it this way," Carey said aloud to Harper. "I know the mountain where he lives. Let's get back to my house, radio Varrie English for a flitter and try to beat Jacobs home. If we can find his cave and surprise him as he comes in we should be able to get Micka away from him without any trouble."

"I will go too, Car-ree," said Tharee in a firm voice. "You will need me to help you find Micka if you do not find the cave."

"And I will accompany my father's sister," said Timmy quietly.

"Then that should be enough. Three men should be able to handle Jacobs, big though he may be."

Carey had ridden a horse from the Sheldon farm to Loafer-town, and he mounted and rode the two miles at a gallop while the others walked. By the time they arrived at the big, comfortable farmhouse he had explained the situation to Varinov English, the head of C.G. Security, and the lone Security flitter was on its way.

There was a brief, hot argument with Doreen, Carey's sister, who would be eighteen Eryears old next month and an adult. Timmy finally led her outside, and the decision that she would stay home was not reached until she was sobbing softly, in angry frustration, against his hairy chest. He kissed her tenderly and brought her inside, still dabbing at her eyes, as the flitter landed.

The sun was setting as they climbed inside the small grey machine. Dane Phillips, the pilot, a farmer's son pressed into involuntary government service for fighting, sent the silent craft winging aloft.

"Which mountain we heading for, Carey?" asked Dane.

"Old Baldy is the one where most people have reported sighting Jacobs," replied Carey. "Varrie English thinks he has a cave somewhere just above the timberline on the West face. Let's hover there and see if we can find anything. We should have at least an hour before he can get to the edge of the woods and spot us."

Dane grunted noncommittally and changed course slightly. Flying at night on Refuge was a matter of seat-of-the-pants navigation, since the only available signal was the artificial 'on course North' beamed by C.G. in Refuge. Distances were a matter of the pilot's judgment.

They saw old Baldy even in the dim light, a low, round-topped mound, to their right and a little North. It was not as high as most of its neighbours and the timberline reached almost to its naked crest. Dane held the flitter parallel to the Whitecap range and headed directly for Old Baldy. It was a clear night and the myriad neighbours of Antares cast a soft, restful glow over the world of Refuge, dimly outlining the dark thick temperate forests, the high plateau of the open grass range, and the worn old mountains rearing their craggy heads between them.

Carey was watching the ground below intently. He nudged Timmy and gestured as they passed the steep scarp where, two years back, he had spent eight days lying hidden in a cave near

its base, during his Controller's initiation rites. He had gone for eight days without the taste of food and with only snow for water, and in the end he had mastered the subtle art of mental projection of emotions and simulated senses which was Controlling. Every young Loafer went through the experience before becoming an adult, and those who failed the test were banished from the tribe.

So deeply ingrained was the desire to become Controllers that the young adult failing the test usually lay in his isolation hole and continued to try mental projection until he starved to death. If he came out and found a new home with another tribe he was not permitted to marry until he had undergone the rites again and passed. The few who lacked the courage to starve themselves to death, but failed to pass after repeated tests, were turned loose in the wilderness to live their lives alone and die childless. This form of selective breeding carried on now for generations beyond counting, had resulted in a very low failure rate.

Still, the Loafers seemed to have reached an impasse, for no one had advanced beyond the projection of senses-emotions to direct exchange of information. Carey, who had devoured every book and tape he could find in Earth's vast libraries on the ancient and long forgotten art of extra-sensory perception, was aware that the hairy humanoids had barely tapped the possible sources of power in the ability they possessed. Yet he, too, though he had experimented often and extensively since becoming a Controller, had been unable to progress beyond Timmy or any of their friends. They had no equivalent in their language for the words telekinesis, precognition or clairvoyance, though they did experience a dim, blurred form of clairvoyance when projecting themselves.

The flitter had reached Old Baldy while Carey was occupied with his thoughts, and Dane was bringing them in close to its craggy walls.

There was silence in the flitter for the next half-hour while the entire party searched in the poor light for the cave or opening that might be the hiding place of The-Old-Man-In-The-Mountain. They landed twice but in each case it was a wrong guess. When they were back in the air after the second landing Tharee said softly, "Carey, I . . . I feel Micka approaching."

Carey stared at his watch in amazement. Jacobs had covered the distance he had estimated would take an hour in a little over a half. The man must be either a giant in truth or an amazing athlete.

"Let's set down just over the crest," Carey said to Dane. "We'll have to wait until he's at home and asleep. After that run he shouldn't stay awake too long tonight!"

Dane lifted the little craft swiftly and guided it over the comparatively flat top of Old Baldy until they were well past the rising slope of the eastern side. He found a wide cleft, the bottom lost in impenetrable shadow, and brought the flitter gently to rest in its blackness.

Tharee leaned back in her chair and seemed to fall asleep. Her breathing was quiet and slow, her eyes closed. The fine down that covered the faces of Loafer women could not hide the queenly beauty of the firm, angular features, nor the loose *wirt* cloak the slender strength of her well-formed body. Like all primitives she had married young, and though Micka was seven summers old by Loafer reckoning her mother was only twenty-two, a little older than Carey. Refuge had a seasonal cycle that corresponded to eleven Earthly months, and the colonists still kept Ertime on their ages, though the habit was swiftly changing.

They waited quietly for a quarter of an hour, and then Tharee stirred and sat up. "The sense of motion has stopped," she said to Carey. "They are in a cave, and Micka knows I am near. She has not been harmed."

"Tharee, can you tell Micka to stay awake and tell us when the giant falls asleep?"

"I do not know, Carey. I will try." Tharee sat down again and concentrated for a full five minutes, then opened her eyes and said, "I am sorry, Car-ree. Micka understands sleep, and man, but I cannot make her realise what you want."

"Then let's just give him an hour and let you try to lead us to him," said Carey.

"That is good. Rest now, if you will, and I will call you," said Tharee, closing her eyes. Carey glanced over at Timmy and saw that he had his eyes closed also, though he seemed to be asleep, not projecting. Harper, his big hands clenched in his lap, was sitting silently by Dane, able to follow only a little of the conversation. Carey brought him up to date on the decision and then closed his eyes himself.

four

Micka lay on the Hairless One's bed where the white-haired giant had placed her and stared with dark accusing eyes at her captor. Jacobs was feeding himself, stuffing succulent *kitzl* berries and roasted corn into his mouth at a prodigious rate. He had placed some of the food by the big bed, but Micka had touched nothing. Her eyes were on the big rock in front of the entrance tunnel. It fitted fairly well, but there was a large crack on the right-hand side near the top where she might possibly squeeze through, at the expense of some skin.

Jacobs finished his rough meal and turned to stare at the small form of the Loafer girl. So tiny, so frail, and yet so strong in ways not outwardly visible, and with such a spirit. She would teach him what he still must learn.

He crossed the room to the bed and sat down by her, laying one massive arm casually across the thin shoulders, careful not to burden her with his weight. Micka turned a small face towards him, no sign of fear, terror or loathing on the childish features.

"We're going to get along, you and I, little one," rumbled Jacobs deep in his massive chest. His accent was crude and the pronunciation rough, but he spoke the Loafer tongue. "Yes, we're going to be great friends, and you're going to teach me how your people control animals, yes, you are. Because I learn fast, little girl, very fast, and when I have the power as strong as your people I'm going to show that stinking town of Refuge something, yes, you can bet on it! Now move over and make room for your friend Brian, yes, I'm your friend even if you don't think so now."

He stretched out on the massive bed beside her and gently pulled the girl into a prone position. She found her face pressed into his heavy beard, so similar and yet so unlike the coating of hair on her mother's firm warm body, and one great arm lay around her, holding her immovable against his chest.

"Yes, you and I are going to have lots of fun, and we're going to be great friends and learn to be Controllers," said Jacobs sleepily. "But I am tired now because I ran so far, and I must sleep. Don't worry, you're safe with me."

He dozed off almost immediately, and in minutes the sound of his heavy breathing filled the chamber. Micka waited patiently, held in place by the weight of the arm, and felt her-

self growing sleepy. She roused enough to project, with all her small strength, a sense of *need ! need ! need !* to her mother, and felt the answering surge of *love-sympathy-comfort-reassurance*. The response was so strong she knew her mother must be close, perhaps just outside the cave, and Micka forced herself back to full alertness. She squirmed gently in the big man's embrace and felt the arm tighten about her. She lay still again, afraid of waking him, and thought hard. After a few minutes she reached with small hands and placed them both against the barrel of his chest. She clenched the small knuckles into fists and began to press against his ribs, first gently and then with more insistence. He stirred, muttered in his sleep, then yielded to the nagging sense of pain and rolled over and away from her.

Micka slipped from the bed and crossed the room on silent feet. The rock was smooth but not more than four feet high and she scrambled up the side without trouble. The crack was narrower than it had appeared and her head would not enter it.

She paused in indecision, knowing her small strength could not move the rock. While she waited, crouching on its top, a second flood of *love-reassurance* reached her and she knew her mother was close. A moment later she heard the sound of light footfalls and breathless whispers. She recognised the voice of her Uncle Timmy even in the thin whisper, and then a dark form appeared in the tunnel on the other side of the rock and a hairy arm came creeping through the slit and seized her own. She recognised the touch of her mother and almost screamed aloud in her joy.

Tharee did not speak aloud to her daughter, but the clasp of her hand was comfort beyond belief. In the almost pitch-blackness of the entrance tunnel, relieved only by the red gleams that escaped around the rock from inside the cave, she leaned against the rock and pulled Carey's ear to her lips with her free hand. "What shall we do, Car-ree? To move the rock will awaken him."

Carey felt over the rock with his hands. It must have weighed many hundred pounds, and to move it at all required great strength.

"Wait here," he whispered to Tharee, and by touch communicated to Harper and Timmy to follow him. He led

them out of the cave and when they straightened up outside he asked for suggestions.

They talked in low voices for a moment, then returned to Tharee with the best plan they could devise. Timmy took her place against the rock and whispered hurriedly to Micka, who squeezed his hand in acknowledgement that she understood and then eased herself down to the floor of the cave. Timmy had said to hide, and there was an obvious place where the giant would not look for her. She returned to the bed and crawled quietly under it.

Jacobs did not stir. In the tunnel Carey and Sam Harper waited, their breathing loud in their own ears, until they judged Micka had had time to secrete herself. Then each of the big men grasped the rock, braced themselves and heaved mightily. It yielded before their combined strength and rolled heavily away from the door, with a grinding rumble that would have awakened a hibernating bear. Jacobs came springing off the bed, his tousled beard swinging wildly in the gloom and met Timmy, who had sprang past his companions the instant the boulder moved, with a sweeping blow to the head that flung the young Loafer to the wall and curled him into an unconscious heap at its base. Then both Carey and Harper were on him, big fists swinging, and he took some hard blows to the face and stomach before he managed to jump away from them and come to bay, cornered, in a small alcove, his back to a wall. His reprieve was short-lived. Harper followed him in swiftly, punching at his head, and Carey came in low and tried to tackle him about the knees.

Carey got his grip on the giant's legs, but Jacobs's shoulders were braced firmly against the rock wall and throwing him was like trying to tear up a tree by its roots. And then one of the great fists caught Harper flush in the face, sending the big colonist to his knees, dizzy, and the giant turned his attention to Carey. One huge hand seized him by the neck and plucked him from the floor like a pet kitten. Carey twisted desperately and managed to get his feet on the ground and land one solid blow to the massive chin hidden under the white beard, before a fist like a battering ram came from nowhere and hit him in the stomach. He doubled over, suddenly sick, and was only saved from a blow that would have broken his neck by Harper returning to the attack.

The giant was bellowing now at the top of his lungs, a mad senseless cacaphony of sound that echoed and re-echoed in the large room. Jacobs seemed to have gone completely insane, become a berserk Viking with the strength of ten men, and he could not be hurt. He took Harper's fist in his stomach without apparent effect and felled the big colonist again with a clubbing blow to the side of the head that put him down and out.

Micka had crept to the edge of the bed and was watching the fight with eyes grown large with surprise and fright. Tharee crossed the room at a run and pulled her from under the bed, but the small girl refused to follow her mother back to the tunnel. She saw Jacobs reach with long arms and seize Carey by the shoulders, saw him lift the smaller man high above his head, saw the huge muscles tense in the great shoulders as he prepared to hurl Carey against the rock wall. She saw, and broke from her mother with a wordless cry and fled across the room to the struggling pair, one small hand upraised in protest.

"*Stop ! Oh stop !*" screamed Micka in the Loafer tongue, her small voice piercing like a thin flute-sound through the bass of the giant's mindless roaring. The muscled arms started the movement that would make Carey Sheldon a bloody, mangled mess against the rock wall, and *the small girl reached out, seized the great arms in a vise-like grip, freezing him where he stood, arms above his head, mouth open, roaring his hate and defiance.* Carey fell from the nerveless hands to the floor, twisting in midair to land on his hands and feet. The girl lost her control and the giant came alive again, and reached again for Carey. Micka opened her mind, letting the new senses that had suddenly appeared within her coalesce, develop, grow. *The air of the room seemed to come alive, to vibrate, to glow with a raw and terrible power, as though all the huge mountain had developed life and within this large room beat its throbbing heart !*

Micka faced the giant, tiny hand still upraised, and partially channelled and guided the new forces surging within her. Jacobs was lifted off the floor, hung suspended for a moment in midair, his roaring changing suddenly to a scream of terror and then he flew through the air for the short distance to the rock wall. There was a sickening crunch, the sound of the huge body falling to the floor, and a sudden and deathly silence.

Tharee reeled and fell to the floor, her mind so closely in tune with Micka's that she had caught some of the shock, like the backwash of a mighty wave causing a sucking undertow. She hovered for a moment between unconsciousness and waking and then the sense of uncontrolled power receded, grew dim, and she opened her eyes in time to see Micka running across the floor to Jacobs.

Tharee staggered to her feet and saw Micka take the great bearded head into her lap and start frantically rubbing her hands across the bloody forehead. Suddenly the power was there again, but this time better restrained, channelled, in care of small hands that were gaining a measure of control, and Tharee felt the lifeforce that was fleeing the giant's body pause, gather itself, hover dimly, like an impalpable presence in the cavern, and then return to the body and reanimate it. The barrel of a chest convulsed, the lips opened and gasped and a cough shook the bearded head. The big man rolled away from the girl, coughing uncontrollably, his hands going to his head and brushing the blood from his eyes. The coughing eased and he sat erect, holding his head in his hands.

Timmy had not moved since that first violent blow had knocked him down and Tharee, seeing that The-Old-Man-In-The-Mountain seemed to have all the fight knocked out of him for the moment, crossed the room to Timmy and examined him. There was an ugly knot on his head, and the skin had split and drenched his hair with blood, but his heartbeat was strong and he was beginning to mutter aloud. She glanced back at Carey and saw that he was on his knees beside Harper, feeling for broken bones. Harper stirred under the gentle ministrations and groaned aloud. Carey helped him to a sitting position and half-supported him while the big colonist recovered his wits.

Timmy opened his eyes, and the first person he looked for was Micka. The slim child sat quietly in the centre of the group, not having moved since Jacobs rolled away from her, her thin face serious and intent. To the two Loafers and Carey, she seemed a changed person, no longer a child, or at least a child suddenly endowed with strength and knowledge far beyond her years. There was an aura about her, a sense that was felt, not seen, visible only to someone with a Controller's sensitive mind.

Jacobs broke the restful impasse by staggering to his feet and lumbering toward the entrance, still holding his massive head

in his hands. Harper started to get to his feet, but Timmy motioned him down. "It doesn't matter. We can get him again when we want him."

The giant disappeared and they heard his heavy body brush the walls as he shuffled the length of the tunnel. He reached the outside and was gone.

"What happened?" Carey asked Tharee, glancing at Micka. "I was almost out, but I felt it when Micka . . . did whatever she did."

"I do not know, Car-ree. It was something new to me, something I have never known or felt. It was a power I did not know any of us possessed, one I would have never looked for in a child, yet I can tell now that it is in all of us, if we could draw it forth. Micka will never need to take the Initiation Rites. And I can feel, dimly, that there are other strengths there, besides the one that picked up The-Old-Man-In-The-Mountain and threw him against the wall."

"Micka, can you speak-to-me-without-sound?" asked Carey, and opened his mind to reception. And clear and distinct in his mind a childish voice asked, "*Why do you wish me to do this thing, friend Carey?*"

five

As Dane lifted the flitter in the air and turned it toward home Carey got out the light craft's first aid kit and began to doctor Harper's multitudinous cuts and bruises. Micka watched, wide-eyed, then turned to her mother and said, "The-Old-Man-In-The-Mountain is better now. I can feel that most of his pain is gone. And he is a Controller, though he does not know it. He has the power and it was awakened when I seized him and threw him against the wall. I have told him to come to our village and we will teach him what he must know. And the cloud that was about his mind is gone now."

Carey paused in his work and stared curiously at this amazing child, whom he had carried about on his shoulders only short months before. She spoke with a power and authority that could not be denied. Jacobs was indeed a cured man, his aberration gone, if this girl said so. And it was irony indeed that he had succeeded in what he had been trying to do when he kidnapped Micka, find the hidden spark that would awaken

his dormant telepathic powers. Though it had happened in a way that not even the ill-balanced mind of the giant would have deliberately chosen !

"Of course we will teach him, since his mind is his own again," said Timmy, placing one hand on his niece's small shoulder. He smiled into her upturned face. "But you have problems of your own, little one. The night is almost past, and you must attend the Hairless Ones' school tomorrow. Even a small one who has found her power early needs her rest."

"And there is the problem of the people who are pulling their children out of school," said Harper, joining the conversation. "Will Micka's new powers help to kill prejudice, Carey?"

Carey smiled briefly. "I doubt it, Sam. Nothing will eliminate prejudice but time and education. Still, the law says the children must go to school, and though it will take time they'll eventually come back. I'm more concerned with working with Micka to find what opened the gates and brought her in so early, and with such wonderful new abilities."

Micka, suddenly and overwhelmingly tired, had curled up in her mother's lap and laid her head on Tharee's hairy breast. With the incredible quickness of small children she was deeply and completely asleep. Carey smiled at the small face, and reached with one broad hand to stroke back the tousled hair from the fair forehead.

The final buzzer sounded and Marge Anders watched the children scramble for the door. Two weeks had passed since the chaos of opening day and much had happened. Issakson's petition to have her dismissed had received so few signatures he had not bothered to present it to the District Administrator. Jay Issakson had come back to school two days ago. Many people did not like the idea of integrating the Loafer children into the local schools, nor the further moves of integrating the Loafers into the social life which was bound to follow, but active opposition was scarce. No one cared to take a chance on being sent back to Earth. It looked now as if the hectic events of the opening day had been all smoke, with little real fire beneath. Next year would see all the young Loafers in school, and night schools were planned for the older children.

All four of the Loafer children were proving apt pupils, and what was perhaps even more important, were rapidly making friends of most of the Earthchildren. Only Micka continued

to seem a trifle aloof, as if she had little desire to mingle with the others.

Miss Kaymar had left early and she was alone in the deserted schoolroom. Moving rapidly, she gathered the children's papers together and fed them one at a time into the receiving slot of her desk, where the compact cybernetics unit added that day's scores to each child's short class history. Carey Sheldon had asked her to visit Loafertown with him tonight, and she had no intention of being late.

She finished her work, rode her old mare to the family farm three miles out of Refuge, ate, changed from the usual riding outfit to a powderblue dress with a full skirt that went well with her pink complexion and helped hide the several bulges in her figure and was ready by six-thirty. Carey was on time, and a few minutes later they were bouncing down the dirt road to Loafertown, eight miles away, in the Sheldon family buggy.

It was a very pleasant ride through a beautiful night, the stars twinkling softly in a sky unclouded by smoke or dust. She was almost sorry when Carey pulled the horse up short and jumped down to hitch him to a nearby tree. Around her, looming dimly in the faint starlight, were the huge *waquil* pods of Loafertown, and a fire burned brightly in the centre of the grove.

They linked arms and Carey led her to a seat by the fire, where most of Loafertown was gathered. She saw Doreen sitting across the fire, with Timmy at her side. They were holding hands and watching three boys acting out an ancient ritual in a cleared spot by the fire. A little to one side a giant of an Earthman, with a neatly trimmed white beard and flowing white hair, sat quietly watching the performance. That would be Brian Jacobs, who had come down out of the mountain at last.

The small play reached its climax when one boy walked off on his hands, bringing a tremendous burst of laughter from the audience. It had meant nothing to Marge, but she saw Doreen laughing as heartily as the rest and Carey was chuckling slightly. She felt a touch of resentment because everyone understood the joke but herself.

Carey suddenly gripped her arm a little more tightly, and she turned toward him inquiringly. His eyes were bright in the firelight. "I just had a thought, Marge. Brian Jacobs is going to return to farming when he finishes training with the

Loafers and he is looking for a wife. He's only a little over forty, not nearly as old as he looks. It seems to me that he and Miss Kaymar . . ."

Marge, startled, considered the notion a moment, then smiled and patted Carey's hand. "That's a wonderful thought. I'll arrange an introduction tomorrow."

Tharee appeared and sat down on the other side of Marge. Carey nodded a greeting, then explained to Marge that Tharee would be her interpreter, or sensual projector, for the main act of the evening, which was what he had wanted her to see.

The audience quieted, in breathless anticipation. "We are going to see, and feel, a new dance called 'Dancing on Air,'" said Carey, low-voiced. "Open your mind to Tharee and I promise you an experience such as you've never known."

Marge felt a wild moment of rebellion. She wanted no one intruding into her mind. But then a soft, warm sense of presence was pressing gently against her resistance and she yielded and admitted Tharee. Carey's hand found and pressed her own and she realised he had sensed her resentment, and known when she acquiesced.

There was movement at the edge of the fire-lit area, a blurred feeling of movement in her own mind and then a small figure ran gracefully into the centre of the clear area and paused, arms above her head, in a typical dancer's pose. It was Micka, her slim child's body devoid of wirtlcloak or other covering. For a moment only she stood motionless, then swept into a graceful bowing glide that took her to the edge of the firelight and back again toward the centre in a series of dipping turns that were beauty in motion. *Marge felt the surge of taut muscles in strong young legs, felt the ground moving beneath her bare feet, felt a sense of lightness and freedom such as she had never experienced.* She was one with the dancer, enjoying the sensations in her own body, taking pleasure in the controlled, rhythmic movements of her hands and feet. A cool, detached part of her mind realised what was happening, but she ignored it and concentrated on the enchantment of the moment.

The dance built, grew, approaching a climax that seemed foreordained, inevitable and as natural as breathing. The ground grew light beneath her feet, airy, insubstantial, then she was off the dirt, dancing on air, her feet a foot from the ground, then two, then a dozen. She felt the heat from the

fire, a taste of smoke, the lightness of the heated air rising about her and dissipating into the night and knew she could join it if she wished, fly to the farthest and highest corners of the sky, dance with the moonbeams as they entered the atmosphere, cavort with abandoned joy among the scudding clouds in the upper winds, leaving all that was earthy and crass far below her flying feet.

Then she spun completely around the fire, still many feet above the ground and came gracefully downward again until she touched earth, paused, let the sensation of gravity overtake her again, bowed, and Marge Anders was sitting in the audience watching a small hairy child running across the firelit ground toward the protective darkness.

She felt Carey's hand holding her own, felt the quiet presence of Tharee by her side, felt her own plump, strong body again, in all its weight and mass. She watched the tiny form of the Loafer child disappear into shadows, and waited for her heart to break.

Joseph Green

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by J. G. BALLARD

After his trial they gave Constantin a villa, an allowance and an executioner. The villa was small and high-walled, and had obviously been used for the purpose before. The allowance was adequate to Constantin's needs—he was never permitted to go out and his meals were prepared for him by a police orderly. The executioner was his own. Most of the time they sat on the enclosed veranda overlooking the narrow stone garden, playing chess with a set of large well-worn pieces.

The executioner's name was Malek. Officially he was Constantin's supervisor, and responsible for maintaining the villa's tenuous contact with the outside world, now hidden from sight beyond the steep walls, and for taking the brief telephone call that came promptly at nine o'clock every morning. However, his real role was no secret between them. A powerful, doughy-faced man with an anonymous expression, Malek at first intensely irritated Constantin, who had been used to dealing with more subtle sets of responses. Malek impassively followed him around the villa, never interfering—unless Constantin tried to bribe the orderly for a prohibited newspaper, when Malek merely gestured with a slight turn of one of his large hands, face registering no disapproval, but cutting off the attempt as irrevocably as a bulkhead—nor making any suggestions as to how Constantin should spend his time. Like a large bear, he sat motionlessly in the lounge in one of the faded armchairs, watching Constantin.

After a week Constantin tired of reading the old novels in the bottom shelf of the bookcase—somewhere among the grey well-thumbed pages he had hoped to find a message from one of his predecessors—and invited Malek to play chess. The set of chipped mahogany pieces reposed on one of the empty shelves of the bookcase, the only item of decoration or recreational equipment in the villa. Apart from the books and the chess set the small six-roomed house was completely devoid of ornament. There were no curtains or picture rails, bedside tables or standard lamps, and the only electrical fittings were the lights recessed behind thick opaque bowls into the ceilings. Obviously the chess set and the row of novels had been provided deliberately, each representing one of the alternative pastimes available to the temporary tenants of the villa. Men of a phlegmatic or philosophical temperament stoically resigned to the inevitability of their fate, would choose to read the novels, sinking backwards into a self-anaesthetised trance as they waded through the turgid prose of those nineteenth century romances.

On the other hand, men of a more volatile and extrovert disposition would obviously choose the chess, unable to resist the opportunity to exercise their Machiavellian talents for positional manoeuvre to the last. The games of chess would help to maintain their unconscious optimism and, more subtly, sublimate or divert any attempts at escape.

When Constantin suggested that they play chess Malek promptly agreed, and so they spent the next long month as the late summer turned to autumn. Constantin was glad he had chosen chess ; the game brought him into immediate personal involvement with Malek, and like all condemned men he had soon developed a powerful emotional transference on to what effectively was the only person left in his life.

At present it was neither negative nor positive ; but a relationship of acute dependence—already Malek's notional personality was becoming overlaid by the associations of all the anonymous but nonetheless potent figures of authority whom Constantin could remember since his earliest childhood : his own father, the priest at the seminary he had seen hanged after the revolution, the first senior commissars, the party secretaries at the ministry of foreign affairs and, ultimately, the members of the central committee themselves. Here, where the anonymous faces had crystallised into those of closely observed

colleagues and rivals, the process seemed to come full circle, so that he himself was identified with those shadowy personas who had authorised his death and were now represented by Malek.

Constantin had also, of course, become dominated by another obsession, the need to know : *when* ? In the weeks after the trial and sentence he had remained in a curiously euphoric state, too stunned to realise that the dimension of time still existed for him, he had already died *a posteriori*. But gradually the will to live, and his old determination and ruthlessness, which had served him so well for thirty years, reasserted themselves, and he realised that a small hope still remained to him. How long exactly in terms of time he could only guess, but if he could master Malek his survival became a real possibility.

The question remained : When ?

Fortunately he could be completely frank with Malek. The first point he established immediately.

"Malek," he asked on the tenth move one morning, when he had completed his development and was relaxing for a moment. "Tell me, do you know—when ?"

Malek looked up from the board, his large almost bovine eyes gazing blandly at Constantin. "Yes, Mr. Constantin, I know when." His voice was deep and functional, as expressionless as a weighing machine's.

Constantin sat back reflectively. Outside the glass panes of the veranda the rain fell steadily on the solitary fir tree which had maintained a precarious purchase among the stones under the wall. A few miles to the south-west of the villa were the outskirts of the small port, one of the dismal so-called 'coastal resorts' where junior ministry men and party hacks were sent for their bi-annual holidays. The weather, however, seemed peculiarly inclement, the sun never shining through the morose clouds, and for a moment, before he checked himself, Constantin felt glad to be within the comparative warmth of the villa.

"Let me get this straight," he said to Malek. "You don't merely know in a general sense—for example, after receiving an instruction from so-and-so—but you know *specifically* when ?"

"Exactly." Malek moved his queen out of the game. His chess was sound but without flair or a personal style, suggesting

that he had improved merely by practice—most of his opponents, Constantin realised with sardonic amusement, would have been players of a high class.

"You know the *day* and the *hour* and the *minute*," Constantin pressed. Malek nodded slowly, most of his attention upon the game, and Constantin rested his smooth sharp chin in one hand, watching his opponent. "It could be within the next ten seconds, or again, it might not be for ten years?"

"As you say." Malek gestured at the board. "Your move."

Constantin waved this aside. "I know, but don't let's rush it. These games are played on many levels, Malek. People who talk about three-dimensional chess obviously know nothing about the present form." Occasionally he made these openings in the hope of loosening Malek's tongue, but conversation with him seemed to be impossible.

Abruptly he sat forward across the board, his eyes searching Malek's. "You alone know the date, Malek, and as you have said, it might not be for ten years—or twenty. Do you think you can keep such a secret to yourself for so long?"

Malek made no attempt to answer this, and waited for Constantin to resume play. Now and then his eyes inspected the corners of the veranda, or glanced at the stone garden outside. From the kitchen came the occasional sounds of the orderly's boots scraping the floor as he lounged by the telephone on the deal table.

As he scrutinised the board Constantin wondered how he could provoke any response whatever from Malek; the man had shown no reaction at the mention of ten years, although the period was ludicrously far ahead. In all probability their real game would be a short one. The indeterminate date of the execution, which imbued the procedure with such a bizarre flavour, was not intended to add an element of torture or suspense to the condemned's last days, but simply to obscure and confuse the very fact of his exit. If a definite date were known in advance there might be a last-minute rally of sympathy, an attempt to review the sentence and perhaps apportion the blame elsewhere, and the unconscious if not conscious sense of complicity in the condemned man's crimes might well provoke an agonised reappraisal and, after the execution of the sentence, a submerged sense of guilt upon which opportunists and intriguers could play to advantage.

By means of the present system, however, all these dangers and unpleasant side-effects were obviated, the accused was removed from his place in the hierarchy when the opposition to him was at its zenith and conveniently handed over to the judiciary, and thence to one of the courts of star chamber whose proceedings were always held in camera and whose verdicts were never announced.

As far as his former colleagues were concerned, he had disappeared into the endless corridor world of the bureaucratic purgatories, his case permanently on file but never irrevocably closed. Above all, the fact of his guilt was never established and confirmed. As Constantin was aware, he himself had been convicted upon a technicality in the margins of the main indictment against him, a mere procedural device, like a bad twist in the plot of a story, designed solely to bring the investigation to a close. Although he knew the real nature of his crime, Constantin had never been formally notified of his guilt; in fact the court had gone out of its way to avoid preferring any serious charges against him whatever.

This ironic inversion of the classical Kafkaesque situation, by which, instead of admitting his guilt to a non-existent crime, he was forced to connive in a farce maintaining his innocence of offences he knew full well he had committed, was preserved in his present situation at the execution villa.

The psychological basis was more obscure but in some way far more threatening, the executioner beckoning his victim towards him with a beguiling smile, reassuring him that all was forgiven. Here he played upon, not those unconscious feelings of anxiety and guilt, but that innate conviction of individual survival, that obsessive preoccupation with personal immortality which is merely a disguised form of the universal fear of the image of one's own death. It was this assurance that all was well, and the absence of any charges of guilt or responsibility, which had made so orderly the queues into the gas chambers.

At present the paradoxical face of this diabolical device was worn by Malek, his lumpy amorphous features and neutral but ambiguous attitude making him seem less a separate personality than the personification of the apparatus of the state. Perhaps the sardonic title of 'supervisor' was nearer the truth than had seemed at first sight, and that Malek's real role was simply to officiate, or at the most serve as moderator, at a trial by

ordeal in which Constantin was his own accused, prosecutor and judge.

However, he reflected as he examined the board, aware of Malek's bulky presence across the pieces, this would imply that they had completely misjudged his own personality, with its buoyancy and almost gallic verve and panache. He, of all people, would be the last to take his own life in an orgy of self-confessed guilt. Not for him the neurotic suicide so loved of the Slav. As long as there were a way out he would cheerfully shoulder any burden of guilt, tolerant of his own weaknesses, ready to shrug them off with a quip. This insouciance had always been his strongest ally.

His eyes searched the board, roving down the open files of the queens and bishops, as if the answer to the pressing enigma were to be found in these polished corridors.

When? His own estimate was two months. Almost certainly, (and he had no fear here that he was rationalising) it would not be within the next two or three days, nor even the next fortnight. Haste was always unseemly, quite apart from violating the whole purpose of the exercise. Two months would see him safely into limbo, and be sufficiently long for the suspense to break him down and reveal any secret allies, sufficiently brief to fit his particular crime.

Two months? Not as long as he might have wished. As he translated his queen's bishop into play Constantin began to map out his strategy for defeating Malek. The first task, obviously, was to discover when Malek was to carry out the execution, partly to give him peace of mind, but also to allow him to adjust the context of his escape. A physical leap to freedom over the wall would be pointless. Contacts had to be established, pressure brought to bear at various sensitive points in the hierarchy, paving the way for a reconsideration of his case. All this would take time.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sharp movement of Malek's left hand across the board, followed by a guttural grunt. Surprised by the speed and economy with which Malek had moved his piece, as much as by the fact that he himself was in check, Constantin sat forward and examined his position with more care. He glanced with grudging respect at Malek, who had sat back as impassively as ever, the knight he had deftly taken on the edge of the table in front of him. His eyes watched Constantin with their usual untroubled calm, like those

of an immensely patient governess, his great shoulders hidden within the bulky suiting. But for a moment, when he had leaned across the board, Constantin had seen the powerful extension and flexion of his shoulder musculature.

Don't look so smug, my dear Malek, Constantin said to himself with a wry smile. At least I know now that you are left-handed. Malek had taken the knight with one hand, hooking the piece between the thick knuckles of his ring and centre fingers, and then substituting his queen with a smart tap, a movement not easily performed in the centre of the crowded board. Useful though the confirmation was—Constantin had noticed Malek apparently trying to conceal his left-handedness during their meals and when opening and closing the windows—he found this sinistral aspect of Malek's personality curiously disturbing, an indication that there would be nothing predictable about his opponent, or the ensuing struggle of wits between them. Even Malek's apparent lack of sharp intelligence was belied by the astuteness of his last move.

Constantin was playing white, and had chosen the Queen's Gambit, assuming that the fluid situation invariably resulting from the opening would be to his advantage and allow him to get on with the more serious task of planning his escape. But Malek had avoided any possible errors, steadily consolidating his position, and had even managed to launch a counter-gambit, offering a knight-to-bishop exchange which would soon undermine Constantin's position if he accepted.

"A good move, Malek," he commented. "But perhaps a little risky in the long run." Declining the exchange, he lamely blocked the checking queen with an interposed pawn.

Malek stared stolidly at the board, his heavy policeman's face, with its almost square frame from one jaw angle to the other, betraying no sign of thought. His approach, Constantin reflected as he watched his opponent, would be that of the pragmatist, judging always by immediate capability rather than by any concealed intentions. As if confirming this diagnosis, Malek simply returned his queen to her former square, unwilling or unable to exploit the advantage he had gained and satisfied by the captured piece.

Bored by the lower key on to which the game had descended, and the prospect of similar games ahead, Constantin castled his king to safety. For some reason, obviously irrational, he

assumed that Malek would not kill him in the middle of a game, particularly if he, Malek, were winning. He recognised that this was an unconscious reason for wanting to play chess in the first place, and had no doubt motivated the many others who had also sat with Malek on the veranda, listening to the late summer rain. Suppressing a sudden pang of fear, Constantin examined Malek's powerful hands protruding from his cuffs like two joints of meat. If Malek wanted to, he could probably kill Constantin with his bare hands.

That raised a second question, almost as fascinating as the first.

"Malek, another point." Constantin sat back, searching in his pockets for imaginary cigarettes (none were allowed him). "Forgive my curiosity, but I am an interested party, as it were—" He flashed Malek his brightest smile, a characteristically incisive thrust modulated by ironic self-deprecation which had been so successful with his secretaries and at ministry receptions, but the assay at humour failed to move Malek. "Tell me, do you know . . . how—?" Searching for some euphemism, he repeated: "Do you know how you are going to . . .?" and then gave up the attempt, cursing Malek to himself for lacking the social grace to rescue him from his awkwardness.

Malek's chin rose slightly, a minimal nod. He showed no signs of being bored or irritated by Constantin's laboured catechism, or of having noticed his embarrassment.

"What is it, then?" Constantin pressed, recovering himself. "Pistol, pill or—" with a harsh laugh he pointed through the window—"do you set up a guillotine in the rain? I'd like to know."

Malek looked down at the chess-board, his features more glutinous and dough-like than ever. Flatly, he said: "It has been decided."

Constantin snorted. "What on earth does *that* mean?" he snapped belligerently. "Is it painless?"

For once Malek smiled, a thin smear of amusement hung fleetingly around his mouth. "Have you ever killed anything, Mr. Constantin?" he asked quietly. "Yourself, personally, I mean."

"Touche," Constantin granted. He laughed deliberately, trying to dispel the tension. "A perfect reply." To himself he said: I mustn't let curiosity get the upper hand, the man was laughing at me.

"Of course," he went on, "death is always painful. I merely wondered whether, in the legal sense of the term, it would be humane. But I can see that you are a professional, Malek, and the question answers itself. A great relief, believe me. There are so many sadists about, perverts and the like—" again he watched carefully to see if the implied sneer provoked Malek—"that one can't be too grateful for a clean curtain fall. It's good to know. I can devote these last days to putting my affairs in order and coming to terms with the world. If only I knew how long there was left I could make my preparations accordingly. One can't be forever saying one's last prayers. You see my point?"

Colourlessly, Malek said: "The Prosecutor-General advised you to make your final arrangements immediately after the trial."

"But what does that mean?" Constantin asked, pitching his voice a calculated octave higher. "I'm a human being, not a book-keeper's ledger that can be totted up and left to await the auditor's pleasure. I wonder if you realise, Malek, the courage this situation demands from me? It's easy for you to sit there—"

Abruptly Malek stood up, sending a shiver of terror through Constantin. With a glance at the sealed windows, he moved around the chess table towards the lounge. "We will postpone the game," he said. Nodding to Constantin, he went off towards the kitchen where the orderly was preparing lunch.

Constantin listened to his shoes squeaking faintly across the unpolished floor, then irritably cleared the pieces off the board and sat back with the black king in his hand. At least he had provoked Malek into leaving him. Thinking this over, he wondered whether to throw caution to the winds and begin to make life intolerable for Malek—it would be easy to pursue him around the villa, arguing hysterically and badgering him with neurotic questions. Sooner or later Malek would snap back, and might give away something of his intentions. Alternatively, Constantin could try to freeze him out, treating him with contempt as the hired killer he was, refusing to share a room or his meals with him and insisting on his rights as a former member of the central committee. The method might well be successful. Almost certainly Malek was telling the truth when he said he knew the exact day and minute of Constantin's execution. The order would have been given to him

and he would have no discretion to advance or delay the date to suit himself. Malek would be reluctant to report Constantin for difficult behaviour—the reflection on himself was too obvious and his present post was not one from which he could graciously retire—and in addition not even the Police-President would be able to vary the execution date now that it had been set without convening several meetings. There was then the danger of re-opening Constantin's case. He was not without his allies, or at least those who were prepared to use him for their own advantage.

But despite these considerations, the whole business of play-acting lacked appeal for Constantin. His approach was more serpentine. Besides, if he provoked Malek, uncertainties were introduced, of which there were already far too many.

He noticed the supervisor enter the lounge and sit down quietly in one of the grey armchairs, his face, half-hidden in the shadows, turned towards Constantin. He seemed indifferent to the normal pressures of boredom and fatigue (luckily for himself, Constantin reflected—an impatient man would have pulled the trigger on the morning of the second day), and content to sit about in the armchairs, watching Constantin as the grey rain fell outside and the damp leaves gathered against the walls. The difficulties of establishing a relationship with Malek—and some sort of relationship was essential before Constantin could begin to think of escape—seemed insuperable, only the games of chess offering an opportunity.

Placing the black king on his own king's square, Constantin called out : " Malek, I'm ready for another game, if you are."

Malek pushed himself out of the chair with his long arms, and then took his place across the board from Constantin. For a moment he scrutinised Constantin with a level glance, as if ascertaining that there would be no further outbursts of temper, and then began to set up the white pieces, apparently prepared to ignore the fact that Constantin had cleared the previous game before its completion.

He opened with a stolid Ruy Lopez, an over-analysed and uninteresting attack, but a dozen moves later, when they broke off for lunch, he had already forced Constantin to castle on the Queen's side and had established a powerful position in the centre.

As they took their lunch together at the card table behind the sofa in the lounge, Constantin reflected upon this curious element which had been introduced into his relationship with Malek. While trying to check any tendency to magnify an insignificant triviality into a major symbol, he realised that Malek's proficiency at chess, and his ability to produce powerful combinations out of pedestrian openings, was symptomatic of his concealed power over Constantin.

The drab villa in the thin autumn rain, the faded furniture and unimaginative food they were now mechanically consuming, the whole grey limbo with its slender telephone connection with the outside world were, like his chess, exact extensions of Malek's personality, yet permeated with secret passages and doors. The unexpected thrived in such an ambience. At any moment, as he shaved, the mirror might retract to reveal the flaming muzzle of a machine pistol, or the slightly bitter flavour of the soup they were drinking might be other than that of lentils.

These thoughts preoccupied him as the afternoon light began to fade in the east, the white rectangle of the garden wall illuminated against this dim backdrop like a huge tabula rasa. Excusing himself from the chess game, Constantin feigned a headache and retired to his room upstairs.

The door between his room and Malek's had been removed, and as he lay on the bed he was conscious of the supervisor sitting in his chair with his back to the window. Perhaps it was Malek's presence which prevented him from gaining any real rest, and when he rose several hours later and returned to the veranda he felt tired and possessed by a deepening sense of foreboding.

With an effort he rallied his spirits, and by concentrating his whole attention on the game was able to extract what appeared to be a drawn position. Although the game was adjourned without comment from either player, Malek seemed to concede by his manner that he had lost his advantage, lingering for a perceptible moment over the board when Constantin rose from the table.

The lesson of all this was not lost to Constantin the following day. He was fully aware that the games of chess were not only taxing his energies but providing Malek with a greater hold upon himself than he upon Malek. Although the pieces stood where they had left them the previous evening, Constantin did

not suggest that they resume play. Malek made no move towards the board, apparently indifferent to whether the game was finished or not. Most of the time he sat next to Constantin by the single radiator in the lounge, occasionally going off to confer with the orderly in the kitchen. As usual the telephone rang briefly each morning, but otherwise there were no callers or visitors to the villa. To all intents it remained suspended in a perfect vacuum.

It was this unvarying nature of their daily routines which Constantin found particularly depressing. Intermittently over the next few days, he played chess with Malek, invariably finding himself in a losing position, but the focus of his attention was elsewhere, upon the enigma cloaked by Malek's square expressionless face. Around him a thousand invisible clocks raced onwards towards their beckoning zeros, a soundless thunder like the drumming of apocalyptic hoof-irons.

His mood of foreboding had given way to one of mounting fear, all the more terrifying because, despite Malek's real role, it seemed completely sourceless. He found himself unable to concentrate for more than a few minutes upon any task, left his meals unfinished and fidgetted helplessly by the veranda window. The slightest movement by Malek would make his nerves thrill with anguish ; if the supervisor left his customary seat in the lounge to speak to the orderly Constantin would find himself almost paralysed by the tension, helplessly counting the seconds until Malek returned. Once, during one of their meals, Malek started to ask him for the salt and Constantin almost choked to death.

The ironic humour of this near-fatality reminded Constantin that almost half of his two-month sentence had elapsed. But his crude attempts to obtain a pencil from the orderly and later, failing this, to mark the letters in a page torn from one of the novels were intercepted by Malek, and he realised that short of defeating the two policemen in single-handed combat he had no means of escaping his ever more imminent fate.

Latterly he had noticed that Malek's movements and general activity around the villa seemed to have quickened. He still sat for long periods in the armchair, observing Constantin, but his formerly impassive presence was graced by gestures and inclinations of the head that seemed to reflect a heightened cerebral activity, as if he were preparing himself for some long-awaited denouement. Even the heavy musculature of his face seemed

to have relaxed and grown sleeker, his sharp mobile eyes, like those of an experienced senior inspector of police, roving constantly about the rooms.

Despite his efforts, however, Constantin was unable to galvanise himself into any defensive action. He could see clearly that Malek and himself had entered a new phase in their relationship, and that at any moment their outwardly formal and polite behaviour would degenerate into a gasping ugly violence, but he was nonetheless immobilised by his own state of terror. The days passed in a blur of uneaten meals and abandoned chess games, their very identity blotting out any sense of time or progression, the watching figure of Malek always before him.

Every morning, when he woke after two or three hours of sleep to find his consciousness still intact, a discovery almost painful in its relief and poignancy, he would be immediately aware of Malek standing in the next room, then waiting discreetly in the hallway as Constantin shaved in the bathroom (also without its door) following him downstairs to breakfast, his careful reflective tread like that of a hangman descending from his gallows.

After breakfast Constantin would challenge Malek to a game of chess, but after a few moves would begin to play wildly, throwing pieces forwards to be decimated by Malek. At times the supervisor would glance curiously at Constantin, as if wondering whether his charge had lost his reason, and then continued to play his careful exact game, invariably winning or drawing. Dimly Constantin perceived that by losing to Malek he had also surrendered to him psychologically, but the games had now become simply a means of passing the unending days.

Six weeks after they had first begun to play chess, Constantin more by luck than skill succeeded in an extravagant pawn gambit and forced Malek to sacrifice both his centre and any possibility of castling. Roused from his state of numb anxiety by this temporary victory, Constantin sat forward over the board, irritably waving away the orderly who announced from the door of the lounge that he would serve lunch.

"Tell him to wait, Malek. I mustn't lose my concentration at this point, I've very nearly won the game."

"Well . . ." Malek glanced at his watch, then over his shoulder at the orderly, who, however, had turned on his heel

and returned to the kitchen. He started to stand up. "It can wait. He's bringing the—"

"No !" Constantin snapped. "Just give me five minutes, Malek. Damn it, one adjourns on a move, not half-way through it."

"Very well." Malek hesitated, after a further glance at his watch. He climbed to his feet. "I will tell him."

Constantin concentrated on the board, ignoring the supervisor's retreating figure, the scent of victory clearing his mind. But thirty seconds later he sat up with a start, his heart almost seizing inside his chest.

Malek had gone upstairs! Constantin distinctly remembered him saying he would tell the orderly to delay lunch, but instead he had walked straight up to his bedroom. Not only was it extremely unusual for Constantin to be left unobserved when the orderly was otherwise occupied, but the latter had still not brought in their first luncheon course.

Steadying the table, Constantin stood up, his eyes searching the open doorways in front and behind him. Almost certainly the orderly's announcement of lunch was a signal, and Malek had found a convenient pretext for going upstairs to prepare his execution weapon.

Faced at last by the imminent nemesis he had so long dreaded, Constantin listened for the sounds of Malek's feet descending the staircase. A profound silence enclosed the villa, broken only by the fall of one of the chess pieces to the tiled floor. Outside the sun shone intermittently in the garden, illuminating the broken flagstones of the ornamental pathway and the bare fifteen-feet-high face of the walls. A few stunted weeds flowered among the rubble, their pale colours blanched by the sunlight, and Constantin was suddenly filled by an overwhelming need to escape into the open air for the few last moments before he died. The east wall, lit by the sun's rays, was marked by a faint series of horizontal grooves, the remnants perhaps of a fire escape ladder, and the slender possibility of using these as hand-holds made the enclosed garden, a perfect killing ground, preferable to the frantic claustrophobic nexus of the villa.

Above him, Malek's measured tread moved across the ceiling to the head of the staircase. He paused there and then began to descend the stairs, his steps chosen with a precise and careful rhythm.

Helplessly, Constantin searched the veranda for something that would serve as a weapon. The french windows on to the garden were locked, and a slotted pinion outside secured the left-hand member of the pair to the edge of the sill. If this were raised there was a chance that the windows could be forced outwards.

Scattering the chess pieces onto the floor with a sweep of his hand, Constantin seized the board and folded it together, then stepped over to the window and drove the heavy wooden box through the bottom pane. The report of the bursting glass echoed like a gun shot through the villa. Kneeling down, he pushed his hand through the aperture and tried to lift the pinion, jerking it up and down in its rusty socket. When it failed to clear the sill he forced his head through the broken window and began to heave against it helplessly with his thin shoulders, the fragments of broken glass falling on to his neck.

Behind him a chair was kicked back, and he felt two powerful hands seize his shoulders and pull him away from the window. He struck out hysterically with the chess box, and then was flung head-first to the tiled floor.

His convalescence from this episode was to last most of the following week. For the first three days he remained in bed, recovering his physical identity, waiting for the sprained muscles of his hands and shoulders to repair themselves. When he felt sufficiently strong to leave his bed he went down to the lounge and sat at one end of the sofa, his back to the windows and the thin autumn light.

Malek still remained in attendance, and the orderly prepared his meals as before. Neither of them made any comment upon Constantin's outburst of hysteria, or indeed betrayed any signs that it had taken place, but Constantin realised that he had crossed an important rubicon. His whole relationship with Malek had experienced a profound change. The fear of his own imminent death, and the tantalising mystery of its precise date which had so obsessed him, had been replaced by a calm acceptance that the judicial processes inaugurated by his trial would take their course and that Malek and the orderly were merely the local agents of this distant apparat. In a sense his sentence and present tenuous existence at the villa were a microcosm of life itself, with its inherent but unfearful uncertainties, its inevitable quietus to be made on a date never known in advance. Seeing his role at the villa in this light, Constantin

no longer felt afraid at the prospect of his own extinction, fully aware that a change in the political wind could win him a free pardon.

In addition, he realised that Malek, far from being his executioner, a purely formal role, was in fact an intermediary between himself and the hierarchy, and in an important sense a potential ally of Constantin's. As he reformed his defence against the indictment preferred against him at the trial—he knew he had been far too willing to accept the *fait accompli* of his own guilt—he calculated the various ways in which Malek would be able to assist him. There was no doubt in his mind that he had misjudged Malek. With his sharp intelligence and commanding presence, the supervisor was very far from being a hatchet-faced killer—this original impression had been the result of some cloudiness in Constantin's perceptions, an unfortunate myopia which had cost him two precious months in his task of arranging a re-trial.

Comfortably swathed in his dressing-gown, he sat at the card-table in the lounge (they had abandoned the veranda with the colder weather, and only a patch of brown paper over the window reminded him of that first circle of purgatory) concentrating on the game of chess. Malek sat opposite him, hands clasped on one knee, his thumbs occasionally circling as he pondered a move. Although no less reticent than he had ever been, his manner seemed to indicate that he understood and confirmed Constantin's reappraisal of the situation. He still followed Constantin around the villa, but his attentions were noticeably more perfunctory, as if he realised that Constantin would not try again to escape.

From the start, Constantin was completely frank with Malek.

"I am convinced, Malek, that the Prosecutor-General was mis-directed by the Justice Department, and that the whole basis of the trial was a false one. All but one of the indictments were never formally presented, so I had no opportunity to defend myself. You understand that, Malek? The selection of the capital penalty for one count was purely arbitrary."

Malek nodded, moving a piece. "So you have explained, Mr. Constantin. I am afraid I do not have a legalistic turn of mind."

"There's no need for you to," Constantin assured him. "The point is obvious. I hope it may be possible to appeal against the court's decision and ask for a re-trial." Constantin gestured with a piece. "I criticise myself for accepting the indictments so readily. In effect I made no attempt to defend myself. If only I had done so I am convinced I should have been found innocent."

Malek murmured non-committally, and gestured towards the board. Constantin resumed play. Most of the games he consistently lost to Malek, but this no longer troubled him and, if anything, only served to reinforce the bonds between them.

Constantin had decided not to ask the supervisor to inform the Justice Department of his request for a re-trial until he had convinced Malek that his case left substantial room for doubt. A premature application would meet with an automatic negative from Malek, whatever his private sympathies. Conversely, once Malek was firmly on his side he would be prepared to risk his reputation with his seniors, and indeed his championing of Constantin's cause would be convincing proof in itself of the latter's innocence.

As Constantin soon found from his one-sided discussions with Malek, arguing over the legal technicalities of the trial, with their infinitely subtle nuances and implications, was an unprofitable method of enlisting Malek's support, and he realised that he would have to do so by sheer impress of personality, by his manner, bearing and general conduct, and above all by his confidence of his innocence in the face of the penalty which might at any moment be imposed upon him. Curiously, this latter pose was not as difficult to maintain as might have been expected; Constantin already felt a surge of conviction in his eventual escape from the villa. Sooner or later Malek would recognise the authenticity of this inner confidence.

To begin with, however, the supervisor remained his usual phlegmatic self. Constantin talked away at him from morning to evening, every third word affirming the probability of his being found 'innocent,' but Malek merely nodded with a faint smile and continued to play his errorless chess.

"Malek, I don't want you to think that I challenge the competence of the court to try the charges against me, or that I hold it in disrespect," he said to the supervisor as they played

their usual morning board some two weeks after the incident on the veranda. "Far from it. But the court must make its decisions within the context of the evidence presented by the prosecutor. And even then, the greatest imponderable remains—the role of the accused. In my case I was, to all intents, not present at the trial, so my innocence is established by *force majeure*. Don't you agree, Malek?"

Malek's eyes searched the pieces on the board, his lips pursing thinly. "I'm afraid this is above my head, Mr. Constantin. Naturally I accept the authority of the court without question."

"But so do I, Malek. I've made that plain. The real question is simply whether the verdict was justified in the light of the new circumstances I am describing."

Malek shrugged, apparently more interested in the end-game before them. "I recommend you to accept the verdict, Mr. Constantin. For your peace of mind, you understand."

Constantin looked away with a gesture of impatience. "I don't agree, Malek. Besides, a great deal is at stake." He glanced up at the windows which were drumming in the cold autumn wind. The casements were slightly loose, and the air lanced around them. The villa was poorly heated, only the single radiator in the lounge warming the three rooms downstairs. Already Constantin dreaded the winter. His hands and feet were perpetually cold and he could find no means of warming them.

"Malek, is there any chance of obtaining another heater?" he asked. "It's none too warm in here. I have a feeling it's going to be a particularly cold winter."

Malek looked up from the board, his bland grey eyes regarding Constantin with a flicker of curiosity, as if this last remark were one of the few he had heard from Constantin's lips which contained any overtones whatever.

"It is cold," he agreed at last. "I will see if I can borrow a heater. This villa is closed for most of the year."

Constantin pestered him for news of the heater during the following week—partly because the success of his request would have symbolised Malek's first concession to him—but it failed to materialise. After one palpably lame excuse Malek merely ignored his further reminders. Outside, in the garden, the leaves whirled about the stones in a vortex of chilling air, and

overhead the low clouds raced seaward. The two men in the lounge hunched over their chess-board by the radiator, hands buried in their pockets between moves.

Perhaps it was this darkening weather which made Constantin impatient of Malek's slowness in seeing the point of his argument, and he made his first suggestions that Malek should transmit a formal request for a re-trial to his superiors at the Department of Justice.

"You speak to someone on the telephone every morning, Malek," he pointed out when Malek demurred. "There's no difficulty involved. If you're afraid of compromising yourself—though I would have thought that a small price to pay in view of what is at stake—the orderly can pass on a message."

"It's not feasible, Mr. Constantin." Malek seemed at last to be tiring of the subject. "I suggest that you—"

"Malek!" Constantin stood up and paced around the lounge. "Don't you realise that you must? You're literally my only means of contact, if you refuse I'm absolutely powerless, there's no hope of getting a reprieve!"

"The trial has already taken place, Mr. Constantin," Malek pointed out patiently.

"It was a mis-trial! Don't you understand, Malek, I accepted that I was guilty when in fact I was completely innocent!"

Malek looked up from the board, his eyebrows lifting. "Completely innocent, Mr. Constantin?"

Constantin snapped his fingers. "Well, virtually innocent. At least in terms of the indictment and trial."

"But that is merely a tactical difference, Mr. Constantin. The Department of Justice is concerned with absolutes."

"Quite right, Malek. I agree entirely." Constantin nodded approvingly at the supervisor and privately noted his quizzical expression, the first time Malek had displayed a taste for irony.

He was to notice this fresh leit-motiv recurringly during the next days; whenever he raised the subject of his request for a re-trial Malek would counter with one of his deceptively naive queries, trying to establish some minor tangential point, almost as if he were leading Constantin on to a fuller admission. At first Constantin assumed that the supervisor was fishing for information about other members of the hierarchy which he wished to use for his own purposes, but the few titbits he offered were ignored by Malek, and it dawned upon him that

Malek was genuinely interested in establishing the sincerity of Constantin's conviction of his own innocence.

He showed no signs, however, of being prepared to contact his superiors at the Department of Justice, and Constantin's impatience continued to mount. He now used their morning and afternoon chess sessions as an opportunity to hold forth at length on the subject of the shortcomings of the judicial system, using his own case as an illustration, and hammered away at the theme of his innocence, even hinting that Malek might find himself held responsible if by any mischance he was not granted a reprieve.

"The position I find myself in is really most extraordinary," he told Malek almost exactly two months after his arrival at the villa. "Everyone else is satisfied with the court's verdict, and yet I alone know that I am innocent. I feel very like someone who is about to be buried alive."

Malek managed a thin smile across the chess pieces. "Of course, Mr. Constantin, it is possible to convince oneself of anything, given a sufficient incentive."

"But Malek, I assure you," Constantin insisted, ignoring the board and concentrating his whole attention upon the supervisor, "this is no death-cell repentance. Believe me, I know. I have examined the entire case from a thousand perspectives, questioned every possible motive. There is no doubt in my mind. I may once have been prepared to accept the possibility of my guilt, but I realise now that I was entirely mistaken—experience encourages us to take too great a responsibility for ourselves, when we fall short of our ideals we become critical of ourselves and ready to assume that we are at fault. How dangerous that can be, Malek, I now know. Only the truly innocent man can really understand the meaning of guilt."

Constantin stopped and sat back, a slight weariness overtaking him in the cold room. Malek was nodding slowly, a thin and not altogether unsympathetic smile on his lips as if he understood everything Constantin had said. Then he moved a piece, and with a murmured 'excuse me' left his seat and went out of the room.

Drawing the lapels of the dressing gown around his chest, Constantin studied the board with a desultory eye. He noticed that Malek's move appeared to be the first bad one he had

made in all their games together, but he felt too tired to make the most of his opportunity. His brief speech to Malek, confirming all he believed, now left nothing more to be said. From now on whatever happened was up to Malek.

"Mr. Constantin."

He turned in his chair and, to his surprise, saw the supervisor standing in the doorway, wearing his long grey overcoat.

"Malek—?" For a moment Constantin felt his heart gallop, and then controlled himself. "Malek, you've agreed at last, you're going to take me to the Department?"

Malek shook his head, his eyes staring sombrely at Constantin. "Not exactly. I thought we might look at the garden, Mr. Constantin. A breath of fresh air, it will do you good."

"Of course, Malek, it's kind of you." Constantin rose a little unsteadily to his feet, and tightened the cord of his dressing gown. "Pardon my wild hopes." He tried to smile to Malek, but the supervisor stood impassively by the door, hands in his overcoat pockets, his eyes lowered fractionally from Constantin's face.

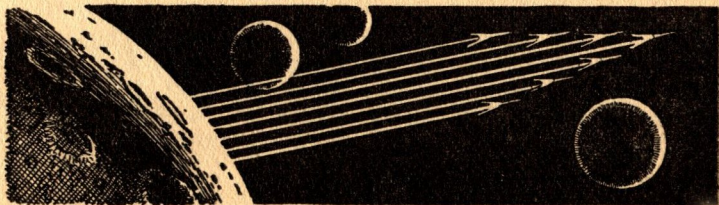
They went out on to the veranda towards the french windows. Outside the cold morning air whirled in frantic circles around the small stone yard, the leaves spiralling upwards into the dark sky. To Constantin there seemed little point in going out into the garden, but Malek stood behind him, one hand on the latch.

"Malek." Something made him turn and face the supervisor. "You do understand what I mean, when I say I am absolutely innocent. I *know* that."

"Of course, Mr. Constantin." The supervisor's face was relaxed and almost genial. "I understand. When you know you are innocent, then you are guilty."

His hand opened the veranda door on to the whirling leaves.

J. G. Ballard



*When one side has the Bomb and the other side
nothing, pacificism may not be so out of place after
all.*

OCCUPATION FORCE

by DAVID ROME

It was a warm morning with the breeze coming in from the sea, so they got off the slowbus a mile from the Area and strolled down the coast road toward the city below. Gallery was tall, but thinner than Johnson. Johnson was squat and tough, heavily muscled in blue shirt and slacks.

There were ships out to sea, blunt noses misted in spray, single sails billowing. On the clifftop ahead a couple of kids—eighteen years old, in bright matching jackets—were watching the ships through binoculars. The girl was bareheaded, golden hair blowing. The boy wore a cap on the back of his head and his blond hair was spiky, cut short.

“Hey !” Johnson said. “Look at the lovers !”

The boy and girl turned slowly to look at Johnson and Gallery. Then the boy put the binoculars into their case and closed the case. The two kids started to walk toward their bicycles.

“Hey, not so fast !” Johnson said.

The two kids looked at him again. They were still a dozen yards from Johnson and Gallery when Johnson got his stunner clear of his belt and fired once at the girl. She froze. She stayed on her feet, but she couldn’t move. The boy stopped in his tracks and his eyes widened now ; the cap fell off his head and lay, a patch of colour in the grass.

Johnson moved closer. When he was a yard from the bicycles he lashed out with one foot and crumpled the front wheel of the first one, then the other. Gallery closed in and stood watching.

"Why you out riding today?" Johnson said.

The boy couldn't say anything. He stared at Johnson. Johnson reached out with one hand and got the boy by the collar of his jacket. "You want me to tell you what you were watching? What every damned one of you offshoots is watching?" He swung the barrel of his stunner at the sky, pointing it like a finger. "The bomb that's up there! The bomb that will blow you to hell!"

Gallery looked at his watch. "Hurry it up, Vic," he said.

Johnson turned on the boy again. He said, "You hear that, kid? We've got to go." Then he levelled the stunner and fired twice. He turned away.

"Let 'em freeze for an hour," he grinned at Gallery. And Gallery nodded and smiled, and they left the two kids and the broken bicycles up there on the cliff and strolled on toward town.

Nobody ever got close to them. They went right through the centre of town, walking in the shade of the ancient stone buildings, and nobody got in their way. The women avoided them openly, bright dresses fluttering. The men did it sullenly, the fear hidden back of their eyes.

It didn't bother Gallery, but today it was getting to Johnson. A couple of times he switched his direction, making for groups on the opposite side of the road. But they broke up before he could get to them, and when he crossed the road again to get back to Gallery, a slowbus—pulling out into the traffic—tried to run him down.

Johnson activated his leapbelt and got clear. He shook a fist at the vanishing bus. He said to Gallery, "You see that? You ever see anything as futile as that?" He shook his head angrily. "Hell, they're like kids! Even when they try to kill us, they do it like kids."

"It gets them that way," Gallery said. They were walking together now, alone on the pavement. "One time I was manning a bomb vehicle over Jarta—a little world on the edge of the Sack. They'd broken away from us years before. And oh, they were sweet!"

Johnson shook his head bitterly. "The crazy thing is they like it that way! Blame the government, I say—back in the eighties. Hell, you could set up a colony anywhere. All the idealists on Earth got away—got these outplanet civilizations started. Now the government sticks slobbs like us here. And gives us the bomb to keep them in line."

They walked on in silence. Then Johnson said, "You ever see a bomb dropped?"

Gallery said, "No."

"I was damn lucky," Johnson said. "The time we had to drop was *back when*. The psychs didn't coddle us then—none of this nerve-complex crap. The eight of us lived in the carrier vehicle. The idealists under us got the complex. They tried to hit us with a solid fuel job—a kid's toy. We launched the bomb."

"Hell," Gallery said. "Don't talk like that." He looked up into the endless blue haze. "Jones would love to let that thing pop."

Johnson said, "Yeah. You wonder sometimes what kind of minds these psychs have got. The bomb is the ultimate weapon. It gives us a complex to live with it. So what do the psychs do? They put us on rotating shifts. Two men up there, the rest live down here. What the hell kind of complex do they think we get now?"

Gallery said bitterly, "We've bought a bunch! No anarchists here. Just a pack of damned puritans!"

They were out of town now. The Area was ahead.

There were children playing in the park around the launch site. They had a bright blue ball that matched the sky, and they were throwing it high and darting to catch it, squealing with laughter.

Johnson and Gallery went through them, and the children broke apart, and nobody threw the ball into the air all the time the two men were walking to the Area. When they reached the wire, Johnson said to the gate guard, "Kids! They need squashing."

The guard grinned and looked at Gallery. "Your buddy still sour?"

Gallery laughed out loud and said, "Oh, yeah. He's sour all right. He froze two kids on the headland today. That's how sour he is."

Johnson said, "It's their sweetness that gets under my skin."

"Yeah," the guard said. "They're sweet all right."

Johnson shook his head savagely, and he and Gallery went on through. The two-man transit vehicle was out on its pad, pointing a needle nose into the sky. Off to the east was the medical dome, and the two men turned for it now, walking slowly because it was early yet and they wouldn't be lifting off for a half-hour.

Outside the wire, the children were playing again, and their voices carried to Johnson. He turned once and watched the blue ball going up, coming down. The children were patches of brilliant colour, always moving. Johnson shook his head again. He caught up with Gallery, and the two of them ducked into the coolness of the dome.

They went down the entry tube and through into the scanchamber. They knew the routine. The stripped and sat down in a couple of snugchairs with magazines, and after a while the medic brought in their flight-suits and took away their street clothes. He didn't say anything.

Johnson and Gallery put down their magazines and started to get into their suits. When they were dressed they walked slowly up and down the room, getting the feel of their equipment again. Finally the door of the room dilated and a couple of psychs came in. The tallest psych was carrying a pistol-gripped searchray. He switched it on, and the invisible beam ran up and down Gallery and up and down Johnson.

When he flipped it off he said, "You're O.K." Then he said, "You hear about Phylox III? Couple of natives bribed a shiftman. He tried to get a time-bomb up to the carrier vehicle. Had it in his mouth when the searchray went over him."

"Yeah?" Gallery said. "How far'd he get?"

"About two paces. The thing went off early. Blew half the dome up."

Johnson was replacing his suit. "Couldn't happen here," he said. "They run a slowbus at you—that's a murderous attack."

Gallery grinned, remembering. The two psychs took the searchray away again and they were both grinning.

Johnson got his suit laced right, then he looked at the wall clock. "Fifteen minutes," he said. "Some fresh air, huh?"

Gallery said, "Fine." They went down the entry tube again and out into the sunlight. It was hot in their suits. There

were trees over by the wire and they walked in the shade of them, strolling toward the gate guard.

The blue ball was still going up into the air. But only a few of the children were playing with it now. A little knot of bright jackets was moving toward the wire.

When Johnson and Gallery reached the gate guard, he said, "They're set for their game again. They gave Jones hell yesterday."

Johnson said, "Let 'em come."

"Yeah," the guard said, "that's what Jones said !" He nodded at the approaching children. "Cunning little whips. They know the routine all right. Soon as you're into your suits—soon as the searchray's been over you—they know you can't go out through the wire."

Johnson said, "You got a smoke ?"

The guard gave him one and struck a match for him. Johnson drew deeply and glared at the children. They were close to the gate now, ranged on either side of it, tiny hands clinging to the wire, mouths forming O's, beginning a chant.

Johnson smoked his cigarette and watched them, and all the time the colour was flushing into his face. The children kept up the chant for a time, but it dwindled at last. A slim, fair-haired boy put his nose through the criss-cross wire and fixed his eyes on Johnson. "Hey, you !" he said. "Come here !"

The gate guard gave a splutter of laughter. The boy said again, "Hey, come here !" The others were crowding behind him now, thrilled by this new game.

Johnson threw his cigarette into the grass and stepped toward the gate. The guard put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't pop your valves, Vic. Stick inside the wire."

"Hey," the boy said. "Hey, you ! Fatso !"

The gate guard sniggered, and Johnson hit him once, full in the face. The guard stumbled backward and Johnson threw himself out through the wire.

The children ran, shrieking.

The slim boy darted and ran, darted and ran. But Johnson was fast. He got one hand on the boy's collar and swung him around. The boy fell into the grass and rolled and tried to scramble clear. The gate guard was running toward them, cursing at Johnson. "You'll lose me my job, damn you, Vic !"

Johnson struck the boy in the face with the flat of his hand. The boy cried out and his hands grabbed at Johnson's neck. He pulled himself close to Johnson, clinging to him so that Johnson couldn't get any power into his blows.

The gate guard reached them and got Johnson by the shoulder, dragging him away. The boy wriggled convulsively, broke Johnson's grip and was off ! He skimmed over the grass like a bird.

"Damn it, Vic !" the guard said.

Johnson was brushing grass from his hands. He rubbed his palms together as he walked back with the guard. "Just a bunch of butterfly kids !"

"The psychs make the rules, Vic. Not me."

"The hell with the psychs !"

They reached the gate and Johnson went on through. The guard was rubbing his face where Johnson had hit him. "Watch it next time," he said. "Or maybe a report will go in."

Johnson spat on the grass, and turned away.

"Damned little innocents !"

Thirty minutes later, when the transit ship locked with the carrier vehicle, Gallery and Johnson stepped through the airlock, stripped off their suits and began to get into shift clothes. Johnson zipped up his pants, turned his back to Gallery and stooped to pick up his shirt.

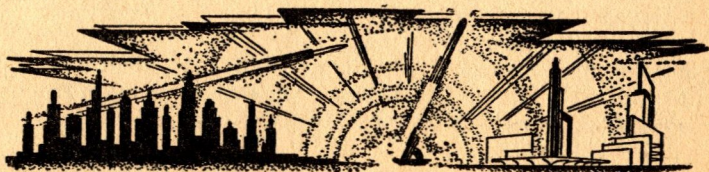
"Hey, Vic," Gallery said. "What the hell have you got on the back of your neck ?"

Johnson said, "Huh ?" and began to turn. He twisted a hand toward his bare neck. "That damned angel-face kid had hold of me—"

They were the last words he ever spoke. The adhesion bomb was small, but it blew the airlock apart and detonated the ultimate weapon. Johnson never knew about it.

The explosion was visible all the way back to Earth.

David Rome



It was the greatest contest of all time, with the dice loaded against the Earthman winning. Despite this, fair means produced a win for him in the end.

DIPSO FACTO

by ROBERT PRESSLIE

Given the right set of circumstances it is possible for Avior to be seen from Earth. The prime circumstance is that there should be someone on Earth, preferably in the southern hemisphere, with sufficient interest in the sky to be looking at the stars. In spite of mankind's migratory explosion throughout the galaxy there were still the odd few million who hung around the old homestead for one reason or another. The minority of the residents lived south of the equator. And it was only for a very small number of these that the sky still held sufficient glamour to promote the desire for more than a cursory glance.

Ragg Dante was not Earthborn, not in the southern hemisphere, not particularly keen to stargaze.

And he knew more about Avior than any amount of looking would have revealed.

Ragg had been spawned on one of the deep-probing colonization ships, orphaned by a mistimed landing, foster-fathered by a dozen sundry colonists whose trades and professions ranged from farmer to physicist, carpenter to cyberneticist.

Out of his varied upbringing Ragg had made his own profession. Technically he was a Galactic Federation troubleshooter. Himself, he termed his work as salesmanship.

Sometimes he sold conventional merchandise like agricultural tools and the concomitant know-how to backward planets.

Sometimes he sold abstracts : peace between worlds when peace was essential for the safety of innocent neighbours ; and occasionally he purveyed war and the instruments of war if the Federation decided that the drastic measure of deliberately inciting wholesale murder was the best means of catalysing scientific progress in a world gone stale through lack of adversity.

He was on one of his rare visits to Earth for the sole purpose of picking up his next line of goods. He was half a world away from the southern hemisphere from which Avior could be seen. He was in Scotland, the only place that could turn out his required merchandise in full authenticity.

Avior did not know it yet but Ragg Dante would soon be on his way to sell one of its planets an initial order of one thousand cases of Scotch.

Altogether the first magnitude star had nineteen planets. Four were ghost worlds, eternally toasted dried-out rocks that swung too close to their mother sun for any life to exist on them. Two planets were so far out from Avior that not all the Aviorids' ingenuity could defrost them sufficiently for economic habitation. Of the thirteen remaining planets eleven were well-behaved, well-adjusted, never made trouble within or without their orbits.

That left two planets, Ragg mused. One was in a mess, the other was responsible for the mess. A thousand cases of Scotch plus a fast line in sales talk should result in a degree of equalisation, he hoped.

The galaxy was no hen-coop. There were remote systems which the Federation had not touched on yet. Those that had been charted and co-opted into the Federation were lucky if they saw a survey ship twice in every century, unless they sent out an emergency call.

Avior's trouble planet was called Umba. It had not sent for help because the Umbarians did not realise they were in trouble, did not know they needed help. If a survey ship had not dropped in while in the area and seen the state of Umba, the inhabitants would have gone muddling on, never knowing that squalor was not necessarily a norm.

The ship left a team of investigators on Umba. As an after-thought another team was deposited on Snox, the nearest planet to Umba. When the reports came in six weeks later the facts were collated, passed to the leader of Ragg Dante's trouble-shooting squad, who passed them in turn to Ragg to deal with as he thought best.

And Ragg had decided it was essential he sold the Snoxians one thousand cases of Scotch.

He relieved the tedium of the journey by wising up on Umba, using the penta-sensory tapes brought back by the survey team. Snox he already knew about and would see for himself in due course.

Theoretically it was improbable that one planet should require Federation aid and not the other. They should have been mirror images of each other. Equal in magnitude—both were just under Earth-size and had a gee-drag of point nine—they wheeled in an identical orbit around Avior, each chasing the other but never catching up.

Axial tilt and rotation were so similar that someone on Umba could have set his chronometer and his calendar by a Snoxian's if he could have been able to communicate with the neighbouring planet.

But, as the tapes told Ragg, it was unlikely that any Umbarian had even seen Snox. And scientifically the Umbarians were so backward that they had not yet developed any means by which they could communicate with their brothers. Basic sciences like optics and radio had yet to be evolved. Space travel was a conception beyond the mental grasp of any Umbarian and would remain that way unless Ragg could help them out of the mire that passed for civilisation on their planet.

The most obvious reason for Umba's sewer state was the atmosphere. It was an almost impenetrable fog, thick with carbon dioxide, sodden with water vapour.

And it stank. It stank so much that Ragg was obliged to cut the olfactory circuit from the tape translator. He wondered if he should go back and exchange the bottles of Scotch for aerosol deodorants. But then he remembered that Snox was his destination, not Umba, and deodorants were about as essential on Snox as pants were to the asexual Tarazeds.

With the stench of Umba out of his nostrils he was able to smile at the memory of the time he had visited the constellation of the Eagle and had actually sold plants to the Tarazeds.

Then the scene before his eyes changed and brought him back to Umba with a shock and wiped the smile from his face.

By and large, Ragg had kicked around a sizeable proportion of the worlds that came within the Federation's jurisdiction. He had grown accustomed not to term an alien ugly just because he was built different. But he had never before been so repulsed by the impression of filth that the Umbar gave him.

They were completely hirsute. All right, Ragg thought, he had seen head-to-toe hairiness before. But the Umbarians' hairy pelts were matted, ungroomed and multi-coloured with a variety of stains that owed their origin to food-scraps, sweat, general garbage and even excrement.

They moved about in ankle-deep mud. Their present social level was still at the agrarian stage. They lived in wooden shacks raised off the mud on stilts. Yet Ragg was able to see that in the mud and adhering to the basically black hair of the Umbarians were slops and slabs of concrete—or something that was a reasonable facsimile thereof.

With the heat-retaining properties of their atmosphere coupled with the humidity, the Umbarians should have been living on the lushest of crops. But the same atmosphere and the same humidity favoured rank weeds as much as it favoured edible vegetation and the inhabitants were too busy fighting other factors to be able to spare the time to evolve means of curtailing the weeds.

The factors they were fighting and had fought since as long back as any one on Umbar could remember, could all be traced back to Snox. The Federation's survey team had done the tracing and their data tapes contained the proof.

At this point Ragg unspooled the tapes. He knew the rest, he knew what Snox was doing to Umba and he thought he knew how to stop it.

Anyhow, he noticed, Snox was looming up on the scanner screens and it was time to start work. It also seemed a good time to sample his merchandise, just to make sure it had travelled well.

He uncorked a bottle, piously refusing to admit he had looked for an excuse.

The Snoxians had the red carpet out for him, figuratively speaking. Although they had no space travel of their own, having no need for it, they had nevertheless gone to great lengths to provide Ragg's ship with a vacant lot of concrete

acreage that would have made him an estate king on some of the more crowded planets he had seen.

He came swaggering out of the ship with the bottle of Scotch still clutched in one hand. Other than his clothes and his wits, his only other appurtenance was a pair of anti-actinic contact lenses which he had slid under his eyelids as soon as his first glance through a porthole had threatened him with blindness.

As far as his protected eyes could see, in whichever direction he looked, Snox was a world of detergent-ad whiteness.

If Umba was a sewage farm, Snox was a shattering vision confectioned of sugar frosting. The atmosphere had a heady, exhilarating clarity. The city that surrounded the landing field was a dream that could have been shared by a cubist and a pointillist. White light splashed everywhere, on and around the box-square buildings of the city. There was an air of spaciousness, accentuated by the absence of streets, each building having a good fifty metres of albino concrete between itself and its neighbours.

Another visitor without Ragg's knowledge of Snox might have been surprised at the lack of streets. He would certainly have been quick to notice that there were no apparent signs of a transport system.

But even if Ragg had been unprimed in Snox's ways he would have guessed at the reason for the absence of traffic immediately the first Snoxian materialised out of the blue to stand before him with a welcoming grin.

"I am Naffan. You will be Master Dante?"

Ragg almost corrected the *Master* to *Mister* but decided to let the mistake slide. If it did nothing else at least it gave his ego a gentle puff. He had a feeling it was quite possible the Snoxians would cut him down to size before his trip was over. They would try, anyhow, that was certain.

"And you are pleased to meet me," he reversed the conventional greeting, just to keep the balance of the oncoming conversation in his favour.

"Of course," said the alien. But Ragg thought he detected deep confidence behind the words. Any concession in the words themselves was being made from strength—strength in Naffan's knowledge that he could string Ragg along for as long as he liked and pounce for the kill any time he chose.

Ragg, however, was no novice in the art of verbal thrust and parry. He had one disadvantage of which the alien was

thoroughly aware. He decided to state it himself before Naffan could use it.

"I regret to put you to the inconvenience, but we'll have to *walk* to wherever my quarters are going to be."

Naffan's smile got wider. He replied, "That was to be expected. I do not mind. We do walk sometimes, you know Just for the exercise."

"My luggage?" Ragg said.

"I have already sent it on."

"Thank you," said Ragg, trying to match the smugness on the other's face.

"And the large quantity of bottles," added Naffan.

Ragg could feel his own smile slipping. He tried to jack it up. But it was difficult. Teleports he had met before. But not of this quality. One man who could carry on a calculated conversation and teleport a thousand cases of Scotch as an effortless sideline . . .

Ragg shuddered behind his ghastly facsimile of a smile.

"That was kind of you," he said.

He nearly developed a permanent squint through trying to survey the alien from the corners of his eyes as he walked behind him across the acres of snow-white concrete.

Sometimes he thought the alien had pulled a fast one and *tee-kayed himself* elsewhere. But it was illusion. The fulgent rays of Avior shining through Snox's cloudless sky made Naffan and his surroundings merge into a featureless white blank. Naffan was as colourless and smooth as an alabaster figure.

The Snoxians, Naffan included, were utterly hairless, since there was nothing in the atmosphere or in their own make-up against which body hair was a necessary protection. Their skins were as smooth as vinyl sheeting since they had no pores. A skin that does not exude sweat requires no pores. And because they had cobalt instead of iron in their blood corpuscles there was no pink or redness to their skins. Only when they stood in the shade could a slight blueness be detected ; in open sunlight the blue merely accentuated the impression of whiteness.

The distance between Ragg's ship and their destination was only about one kilometer but in spite of his anti-actinic contact lenses Ragg was glad when they got out of the sun's glare and into the cubic edifice that Naffan indicated.

Ragg thought it looked a bit spacious. He wondered if the Snoxians always made such a generous gesture to their guests. Then Naffan said, "This is the Games Academy."

"But where do I bunk down?"

"You don't. The contest starts immediately. Nobody has ever got through the first round. It is most unlikely you will be an exception. So the possibility of your requiring sleeping quarters is extremely remote."

Ragg stiffened, tried to stretch his half-pint statistics to a more imposing figure.

He said, "You never know. If I were you I'd see that somebody got me a place to lay my head tonight. Because I intend to be back here tomorrow for the second round of the contest, the round where I choose the weapons as it were."

Naffan was unperturbed. "I believe there is a spare apartment somewhere that my predecessors in their folly set aside for just such an improbable event."

The Snoxian switched subjects. "You know the rules?"

Ragg knew the rules.

The rules of Snox's peculiar contests were the foundation stones on which Ragg had built his plan for dealing with the offending planet.

Anyone who travelled around the galaxy as much as he did was well aware of the fact that visitors to strange worlds had very often to perform the equivalent of doing as the Romans did, when in Rome. There were people who became mightily offended if their offer to exchange a half litre of blood was refused. There were others who would start a war for nothing more serious than non-compliance with their rule that guests must conjoin in a night of intended bliss with their wives—and Ragg trembled at the memory of what some of the wives had looked like.

He could recall countless exotic customs he had been obliged to honour. The one that Snox indulged in had been unknown to him until the G.F. survey team had reported it.

In brief, Snoxians invited guests to their Games Academy for a nosh-up competition. In the first round the incomers were beholden to vie with a picked gastronomic gladiator to see who could eat the most local fare. If he could match the Snoxian, the contest went to another day and another round when the visitor was allowed to compile the menu.

But to date none of the bouts had gone beyond the first round. The Snoxians were master telekineticists. When their representative was in the arena of comestibles he simply teleported his intake of food during the contest and his opponent, usually ignorant of the other's advantage, did one of three things. He was sick, or he had an apoplexy, or he died. It was not unusual for him to do all three.

Ragg hoped the Galactic Fed's chemists knew what they were doing when they had supplied him with metabolism acceleration pills.

"Who is my opponent?" he asked.

"The honour is mine."

"So what are we waiting for? To the tables, friend Naffan!"

As he followed the alien inside the Games Academy, Ragg slipped his tongue under his bottom denture and extracted a hypermetabolic pill.

The sheer vastness of the mountains of victuals piled on the Games tables gave him a momentary flutter of dismay but at least he was thankful that the food looked like food. Bread was recognisably bread. Fish was unmistakably fish. He was able to identify the various cuts of meat in spite of their blue tint and it seemed that Snoxian poultry produced eggs not too geometrically different to the ovoid hen-fruit of Terran origin.

Naffan went straight into the lead. He despatched the assorted provender with no respect for etiquette. He switched from stews to souffles, from soups to salads, steadily ploughing into every variety of fodder as the whim took him.

Ragg preferred to feast in a more orderly fashion. He spent the first half-hour entirely on hors d'oeuvres, getting through eighteen platters of the stuff before he started on the fish.

He settled on a striped amphibian which bore a reasonable affinity to mackerel. He thought he was going pretty good when Naffan stopped chewing long enough to point out that Ragg's pile of empty plates was only half as big as the other's and was still losing ground.

Ragg did not bother to reply. The longer the contest went on, the more he could feel the metabolic catalyst working inside of him. And as he moved from his tenth dish of fish to a delectable looking ragout his appetite went from strength to strength.

By the end of the second hour—which meant he was half-way through the scheduled four hour contest—he was less than a dozen plates behind the Snoxian, and he made a mental note to congratulate the Foundation's chemists on the efficacy of their pill.

Before the contest started he knew he was at a hopeless disadvantage against Naffan, or would have been without the help of the pill. He did not doubt that the alien could have gone on forever. Why shouldn't he, when he was teleporting the various viands as fast as he stuffed them into his mouth—and no doubt on Umba the natives were wondering why the sky was raining a masticated puree of cutlets, hashes, fricasses, croquettes, pies, cakes, souffles, jellies, cheeses and sundry other fodder.

But the G. F. chemists' pill had done all they had promised to equalize the contest. Where the Snoxian was disposing of his comestibles by telekinetics, Ragg was burning them up. He was breathing fast, sucking in the oxygen required to reduce the food to carbon dioxide which he exhaled just as rapidly.

The atmosphere in the Academy would have been lethal within minutes if Naffan had not been getting rid of the carbon dioxide in the same way as he discharged his quota of food.

It was possible, Ragg thought, that this additional burden was helping to slow down the alien's rate of food intake. Anyhow, there had to be some reason why the piles of empty plates were equal by the time the bout had reached the last thirty minutes.

Naffan made a herculean effort to regain supremacy. From the corner of his eyes Ragg saw him twice empty a plate without the formality of putting the food in his mouth first. He gave the alien a straight look to let him know he had been caught cheating. Naffan took the hint and although he was five plates ahead with the deadline only moments away he looked distinctly haggard from the effort.

Ragg's chemist friends had promised him four hours aid from their pill. They were almost right. But just as the effects of the pill ceased, his own natural appetite took over. He snatched at plate after plate and when the buzzer sounded to mark the end of the tournament the alien was forced to concede a draw.

Ragg wiped his mouth with a kerchief and leaned back with a sigh of content.

"That," he said, "was quite a meal. My compliments to the chef."

Naffan could only force a feeble smile.

"I suppose I had better find you some place to sleep."

Ragg waved a hand. "Don't trouble. I'll walk back to the ship and bunk down there."

Naffan goggled. "Walk !"

He stared at Ragg as he stood up, marvelled to see no corpulent rotundity.

Ragg said, "Yes, I'll walk. I like a constitutional after dinner. See you back here tomorrow for round two."

Naffan nodded his head in assent, as much as he could with it held between his hands. He looked more than slightly distracted.

When they reassembled for the second bout it seemed as if half Snox's populace had turned out to witness the little man from Earth who had matched Naffan in yesterday's nosh stakes.

Ragg was unperturbed by the audience. If anything, he castigated himself mildly for not having foreseen such an event, particularly since it was an event which was most desirable. He had hoped to introduce the entire population of Snox to Scotch whisky via Naffan's recommendation. But now he had a ready made opportunity to get a sizeable slice of the planet's inhabitants on the grain at one go.

He made a quick estimate of the number of cases of Scotch which had been laid on for the contest. He figured the quota to be roughly a dozen bottles per man present. He decided that would do for a start ; there was still the remainder of a thousand cases to be called on if required.

He strutted insolently to his place at the table, gestured imperiously for the others to sit down. He remained standing.

"Friends," he said. "Thank you for coming. Your presence here is a compliment. Never before has anyone matched your representative at the Games and if you are here to pay homage to my abilities then I am gracious enough and modest enough to accept it."

His reception was a mass of unsmiling faces.

Ragg pressed his advantage. "Since you may never be fortunate enough to meet someone like me again I will make you an offer. I will show you something that you will tell your grandchildren and their grandchildren, something which will pass into Snoxian legend."

Nobody seemed particularly enthusiastic about his offer, unrevealed as yet. Ragg thought the moment was psychologically right for its revelation.

"Friends," he went on. "What happened yesterday was nothing. Out of politeness to my host I refrained from trouncing him at his own table. But since I may never pass this way again and it would be remiss of me to deprive you of the spectacle, I make you this offer . . ."

He paused for effect.

" . . . the rules state that today I am entitled to challenge one member of your world to consume as much as I do, if he can, of typical Earth fodder. Instead of bringing an assortment of foods, I have brought one. There, on the table before you, is a delectable product, the staple diet of most of my world's inhabitants. And here is my challenge . . ."

He paused again.

" . . . I, Ragg Dante, Games representative of Earth, do hereby challenge all of you, everyone present, to consume as many bottles of that whisky as I do. By this I do not mean bottle for bottle per man. I mean that we split the number of bottles into two and I will drink one half the total and you must drink the other half."

The smiles had returned to the Snoxian countenances. This undersized braggart may have equalled Naffan yesterday but now he was asking for a drubbing.

"Agreed!" came a chorus.

Ragg lifted a hand for silence.

"Then let battle commence," he said.

This time, although hopelessly outnumbered, the odds were in Ragg's favour. For a start he had a natural affinity for Scotch and had been known to dispose of three bottles in an all-night drinking session, whereas the aliens had never come across alcohol before—this being one of the facts that the survey team had dug up. For another thing he was primed with a second catabolic pill which would help oxidise the spirit to harmless water and carbon dioxide, whereas the aliens would have to cope with it with their digestive systems if they failed to teleport the stuff to Umba—and Ragg was pretty sure they would fail.

He had the open neck of a bottle at his mouth when he remembered his manners.

"Cheers!" he said.

He took a hefty swig, waved the bottle and said, "Skol ! Slange ! Prosit !" And in the remote but unlikely event that anyone present might understand Chinese, he added, "Yam seng !"

The last ejaculation seemed to strike some affinity with the Snoxian native tongue, or maybe the phrase just took their fancy. Anyhow, Ragg's eyebrows went up when the aliens answered in chorus, "Yam seng ! Yam seng !"

Knowing that Ragg had to drink one bottle for every bottle drunk by each of their number, the natives were content to follow Ragg's drinking pace.

This was a sad mistake on their part. Ragg, when his commitments allowed him sufficient leisure to get lushed, was a naturally fast drinker. Runt sized he may have been but it always took him the first bottle just to get the fuse lit.

He thumped the empty bottle on the table exactly five minutes after he had picked it up.

Immediately the aliens followed suit and the Academy rattled as if an army of spooks had come to knock on the table at a seance.

Ragg waited so long before reaching for a second bottle that Naffan was prompted to get a little jibe in.

"Giving up ?" he asked.

"The four hours have just begun," Ragg answered.

"But you are already more than a hundred bottles behind. You can't possibly win."

"Sometimes you can win by losing," Ragg said cryptically. He picked up his second bottle, pulled the cork with his teeth.

"Yam seng !" he gurgled through the scotch as it cataracted down his throat.

He was on his fourth bottle before he could be sure that his plan was working as it should. Up to a point the aliens had managed to teleport some of the hooch elsewhere. But when they were forced back on their own alimentary resources they still managed to dispose of sufficient liquor to earn themselves a little respect in Ragg's eyes.

The first signs of intoxication were no different to those he was familiar with. The aliens got talkative. Most of what they had to say was abuse of Ragg. But Ragg waited and watched for the initial stimulating effect of the alcohol to pass giving way, as it did, to an increased appetite for more alcohol,

and he knew they were well and truly oiled when the dilation of their skin vessels was evidenced by a flush of duck-egg blue on every face.

He was still drinking when the last of them fell asleep.

He was still drunk when he got back to Federation H.Q.

"You look like hell," his chief told him.

Ragg grunted. "You should have my head and see what I feel like!"

"Was the mission successful?"

Ragg closed his eyes in blissful reminiscence. "Lovely," he said.

"I am not concerned with your low-life debauchery, Dante. I want to know the present situation between Snox and Umba. I want to know if we can close the casebook."

"Anytime, anytime," came Ragg's airy reply.

"Dante!" The chief's voice was sharper. "I am inclined to think you deliberately chose this method of tackling the case for your own ulterior motives. Sober up and tell me what took place."

Ragg made a heriocratic effort to separate his eyelids. The weight of the portmanteaux under his eyes did nothing to help the effort.

"All according to plan," he said. "And you've hurt my feelings. I've a good mind not to tell you—"

"Dante!"

There was a finality in the chief's voice that even Ragg could not ignore.

"Yes sir! Well, sir, as the survey team discovered, they had no sugar on Snox, no precursors of sugar, no by-products of sugar. That includes alcohol. And never having met alcohol, they had never met *its* breakdown products. Once I got through the first day and then had them lapping up the scotch, I knew I had them. They teleported the stuff at first but pretty soon the addiction drug we incorporated in the liquor took hold. Some of the alcohol stayed in their stomachs. And just like in any stomach it got converted to aldehyde."

Ragg stopped to groan and for a moment he looked as blue as a tipsy Snoxian.

"Par'me," he said. "It was the mention of stomachs."

"Go on," said the chief unsympathetically.

"Yessir. Well, with them the aldehyde polymerised, became paraldehyde and you know what that does. Paraldehyde can cool off a nut."

The chief rephrased Ragg's words. "I believe it is used in psychiatric medicine."

"That's what I said. So, with their brains with a brake on, they stopped teleporting altogether. And because of the addiction additive they brought every bottle I had with me and they'll take as many more as we can send. It's going to be a helluva long time before Umba gets any more of Snox's sewage."

Ragg's chief looked sad. He shook his head in regret.

"What did I do wrong?" Ragg asked.

"Nothing, nothing. It just seems a pity to have to condemn a world to mass bacchanalia. However, I expect it's all in a good cause. Very well, Dante, you may go now."

Ragg sat immobile, two shuttered eyes fixed on his superior's.

"I said you may go."

"I heard, chief. But first . . . well, I had to drink the same booze as they did, and before I go to the medicos to get de-lushed . . ."

"Yes, Dante?"

Ragg smiled ingratiatingly. "In the bottom drawer of your desk," he purred. "You know that bottle you always keep there . . . could I just have a little one? A large sized little one?"

Robert Presslie

'Gone Away—No known address'

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

Inexplicable disasters are happening in and around the British base on the Moon and tension grows as Felix Larsen, special investigator, tries to solve the mystery of ABIC, the electronic brain which apparently does nothing except exist.

WINDOW ON THE MOON

by E. C. TUBB

Conclusion

foreword

Not far in our present future, the British, Americans, Russians and Chinese have established bases on the Moon, ostensibly for scientific research, but in view of the unsettled political situation on Earth, each base is, in effect, an armed strongpoint spying on the others. The British base, comprising mixed personnel, is the only one with a huge panoramic window facing the globe of Earth, the others relying upon electronic eyes.

Making the best of a bad job, the British develop numerous research programmes under the direction of Sir Ian MacDonald, the top secret one being ABIC (Artificial Biochemical Integration Computer), an electronic brain grown from the basic elements of life, but which, at present, apparently does nothing except exist. In charge of ABIC is Professor Reginald Ottoway, assisted by Professor Jeff Carter.

A Royal Commission arrives at the base to obtain a report on the experiments and necessary expenditure, bringing with them

Professor Felix Larsen, officially a technician due to instal new laser-beam defences, but who is also a special agent for the Government. Felix is conducted round the base by Avril Simpson, a dietician, but soon becomes sick under the lesser gravity, is put to bed and administered by Dr. Gloria Brittain. When he recovers he suspects that he has been purposely drugged and questioned under scopolamine.

Larsen works in conjunction with Major Jack Crombie in organising the new defences, narrowly escaping death while investigating sites on the rim of a crater. While recovering in hospital he discovers another patient named Seldon in an adjoining room, the agent he is trying to contact. Seldon, however, is apparently in a partially drugged state following a bad accident and can only infer that there is a spy in the Base.

Meanwhile, in the United States Base, General Klovis receives information that the British base is apparently sending out secret code signals and decides to investigate, at the same time to try and discover why the Royal Commission has arrived. His main objective is to incorporate the British defences under his command if possible. Sir Ian resists this suggestion and proposes that the Americans loan their detector. Klovis reluctantly agrees and departs for his own Base, but never arrives. His moon-crawler is later found wrecked and he and the crew dead.

Having recovered from his accident, Larsen is allowed to visit the Eyrie, the lookout window on the surface from where Earth can be seen hanging in the void. Together with other personnel he watches the spaceship Enterprise take off from the surface carrying the Commission on its return home. When it is almost out of sight there is a violent explosion of light. The ship and all it contained has been utterly destroyed.

thirteen

It had been an interesting period. Lying supine on his bed Felix mentally reviewed the events since the sudden disruption of the ship. First there had been an instant of stunned silence and then, even before the flare of the explosion had faded from the screen, the intercom had broken into strident life.

“Hear this! Hear this! Major Crombie speaking. Attention all personnel! The vessel bearing the members of the Royal Commission back to Earth has exploded with the

total destruction of all on board. All personnel will immediately proceed to their quarters and remain there. I will repeat that. All personnel will immediately proceed to their quarters and remain there."

The results had given Felix food for thought.

One of the things he had learned early in his career was the axiom constantly preached to all student anthropologists ; to know a culture you must understand it. The eating of human flesh is not peculiar behaviour in a society which practices cannibalism. The same axiom was more than applicable to individuals as any psychologist knew. First find the normal pattern of behaviour and then, but only then, look for aberrations.

Felix had been sent to the station to look for aberrations among the personnel as a whole.

It was a precautionary measure, a fear sparked off more by Seldon's vague reports than for any concrete reason, but the Government intended taking no chances. Superficially the station was composed of ordinary men and women who should react in a normal way to any emergency or stimulus. But they were no longer ordinary. They had been uprooted, confined in an artificial environment and, because of that, could no longer be wholly trusted to react in predictable ways.

Seldon had reported sensing something odd and that, among a group controlling such horrible power was something which reeked of potential danger.

Felix stared at the chiseled stone of the roof. He had assessed the station as a group which had slipped from its original purpose. Discipline had seemed non-existent, the social barriers had vanished and the expected order had dissolved into apparent anarchy. It was reasonable to assume that, in any real emergency, such a group would react in a near-mob manner.

Instead they had acted with instinctive, Guard-like discipline. There had been no talking, no argument, no speculation. There had been an intensive flurry of purposeful movement and that had been all.

It was another odd fact to add to the rest Felix had gathered, and had created in his mind a question to which he still had to find the answer.

He turned as the door swung open, swinging from the bed as Echlan entered the room. The sergeant was apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Felix, but we have to search your quarters."

"Major's orders?"

"Yes. Everyone has to go through it."

Echlan jerked his head and two men entered from the corridor. They carried electronic equipment and began to run long electrodes up the sides of the room, standing one at each end. A thin, high, humming sound came from a pack one carried on his back. Echlan saw Felix watching the operation.

"We're running a current through the rock," he explained. "If it isn't homogenous the sound will alter from the detector. But you'd know all about that."

Felix nodded, wondering if Echlan was using standard equipment or something which Howard had built for the purpose. Standard, he guessed, from the smoothly machined finish but the electronic engineer may well have improved the original model.

The room electronically swept, the men concentrated on the furnishings. Finally the man with the detector pack shook his head.

"Nothing so far, Sarge."

"Right," said Echlan. "Stand over here, Felix, this won't take long. Right, Sam."

Sam lowered a faceplate and, his companion standing behind Felix, carefully scanned every inch of his body.

"Something here," he grunted hollowly. Metal. Fillings by the look of it."

"Solid?"

Felix felt a sudden tingle in his mouth and tasted salt. He swore as violent agony stabbed from several molars.

"Sorry." Sam lifted his faceplate. "Those eddy-currents can play hell but its the only way to be sure." He glanced at the sergeant. "He's clear."

"Good. Take the next in line." Sombrely Echlan watched his men file past then shook his head at Felix. "This," he said with feeling, "is a hell of a job."

"Do you think you'll find anything?"

"No, but we've got to be certain. Something blew up that rocket."

"It could have been an accident. A component failure, for example."

"Sure, and it probably was, but we've got to go through the routine." Echlan looked tired and Felix guessed that he

had been working at top pressure since the explosion. He hesitated as he turned towards the door. "Hell, I almost forgot. Bob said you wanted to check over these." He produced a wad of papers from a pocket. "Some are from him, the others are from Jeff. He said you'd know all about them."

They would be the records from the encephalograph and Rasch's detector. Felix took them from the sergeant's hand.

"Thank you, I've been expecting them. When will the restriction be over?"

"You'll be informed." Echlan looked back from the corridor. "You can go down the corridor to the toilet but no further. Don't try to leave this area, Felix. I've posted guards with orders to shoot if anyone tries to break out." He managed a smile. "Well, have fun."

He left and Felix could sympathise with him. Searching the entire station, even with the most modern of equipment, was no easy job. And he thought grimly, even if they found nothing there would always remain a doubt. If the ship had been sabotaged it would have destroyed all evidence along with itself.

Felix was no stranger to encephalograms. Too often he had studied the erratic lines which signalled the presence of a cerebral tumour or the subtle variations which warned of abnormality. These records were not from a human cortex but the ones from Abic bore certain disturbing similarities . . . disturbing because Abic was artificial and, if man could make a facsimile of a human brain, then what did that make man?

He shrugged, dismissing the concept. Like Ottoway he had no patience with theological speculation. In his experience mankind held within itself the attributes of both God and the Devil with the latter, at the present time, well in the ascendency.

The graphs from Rasch's detector were interesting but told him little. At irregular intervals the stylo had traced peaks of varying height from the base line so that the record looked, when unrolled, like a two-dimensional profile map of a distant mountain range. He frowned at the graphs, noting one extremely high peak towards the end of the record.

If the variable line represented a message such a peak would signify a burst of extremely powerful transmission but Howard had sworn, and Felix was inclined to agree, that the graph had not recorded a message.

He picked up the encephalogram from the artificial brain. On this the red, alpha line was the erratic factor and he studied it, absently moving the two rolls so that the time-stamped edges corresponded. The high peak towards the end of Rasch's detector record coincided with another at almost the same time on Abic's graph. It wasn't one hundred per cent proof but it was so obvious that the academical doubt could be ignored.

Rasch's device had recorded the emissions from the artificial brain.

They had not been secret messages from a spy.

It had been a false alarm but the Americans could hardly be blamed for that. They hadn't known of the thing in the box and had been rightly suspicious of the mysterious signals. If their visit hadn't ended in tragedy the whole thing would have been amusing. Even so, Rasch had built better than he knew. His record followed the encephalogram with startling accuracy.

Something clicked in Felix's brain. For a long moment he stared at the coupled graphs then rose and went to the intercom.

"Control."

"Felix Larsen. Will you please tell me the exact time the rocket exploded."

"One moment."

He waited, finger hard on the button, guessing that the woman was checking on his request. Then her voice echoed softly from the speaker.

"The exact time was ten, eighteen, thirty-five."

"Thank you."

The timing was a little out, not much, but a shade early. Rasch's detector read 10.18.28, but Bob could have been a little careless in his setting or the drum may not have been synchronised with the station chronometer. Abic's time was far more accurate; only two seconds early and that time was exact. Allowing for the time-lag between the actual explosion and the visible evidence of the destruction received by control, Abic had registered exactly as the rocket had exploded.

Major Crombie looked even more fatigued than Echlan but he was an older man and carried a heavier weight of responsibility. He strode into the room, slammed the thick folder he carried down on the table and glared at Felix.

"Well?"

"I've found something I think you should see, Major."

"So you said on the intercom. Has it anything to do with your wanting to know the exact time the rocket exploded?"

"Yes." Felix smiled. "You would know about that, of course. To be frank I hardly expected an answer to my request."

"Why not? There's nothing secret about it." Crombie sat on the bed, his shoulders slumped a little from their normal, ramrod rigidity. "What is it I should know?"

Felix told him, pointing out the marks on both graphs but concentrating on the one from the artificial brain. Crombie nodded, his eyes shrewd.

"It could be coincidence," he suggested.

"It could," agreed Felix. "It could also be a reverse-signal, Abic registered to the explosion of the rocket instead of the rocket exploding in exact time to a signal from Abic, but I doubt it."

"It seems a logical explanation to me."

Crombie, Felix thought, was either being very stupid or very cunning, and he knew the Major was far from being stupid. He took a deep breath. If the Major wanted him to bring it right out into the open then he could oblige.

"It could also," he said carefully, "be the work of a saboteur."

Crombie raised his eyebrows.

"Abic could either be, or its housing could contain, some instrument which could be used for something other than what it appears." Felix pointed to the graphs. "Suppose, for example, that some mechanism had been planted in the rocket, a radio-controlled trigger, perhaps, or something like that. On receiving a special signal . . .!" He made an expressive gesture. "It's possible, you know."

"Agreed, but you overlook one point." Crombie reached for his folder. "Someone would have to plant the mechanism and send the signal. Now we aren't quite stupid here and neither are we as careless as you seem to think. No one worked on the rocket without supervision. Captain Star personally checked his vessel and none of our technicians went aboard unless accompanied by a member of the crew. It is just possible, I suppose, that one of them would be willing to sacrifice his life to destroy the vessel but it isn't likely. In

any event, if that were so, he wouldn't need other assistance."

Felix nodded.

"Now, as to sending a signal via Abic." Crombie riffled the sheets of his folder. "I have here a full account of everyone's movements for some time prior to the explosion. You were with Bob Howard and Jeff Carter in the electronics laboratory. Right?"

"That's correct."

"Only Jeff and Reginald Ottoway have access to the bio-physical laboratory where Abic is installed. Jeff was with you and Reg was with Gloria in the hospital. The laboratory was deserted."

"Couldn't someone have sneaked in?"

"No. The place is guarded and, unless either Ottoway or Carter is there, no one is allowed in." He anticipated Felix's next question. "The guard was on duty at all times, there's no mistake about that. He couldn't have sneaked in either."

It seemed conclusive proof but Felix wasn't satisfied. He had sensed Ottoway's smouldering rage and he knew how highly Jeff regarded all politicians. Hate and detestation were a long way from murder but a man who hated deeply enough would not regard the destruction of the thing he hated as murder at all. To him it would be a justifiable elimination for the common good. He had met such personalities before.

Felix shook his head. He was being more than unfair, he was being ridiculously stupid. If Crombie had eliminated both Jeff and Reginald from suspicion then it was idiotic of him to insist on their guilt. But there was one last probability.

"There could have been a time-switch," he pointed out. "This is wild speculation, I admit, but it is a faint possibility."

"True." Crombie wasn't annoyed. He must, Felix realised, have become accustomed to searching out and eliminating every trace and shadow of possibility. "That is why, as a standard precautionary measure, the departure of the rocket was delayed while I made a last-minute check-up."

"I'm sorry." Felix was sincere. Crombie shrugged.

"What for? You had both a right and a duty to report your suspicions to me as you did. You had an equal right and duty to remind me of what you thought I may have overlooked." He rose and picked up his folder. The slump of his shoulders was very noticeable and, as if conscious of it, he made an effort to straighten.

"A bad business this," he said. "A damn bad business. I don't know what's going to become of it."

"It was an accident."

"I know, but some accidents shouldn't happen. This was one of them."

It was the finish of his ambition and Crombie must know it. One way or another he had reached the end of his career. Felix remembered something as the Major reached the door.

"What about Leaver?"

"Leaver?" Crombie halted and turned, a frown creasing his forehead.

"Yes." Felix was carefully casual. Seldon had told him of the man but, as yet, he hadn't been able to locate him. If, as Seldon had hinted, the man was suspect then Crombie should know. "I've heard his name mentioned," he explained. "Just casual gossip, you know. But I can't remember seeing him around."

"I'm not surprised."

"Do you know him?"

"I did." Crombie was grim. "He's dead."

"Dead!"

"Yes, some time ago now. I suppose you heard Avril talk about him but it's a wonder she didn't tell you. He was her . . ." Crombie coughed. ". . . well, you know."

It was odd how, even in this free and easy society, the old delicacy still persisted.

fourteen

A deep voice was singing an improvised song.

"That's nice." Avril smelt of roses, probably some concoction brewed in one of the laboratories. Women, no matter where they were, would always find means of adornment. "I like to hear people singing, do you?"

"Sometimes."

"Only sometimes? Don't you like it?"

"Not very much." Felix didn't like a calypso even when well constructed and well sung and this was neither.

"Sad sack!" She shook his arm. "Something on your mind, pet?"

"No."

"Are you sure? You look as if you've got the cares of the world on your shoulders. Would you like me to take your mind off them for you?"

"Please! I tell you there's nothing wrong."

"Yes there is." She halted, facing him in the narrow passage, her face serious. "You've been down in the mouth ever since the restriction's been lifted. Are you still brooding over that rocket?"

"No."

"Then what's the matter? I thought you'd like me to call for you. I got tired of waiting for you to call for me. Now I wish that I hadn't." She squeezed his arm. "Please tell me, Felix."

"Does something always have to be wrong because I'm not grinning like a Cheshire Cat?" He saw that he was hurting her and took a perverse delight in his power. "If you don't like my company then why do you keep chasing me?"

"I . . ." She bit her lip. "I'm sorry. It's just that . . ."

"Well?"

"Do I chase you?"

"Yes."

"I see." She dropped his arm. "It won't happen again. I've been a fool, I suppose, but did you have to make me feel so cheap?"

Stubbornly he remained silent, trying not to see how pathetic she looked, how much like an unwanted kitten. The yearning to take her in his arms was almost irresistible.

"Goodbye, Felix." She managed a smile. "There's no need for us to part bad friends. We can't help seeing each other sometimes but I'll try not to be a nuisance." Then her armour cracked a little. "Damn you! Why did you have to come to the Moon? Why did I have to fall in love with you?"

"As you did with Leaver?"

He saw the shock on her face and then the sudden dawn of understanding.

"Leaver is dead, Felix."

"So I've been told. But you loved him."

"Yes. I loved him."

There was no shame in her eyes and, he realised, no cause for shame. There was no regret either and for the same reason. Whatever had been between them was over but his mind couldn't accept that. He was suffering from jealousy and

felt a sick self-contempt because of it. He was a mature, experienced adult not a pimply-faced schoolboy or a gangling adolescent. Jealousy was foreign to his nature and had no part either in his character or training.

But he was jealous and he knew why.

And so did she.

"I loved him," she repeated. "But that was a long time ago and it's all over now. I'm not mourning his memory if that's what you think. And I'm not looking for a substitute. Not now. Not since I met you."

"Avril! I . . ."

"You're jealous, Felix. I should take it as a compliment. Would you take it that way if I were jealous of your ex-wife?"

"That would be unreasonable."

"Yes." Her eyes were very direct. "It would, wouldn't it?"

She turned and left him, walking very straight, looking very slim but she was no longer sad and it was no longer goodbye. Felix loved her and she knew it. One day he would admit it. She could afford to wait.

Howard wasn't in his laboratory. His assistant, a mouse-coloured man with the improbable name of Tan Bark, looked up from where he sat at a drawing board as Felix entered.

"You looking for Bob?"

"I've just brought back some papers he loaned me."

"The Rasch detector graphs?" Bark gestured towards the apparatus. "Dump them down if you've finished with them. Did you get anything interesting?"

"Not more than we expected. Rasch's apparatus registers the emission from Abic."

"It's a wonder it does anything at all," snorted Bark. "It reminds me of the junk I used to throw together when I was a kid before I learned how not to do things. I'm surprised at the Yanks wasting their time on such rubbish."

"I wouldn't call it that," protested Felix. "It works, you've got to admit that. It registers signals undetectable on any other apparatus. It could be that it's the forerunner of something really important."

"So? What's the theory?"

"I don't know."

"Did Rasch?"

"I don't know that either. Why?"

"If you didn't have the theory," explained Bark with airy condescension, "you could spend the rest of your life trying to make a perpetual motion machine. As it is you know perpetual motion machines simply won't work so you don't waste time in trying to build one. Get it?"

"No. What's the point?"

"The point is, Rasch was shooting in the dark. Hell, Felix, I've seen all sorts of crackpot ideas but none of them stand up when you check the math."

"Too true. Where is Bob, anyway?"

"Working on this baby." Bark rapped a knuckle on his drawing board. Felix leaned over his shoulder to look at the plans. He frowned at what he saw.

"You've seen this in a laboratory," said Bark with undisguised enthusiasm. "It's one of those things we knock up to please the visitors and it makes a handy demonstration of magnetism. Out here it could be useful too."

It could, thought Felix grimly, be more than useful. Magnetic acceleration wasn't new but on Earth it had its limitations. Basically, it was a series of hollow electro-magnets which could be activated in turn, thus dragging any ferrous mass through their coils along a linear path. The more magnets the greater the speed with no acceleration mounting in geometrical progression. Bark's plan showed a truly gigantic installation with dozens of electro-magnets.

"What's the idea?"

"Nothing serious, though I suppose it could be useful." Bark leaned back, his face thoughtful. "We could fire a mass of small ball-bearings along it with a jerking mechanism at the far end to send them out in a spray like a shotgun blast. With the speed they would travel, an attacking ship would be riddled like a sieve."

"If it was coming along the right path," reminded Felix. Bark shrugged.

"Sure, but that's no real objection. Any attacking ship would have to line up with the station approach and this thing could be set to really spread the missiles. The range would be out of this world, remember. Escape velocity's only over a mile a second and we could reach that without trouble." He grinned at Felix. "You should talk to Bob about it. It could make your lasers look sick."

"I doubt it. You haven't manoeuvrability for one thing and there's a time lag for another. Still, I will talk to him later." Felix hesitated. "Have you built it yet?"

"Not yet. Maybe we won't ever, but it's fun getting it ready just in case. Mental recreation, you know, we've got to stay sane and healthy."

"Of course."

"Shall I page Bob for you?"

"No. I've got to see Jeff. Tell Bob I delivered the graphs."

"Sure. Have fun."

Fun could have peculiar annotations. Digging caverns in the rock for recreation was amusing as well as beneficial. Building electro-magnetic acceleration devices was both mentally stimulating and provided a means of keeping skills in condition. Add them both and the result could be far from amusing.

Especially when it was remembered just what the station produced.

Felix doubted if the Government would approve. He doubted if any sane and reasonable man would sleep well at night if he knew that above his head hung a damoclean sword.

A sword composed of carefully dug chambers that could be used as missile-proof feeding magazines. A gigantic magnetic-accelerator powered with the energy of an atomic pile and which could easily fling small metal canisters into space at well over Luna escape velocity.

Canisters which could not help but fall on the Earth and could be filled with the minute horrors bred in the laboratories of the station.

f i f t e e n

Jeff was busy when Felix arrived in the bio-physical laboratory. He looked up from the artificial brain, a testing instrument in his hand.

"Anything wrong?"

"No, just a routine testing." Jeff straightened and attached his instrument to a different part of the structure. "Did you check out the graphs?"

"Yes. It was as we suspected."

"No spy, uh?"

"Not unless Abic's the traitor."

"Come again?"

"It sent out a signal coinciding with the explosion."

"I see." Jeff carefully finished his testing then ducked from within the barrier. He rested his instrument on a bench, made a notation on a pad, then grunted with satisfaction. "That should hold him for a while."

"Him?"

"Why not? We've given it a body of sorts, a name of a kind and a mission in life. Why deny it a gender?"

"No reason, but why not her?"

"With a name like Abic?" Jeff frowned. "Still, why not? I knew a girl named Abbie once, and then there's weirder names than that. Still, to me he's masculine all the way through." He leaned against the barrier. "So he sent out a signal, did he? Maybe he was waving them goodbye."

"If he did it was a permanent farewell." Felix was puzzled. "You're not taking this seriously are you?"

"You're mistaken. I'm deadly serious about everything and anything to do with Abic. But there is such a thing as coincidence, you know."

"Admitted."

"And he could have registered the explosion rather than vice-versa."

"True, if the timing had been different, but the signal was early, not late."

"That proves nothing. We could have seen the results of the explosion seconds after it actually happened," pointed out Jeff. "And we don't know what, if anything, Abic registered. Maybe he recorded a fear-impression from one of the crew."

"Is that possible?"

Jeff smiled and Felix grew thoughtful. It seemed a ridiculous concept and yet, if Rasch could build a thing of metal, crystal and wire, which could register the emissions of a brain, then why should not a brain be able to register the strong emotions of another?

"You intrigue me, Jeff," he said. "I'd like to work on it. Have you any earlier encephalograms?"

"As many as you want from the day we fixed the connections." Jeff gestured to a tall filing cabinet. "Help yourself."

"I will." Felix frowned at the stacked sheets on which the graphs had been transferred. "I'll take those of the past few months if I may. Where do I begin?"

"I'll get them for you."

Felix stepped back as Jeff riffled through the sheets, sensing, for some reason, a hint of aggression in the other's manner. He wondered if it could be a touch of professional jealousy, the dislike of an outsider taking an interest in what could be regarded as personal property. It was probably a mistaken impression, the result of his own hypertensed nerves, and he knew it was dangerous when weighing others to trust instinct too far.

He sighed and leaned on the rail, staring at the enigmatic box which housed the largest brain known to man. A bank of dials recorded essential information and, as a supposed electronics expert, he should have been able to read them like a book. But he was a psychologist, not an electrician, and the box held nothing from which he could gain information. No eyes, ears, mouth. No tiny muscles to tense under strain and signal change of emotion. No hands which so often told more than they knew. No tongue to speak the truth when its owner intended lies. No glands to secrete odours which were the signals of the primitive nature guiding all basic motivations.

Nothing but some erratic lines scratched by pens on a roll of marked paper.

He turned as Jeff came from the cabinet, papers piled high in his hands.

"Here, Felix, these should keep you busy for a long time to come. Are you interested in cyphers?"

"A little. Why?"

"Because these are a cypher." Jeff handed them over. "Personally I can't see how you could possibly make anything of them but you're welcome to try."

"Thanks," said Felix drily. "It's good of you to let me amuse myself."

He glanced at the sheets noting that the graphs had been cut and stuck on pasteboard for easy handling. Idly he riffled the stack glancing at the dates stamped along the upper edge of each graph. Each sheet held twelve hours and he tensed as a date caught his eye. It was one he would never forget.

"Seen anything?" Jeff was at his elbow.

"Nothing important." Felix tucked the sheets under his arm. "Well, I'll let you get back to work."

He had lied but that wasn't important, he had only done it because of the other's aggressiveness—what was important

was that he had seen something which had caused a surge of adrenalin to quicken his blood. A date and a time. *Dec. 13th 22.5.23.*

The time of his accident !

Beneath it soared a thin red line.

Avril was puzzled. "But why do you want it, Felix ? What interest can the hospital register have for you ?"

"I want to check on something. I've tried to get it myself but the guard won't let me through."

"Naturally, not without permission from Gloria."

"But you can get in without any argument. You've a right, as dietician, to enter the hospital at any time. Please, Avril, I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

He was taking a chance but it was a calculated risk. Of all the station personnel, she was the one who would be most likely to help him without question. She loved him and, to her, that should be reason enough. But still she hesitated.

"I don't understand this. Why can't you just ask Gloria to let you look at it ?"

"Because I'm not sure and I don't want to make myself look a fool." He smiled, hoping that she wouldn't continue the line of questioning. "It's just something I want to check out, Avril. I'm probably all wrong but, if I'm not, then I'll tell Gloria all about it. If I bother her with it now she might get all sorts of wrong ideas about me. You know how she is with her pills and probing."

"But—"

"Please, Avril. Couldn't you do it just for me ?"

Put like that he knew she couldn't refuse.

Later, with the book in his hands, he wondered why he had acted so mysteriously. Caution bred caution until it defeated its own end. He had given reason for Avril to wonder about him and that could be the first crack in the armour of his disguise. Worse, she may begin to get suspicious of his loyalty and, if that happened, he would have to reveal himself.

He wondered if Leaver had used her in the same way.

Irritably he concentrated on the register, trying to forget the dead man.

The book, like Gloria, was neat, the handwriting small and well formed, each entry clear and unambiguous. With the

heap of graphs at his side Felix quickly correlated the dates then checked the **high** peaks with the entries in the book.

They matched.

There was a slight difference in the times but that could be explained by careless recording on the part of the doctor. She would not have been concerned with seconds and only with the actual time of admission. His own entry was minutes later than Abic's record ; but it had taken time for him to fall, more time for him to be rescued. The other entries could be explained in the same way.

It was not coincidence. It could not have been coincidence, the records matched too well for that. There had to be another explanation.

Felix remembered what Jeff had suggested. Abic could be registering simple human emotion and, if it was, then it must be registering the emotion of fear. But if that were so, how to account for Maynard's suicide attempt ? A man determined to kill himself does not feel fear. Hate, perhaps, depression but not fear. Fear would defeat his own object. Fear was the emotion which kept criminals alive when all they had to face was execution. They were more afraid of immediate death than later destruction.

But if not fear, then what ?

Grimly Felix leafed through the register, concentrating this time on the actual entries and not just on their times. Most were due to accidents, natural in an establishment like the station, and it was these he found most intriguing.

Two women had tried to commit suicide at various times by hanging themselves from nylon rope tested to one thousand pounds earth weight. Each time the 'unbreakable' rope had snapped.

A man had deliberately gripped a pair of heavy duty electric cables—and had been thrown clear with minor searing on the skin.

A technician had deliberately slashed his wrists. He had then stumbled against a bench, knocked over a container of liquid plastic which had sealed his wounds, and had suffered only mild shock.

Carl Leaver had fallen a distance of ten feet and had broken his neck.

Ten feet ! On earth that would be equivalent to a fall of eighteen inches. Felix wondered if Seldon had known what

had happened to his suspected spy, then turned up the man's own entry.

Seldon. Caught in fall of rock from roof. Extensive amputations.

Sickly Felix wondered just how extensive those amputations had been.

The guard was sympathetic.

"Is it bad, Felix?"

"I hope not." Felix managed to give the impression that he felt a lot worse than he looked. "It's just that I'm getting dizzy spells and I want to let Gloria check me over in case there's anything wrong. Did she notify you I was coming?"

"Sure." The guard jerked his head towards the door of the hospital. "You'd better wait inside."

"Is Gloria there?" Felix knew she wasn't.

"No, but you can go inside."

The place was as he remembered it. The same neat, empty ward, the tidy office with its filed records. Pulling the register from beneath his coverall he placed it on the desk where it had been before. There had been no need to implicate Avril any further and he wanted to see Seldon.

The door to the operating theatre was locked.

Irritably he tested the catch, wondering why Gloria had locked it at all, then forgetting his wonder in a mounting sense of urgency. Frowning he examined the simple mechanism, then crossed to a cabinet of surgical instruments. One was shaped like a long, thin, slightly curved spatula, probably something with which to hold down a tongue, but it would serve a different purpose. He probed, strained, probed again and the lock clicked open.

Seldon was asleep.

He was in the same position, the same sheet pulled tight around his throat, still in the odd, humped posture which hinted of terrible injuries. His eyes were closed and the lines of his face sagged in relaxation. He looked, thought Felix, very old and very tired.

"Seldon!"

No response.

"Seldon, damn you! Wake up!"

He couldn't shout, the guard was outside and he couldn't rely on the acoustics of the place. Even a whisper could be overheard. Reaching out he squeezed the man's cheeks.

"Seldon !"

The skin was flaccid beneath his fingers, cold and somehow reptilian as if the life within flowed with alien sluggishness. The theatre was very quiet, only a thin sussuration came from beneath Seldon's sheet as if a tiny pump were working with smooth efficiency.

"Seldon !"

Felix had to talk to him, there were questions to which he must have answers, but still the man remained asleep. Losing patience Felix clamped his hand over the man's nostrils and mouth.

It would have woken any normal man. The threat of suffocation would have dragged any breathing creature from the deepest sleep but still Seldon did not waken. Standing there, his hand tight over the other's mouth, Felix felt the hairs prickle on the base of his neck and something cold trace a path down his spine.

There was one way to be certain.

The spatula was of polished alloy, light but strong and reflecting the light in shining sterility. Removing his hand he held it before Seldon's mouth, watching for the tell-tale misting that would signify life.

He was still watching when Gloria entered the room.

s i x t e e n

There had been no warning, not even the sound of the outer door opening, but perhaps he hadn't been intended to hear. He straightened, the spatula still gleaming unmisted in his hand and he looked down at it, placing it carefully on a small table before looking at the doctor.

She wasn't alone. Avril was beside her and, behind them both, Crombie stood grim and alert. He held his pistol and Felix wondered if he would use it. Then he saw the Major's expression and knew that he wouldn't hesitate to shoot.

"Felix !" Avril stepped forward. "I . . ."

"You told them." He felt bitter at her betrayal.

"She told us nothing," snapped Crombie. He took hold of Avril's arm and pulled her to his side away from the line of fire. "She didn't have to. You've been under surveillance from the moment you arrived."

"Normal procedure surely, Major ?"

"Yes. You tried to flatter me on the subject once before, I suppose you thought that you were being clever. But you aren't clever, Larsen. Your biggest mistake was in enquiring after Leaver. There was no way you could have known about him had you been what you claimed to be."

"Do you honestly believe that I'm an enemy agent?" The concept was so ridiculous that Felix fought the desire to laugh. He lost the impulse as he looked at Crombie's eyes. The man was serious and Felix couldn't blame him. He had only himself to blame for his position.

"You're not an electronics engineer," said Crombie. "Bob Howard spotted that almost right away."

"How?"

"You didn't talk his language. The details are unimportant but he guessed there was something wrong. He was certain of it when you both talked about Rasch's detector."

"I see. Have you considered that Bob might have his own reasons for making me a scapegoat?"

"That is a cheap accusation," said Crombie. "But I've investigated all possibilities. You asked after Leaver and you persuaded Avril to take the register from the hospital. Neither is the act of an innocent man."

"It needn't be the act of an enemy agent either," reminded Felix. "As it happens I have a perfectly innocent explanation for both. So you knew about Leaver?"

"I suspected him. He died before that suspicion became proof."

"You weren't the only one, Major. Seldon suspected him too. He told me about him when I was here after my accident. That was why I mentioned him to you. I thought you should know."

"Interesting." Crombie snapped up his pistol as Felix stepped away from where he stood. "Don't try anything, Larsen! There is a lot you can tell us, so I want to keep you alive. But I'm a good shot and I won't have to kill you if you're thinking of trying anything stupid."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Felix snorted his impatience. "Just because you've found out something you can't explain, you assume that I'm an enemy. Well, I'm not. Seldon told me about Leaver. If he wasn't dead he could prove what I say."

"Dead!" Gloria surged forward, forgetful of being in line with Crombie's gun. He moved quickly to one side.

"Careful, Larsen !"

"Don't be a fool !" Felix turned to the doctor. "I'm sorry, I should have told you earlier. I was trying to determine if he was alive when you came in. There's no sign of breathing."

"No," she said calmly. "There wouldn't be. But Seldon isn't dead."

Felix raised his eyebrows. In his experience, when a man didn't breathe then that man was dead. He watched as Gloria moved the sheet from around Seldon's throat revealing a cabinet studded with dials and controls. She adjusted a dial, waited a few moments then threw a small switch. The soft sursuration Felix had heard earlier rose to a thin hum.

Seldon opened his eyes.

His name should have been Lazarus. Felix would have sworn that he was dead, every test he had been able to administer had proved that, but now he was alive, his eyes wide open, the lips working with a soft smacking sound.

"Hello, Gloria. I see we've got company." He frowned as he looked at Felix, his eyes rolling in their sockets. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before ?"

"Yes." Felix stepped before the cabinet ; "I spoke with you, remember ? We talked and . . ."

"That's enough, Larsen !" Crombie shouldered him to one side. "Listen, Seldon, this is very important. Did you talk about anyone to this man ?"

"Who ?"

"That's what I want you to tell me. Think now, did you ?"

"We talked of all kinds of things." Seldon paused, the tip of his tongue touching his lips. "Could I have a drink, please?"

"Later. Well ?"

"I may have mentioned Leaver. Yes, I did mention Leaver now I come to think of it. Please ! Could I have that drink now ?"

"I'll get it." Felix crossed to the faucet and filled the spouted cup. Carefully he held it to Seldon's lips, letting a trickle of moisture moisten his mouth. He straightened, conscious of Gloria's eyes watching his every move.

"You've done that before," she said. He shrugged.

"I told you that I'd talked with Seldon." He set aside the cup. "Now, there's one thing I must know. When you had your accident, Seldon, what was in . . ."

"No !" Gloria pushed him aside with unsuspected strength. "You are not to talk about that."

"But—"

"No !"

Quickly she adjusted a control and the soft pulse of the pump faded to a murmuring whisper. Seldon's eyelids drooped and, even as Felix watched, he regained his former immobility.

"You've read the register," said Gloria softly. "The amputations were . . . extreme. The rock fall crushed the pelvis, ruptured the spleen and shredded the lungs with broken fragments of ribs. Fortunately the bio-physical laboratory had a second artificial blood pump and I managed to connect the great arteries of the cortex with the supply. Even so it was a near thing. I managed to save the larynx, most of his spine and the upper trachea but the rest . . ." She made an expressive gesture.

"Amputated !"

Felix felt a little sick. Seldon was now nothing more than a head connected to an artificial blood supply and a pump to force air through his throat so that he could speak. It was, he had no doubt, a miracle of modern surgery, perhaps possible only on the Moon, but his instinctive humanity revolted at the concept of such a helpless cripple. Gloria must have read his thoughts.

"You are disgusted," she said, "but that is your conservatism, not your logic. Seldon is alive and will remain so indefinitely, subject, of course, to the normal catabolic decay of the flesh of his face and skull. Even so that may be delayed long past the normal life-expectancy."

"You call it life ?"

"He is aware. He can see and hear and speak. Also, he can hope."

"For a new body, I suppose ?" Felix was bitter. "Why don't you just kill him and have done with it ?"

"That would be murder."

"Of course. You mustn't do that. You doctors are all alike. It doesn't matter what human suffering you inflict, it's all right because you're within the law. Damn it ! You wouldn't let a dog suffer like that. No, I'm wrong. You do let dogs suffer even worse. Are you a disciple of Pavlov, Doctor Brittain ?"

"That's enough, Larsen !"

"Is it, Major? Am I insulting the good doctor?" Felix gritted his teeth. "Well, perhaps I am, but why can't I speak to Seldon if he's so happy?"

"I didn't claim that he was happy," said Gloria evenly. "How could any man in his position be that? But I don't want to inflict further mental agony. The psychic shock of the accident was tremendous and he still hasn't got over it. That is why we keep him under minimum wakefulness. Hypnosis has helped a great deal, sometimes he doesn't even know that he has no body, but outside disturbances could send him into catatonia."

"Would that be so bad? He wouldn't be the first to find escape into the past."

"Now you are talking utter nonsense and you know it. There is not, nor can there ever be, escape into the past. Always there are troubles and the mind retreats and retreats until it is back in the foetal stage and can retreat no further. Seldon has a fine mind. I intend to save it from that."

"So that he can live as a head on a box?"

"Is it so much worse than living in an iron lung? Be reasonable, Felix. We are working all the time on new prosthetic devices but before we can even try to fit them, his body and mind must heal."

"All right." Felix drew a deep breath. "Let's forget the argument. I'll accept that your motives are good. In fact I'll apologise for doubting them. I'm sorry, Gloria. I mean that."

"I understand. You wouldn't be human if you didn't react to what you have seen."

"Thank you." He stared at Crombie. "Well, are you satisfied?"

"Of your innocence? No."

"But you heard Seldon say that he had told me about Leaver."

"I did."

"Then what other proof do you need?"

"Let's get one thing straight," said Crombie. "Since the rocket exploded this station has been in a state of emergency. Even without that I am in complete charge as regards any suspected activities. I do not need proof. I do not even require suspicion. Doubt is sufficient. You are not free of doubt."

"But—"

"There are no buts. The security of the station is of paramount importance."

It was time to take control of the situation. Felix looked around the operating theatre then stepped towards the door. He heard the sharp intake of Avril's breath and sensed rather than saw the movement of Crombie's gun. He turned and looked directly at the Major.

"If you're going to shoot, Major, do it now. If not, I suggest we continue this discussion in more congenial surroundings."

Meekly they followed him into the empty ward.

"Why," said Gloria suddenly, "did you want to speak to Seldon? What is so important that you are willing to risk his sanity to discover?"

She had been standing very silent, her eyes thoughtful as Crombie had made his accusations and Felix was reminded of a detached scientist studying a specimen. So he had often stood and watched, waiting for the moment of maximum psychological impact before asking the question which so often drove to the root of lies and truth. It was a technique used often by the police and he could admire it even though he was the subject of interrogation.

"I wanted to ask him about his accident."

"Why?"

Felix hesitated. To be truthful was to expose himself and to make an end of his usefulness to the Government. Not that he could be of much further use but, if he had gauged the situation correctly, there was a very real danger that he would never be permitted to return to Earth. Yet he had to answer the question.

"I wanted to know all about it," he said slowly. "I wanted to know if the accident was just that or something else."

"Deliberate sabotage?" Gloria glanced at the Major. "How would Seldon know that?"

"He could sense it." Felix tried to explain. "He could have received an impression of wrongness. For example, his fellow workers could all, for no apparent reason, have left the workings at the same time. He could have been given a message which sent him there. I can't say what his impression could be but he may have had one."

"He didn't." Crombie looked at the pistol in his hand then thrust it into its holster. The gesture was symbolic and Felix

felt the immediate easing of tension. "I checked all that. It was a genuine accident."

"Was he working alone?"

"No."

"Yet he was the only one to be hurt. Didn't that strike you as rather odd? One man hurt, almost killed, in a rock fall and yet no one else even slightly injured. I've worked on those rock faces and there isn't a great deal of room."

"Agreed, but it happened," said Crombie drily. "After all, accidents are usually odd. That's why they are accidents."

"Yes," said Felix deliberately. "If they are normal accidents."

"Sabotage? But I told you I checked every possibility. There was no sabotage."

"I think I know what Felix is getting at," said Gloria. She looked at him. "Accident prone?"

"What," said Avril, "is an accident prone?"

"It is a person around which accidents seem to constantly happen," said Gloria. "They do not cause the accidents, quite often they are not personally involved, but wherever they happen to be there are accidents. Insurance companies know them quite well, in fact they have a black-list of such people, and they are the first thing any establishment like this has to weed out."

"Have you weeded them out?"

"Yes, Felix. I've checked every accident with that in mind. There are no common personnel involved."

"I'm not thinking of personnel," said Felix. "But you are wrong when you say there is no common factor involved."

He told them what he had discovered. Gloria was thoughtful, Crombie frankly sceptical. Avril said nothing but, standing beside Felix, she softly squeezed his arm. He had, at least, one ally.

"We've been over all this," snapped Crombie testily. "Abic is obviously registering an emotional emission from those concerned."

"That is what Jeff says, but you could both be wrong. Look at it from the other direction. Abic emits something, a mental force, perhaps, certainly it is akin to thought or Rasch's detector wouldn't have registered it. It seems an odd coincidence that those emissions always coincide with an accident of some kind. And they do! I've proved it!"

"No." Gloria was the cold scientist seeking faults in a seemingly perfect theory. "You haven't, you know, Felix. You have simply discovered a relationship but it need not mean what you say. The Major could be correct."

"The Major is wrong!" Felix couldn't understand why they were so blind. "Listen," he said to Crombie. "You've just told me that you don't need proof or suspicion. All you need is doubt. Well, for God's sake! Isn't there enough doubt here to satisfy you?"

"Be fair, Felix!" Gloria was still the scientist. "You can't expect us to take your unsupported word when there is a perfectly rational explanation which, for some reason, you refuse to accept. If you had a shred of proof . . ."

"Proof! You want still more proof!"

Felix recognised his anger and forced himself to be calm. Shouting was no way to persuade these people. For some odd reason they refused to see what to him was so obvious. He would change all that.

"Very well," he said evenly. "You ask for proof and I can supply it. Avril! You will find some papers in my room. They are the encephalograms from Abic. You know what they look like?"

"Yes, Felix."

"Will you get them for me. Hurry, please." He looked grimly at the doctor as Avril left the room. "Now, Gloria, for your proof. You must have the case history of Seldon in your files. Will you get it, please?"

"For what reason?"

"Please get it. I'll explain when Avril gets back."

She wasn't long. By the flush on her face she had run both ways. Felix took the records and put them on one of the beds. Gloria sat beside them, her file in her lap.

"Now," said Felix. "I'll supply your proof. First I want you to check that the high points on the alpha line, that's the red line on the graphs, check with the accident times in the register. Will you get it for me, Avril?"

He waited as they made the check.

"Right? Good. Now if Abic is simply responding to the stimulus of some strong human emotion, pain or fear or terror, then it should do so each and every time. A detector does not choose when it is going to register. It is either operating, or it is not, and Abic is in continuous operation. Therefore, if Abic

is the registering instrument you claim, there should be no gaps in its record."

Felix riffled the graphs until he found the one he wanted.

"Open your file, Gloria, the time of Seldon's accident was 21.54.49. Right?"

"Not exactly. I have it here as 21.56. I don't record the seconds."

"I know, but it is near enough allowing for inevitable time lags. You see the alpha high point?"

He showed her the broken red line.

"Seldon, I take it, was unconscious when you found him and you probably gave him initial sedation and then followed with a course of extensive anesthesia."

"Naturally. I had to guard against shock."

"Of course. But, inevitably, he had to waken. I assume that, when he did, he was horrified at discovering what had happened to him?"

"Well . . ."

"You told us that he was in actual danger of losing his sanity," rapped Felix. "You said that you had to use drugs and hypnosis to calm him. Is that correct?"

"It is."

"Then he must have experienced strong emotion at that time. Pain and fear and terror. Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Then those emotions must have registered on the encephalograms from Abic."

Felix leaned forward and thrust the graphs into the doctor's hands.

"Please check, Gloria. You have the times Seldon woke, in your file. You have admitted that he suffered strong emotions at those times. If Abic is nothing but an emotion-detector then the alpha line should match your records." Impatiently he waited as she frowned over the papers. "Well, do they?"

He could read the answer in her face.

"They don't, do they?" He snatched the papers from her hands, checking times against the erratic red line. "Nothing!" He flung down the records. "It's as I thought. There's no correlation at all. Well, Major! There's your proof!"

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seventeen

Crombie surprised him.

"Gloria?"

If she made a signal Felix missed it but it didn't matter. She could not but help agree.

"I see." Thoughtfully Crombie stared down at the scattered records. He did not pick them up to make his own check and Felix found that odd in a man who prided himself on fully investigating every possibility. His next words were even more strange.

"Just what," he said carefully, "do you think you have proven, Felix?"

"Isn't it obvious? Abic is emitting, not receiving."

"So?"

"Are you serious, Major?" Felix had met scepticism before but nothing so blatant in a man he had previously considered so shrewd. "Every time there is an accident that artificial brain sends out some mysterious force. Seldon's accident, my own, even the explosion of the rocket followed or coincided with peaks of that emission. Damn it! Can't you see that Abic didn't register those events—it caused them!"

"Please!" Crombie lifted one hand in an unmistakable gesture. He was the sensible adult talking to the foolish child. "Let us keep a sense of proportion about this."

"I don't understand you." Felix felt his triumph at having proven his point dissolve into rage. He forced himself to be calm, taking deep breaths until he had regained his composure. "Aren't you satisfied with the proof?"

Crombie shrugged. "You have shown us that there is an oddity in the records and no doubt Ottoway will be very interested in what you have found, but to state that Abic is responsible for several accidents and the destruction of the rocket . . ."

"Can there now be any doubt?"

"An artificial growth confined in a strong plastic box?" The Major smiled. "Really, Felix! How can I be expected to believe that?"

"By using your intelligence," rasped Felix. "That is, if you have any, which I'm beginning to doubt!"

"There is no need to be insulting!"

"You—"

Felix bit off the words as his anger mounted until it threatened his judgment. The fool ! The stupid blind fool ! And to think that such a man was in complete charge of station security !

Or was he the fool he appeared to be ?

The anger resolved itself into a cold determination.

"Abic must be destroyed," said Felix. "The security of the station depends on it."

"Don't be ridiculous !"

Crombie's gun was in its holster, the flap open, the polished butt reflecting the light in a warm, walnut sheen. Felix picked up some of the papers, let them fall and snatched at the gun as Crombie's attention was distracted.

"What—" The Major clawed at his belt.

"Stay where you are !" Felix stepped back against the wall, the gun in his hand. "Don't move and don't make a noise !"

"He means it, Major !" Gloria's even tones cut through Crombie's anger with a note of warning. He released his breath with a sigh.

"Felix !"

"Be quiet, Avril !" His eyes darted about the ward. "That cabinet ! There is a bottle of small blue pills in there. Bring them to me. Quickly now !"

He remembered the pills and he recognised the label. He smiled at Avril's strained face as she handed him the bottle.

"Felix ! You can't . . ."

"I know what I'm doing."

He gestured the woman back, smashed the bottle with a sweep of the gun and threw a shower of blue on to one of the beds.

"All right, Major. You first. Swallow three of those pills."

"But—"

"They are very strong, Felix," said Gloria quickly. He smiled without humour.

"I know just how strong they are, doctor. Well, Major ? What are you waiting for ?"

For a moment he thought that Crombie would refuse and his hand tightened on the gun, his finger pressing the trigger so that the hammer lifted from the breech. Then Gloria's voice ended the Major's hesitation.

"Do as he says, Jack !"

Slowly Crombie swallowed three of the pills.

"Good !" Felix relaxed his grip on the pistol. "Now you, Gloria. That's right. Avril ! Thank you." He gestured with the gun. "Now lie down. Just stretch out and relax. When you wake it will all be over."

"That's what you think." Crombie's voice was thick and his eyelids drooped as the drug began to take effect. "You'll pay for this, Larsen."

"I don't think so, Major. But we can worry about that later. Someone has to take care of the security of this station if you can't."

"You . . ." Crombie made a supreme effort to resist the drug. He managed to heave himself up on one elbow and then, quite suddenly, fell back with a mumbling sigh.

Ten seconds later they were all unconscious.

There had been no choice.

Walking down the corridors, the sheaf of encephalograms shielding the bulk of the pistol under his coverall, Felix wasted no time on regret. He had assessed the situation, made his decision and was about to carry it out. Later, when the brain had been destroyed, he would reveal himself to the Director and claim protection from Sir Joseph. There would be questions, of course, and perhaps a board of inquiry, but it would be too late then to prevent essential action.

Nothing could stop that now.

"Hi, Felix !" The guard was one of the men who had accompanied him on his trips outside. "Want in ?"

"Please."

He waited as the guard called through.

"They're busy," he said. "If you'll just wait a minute ?"

"Sure."

"They won't be long." The guard was probably bored and felt like conversation. Felix didn't oblige. Fortunately, the intercom hummed and saved him from a forced conversation. Ottoway nodded a greeting from where he stood at a bench, a graduated flask of ruby liquid in his hand. Jeff was standing beside the cabinet holding the records.

"Busy ?" Felix handed the graphs to Jeff.

"We're always busy." Jeff scanned the records, grunted his pleasure at finding them in correct sequence and tucked them into the cabinet. "Well, Felix, did you solve the cypher ?"

"I think so." Felix looked at Ottoway. "Is that a Luna cocktail or have I interrupted an experiment?"

"Neither. I'm just checking Abic's blood. We were drawing some off when you called through and that's why you had to wait. We want no bugs in this stuff that we didn't put in ourselves." He put down the flask. "It seems O.K., Jeff."

"Good."

"What would you do if it wasn't?" Felix leaned idly against the protective rail, moving so that both men were in the field of his vision.

"Do?" Ottoway shrugged. "Drain and replenish, of course. We carry a spare stock in the deep freeze."

"A complete exchange? Just like you would change the blood of a blue baby?"

"Yes." Ottoway seemed surprised at the analogy. "You could say that, but it would be much simpler with Abic than with any baby. Anyway, we don't have to worry about that now."

Not now nor ever, thought Felix grimly. Not now nor ever.

He glanced down at the thing he intended to destroy. The box housing the actual brain looked too strong and while a bullet might penetrate, there was always the risk that it would do little damage, if any. The instruments were obvious extensions and destroying them would do no real harm. The pump was another matter.

He stared at the plating covering the humped apparatus beneath the box. Within that covering would be the mechanical simulacrum of a human body. A pump to act as heart, oxygenators to act as lungs, thermostats, filters and a mass of complex chemical-balancing devices to ensure that the blood was kept in perfect condition.

Kill the body and the brain would die!

He started, shocked by the realisation that he was thinking of the machine as a human person, then became aware that someone was speaking to him.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Didn't you hear me?"

"No, I was thinking. What did you say?"

"Forget her," said Jeff. He moved from the cabinet and Felix tensed before seeing that he was crossing the room towards Ottoway. "Avril will keep. I was asking after the result of your studies."

"I wasn't thinking about Avril," said Felix. For some reason it was important to disassociate her from what he had to do. "What was that about studies?"

"What's the matter with you?" Jeff frowned. "You said that you had solved the cypher—the graphs. Well, what did you discover?"

"One thing," said Felix evenly. "Abic is insane!"

Ottoway grunted, the craggy mask of his face suddenly ugly with barely concealed anger.

"That," he said acidly, "is a damn stupid remark."

"Thank you."

"You asked for it, Felix." Jeff obviously shared Ottoway's opinion.

"I don't think so." Felix gestured towards the bulk of the artificial brain. "What do you really know about this thing you've built? You took nucleic acids and stimulated them until they grew into a giant cortex. But what do you have?"

"A machine," said Jeff quickly. "An organic machine."

"And what else is a man?"

"A man is the product of his environment," said Ottoway. "Are you trying to teach me basic physiology, Felix? To me a man is nothing but a collection of stimuli, a sensory recording device capable of limited motion and restricted free will. He lives, moves and is governed by the world of his senses."

"Exactly." Ottoway, Felix saw, had expected opposition. "I'm not arguing with you about that, Reg. I agree with you all the way."

"So?"

"So, take a new-born brain. Divorce it from all preconceived emotionally based external stimuli—isolate it from all humanity. Put it in a box and make certain that it lives and grows. What would we have then?"

"Abic isn't a human brain, Felix. The analogy isn't absolute."

"I know that, but where is the difference? Abic is a cortex. It's capable of receiving and storing information. It contains an electric potential and that potential can be recorded on an encephalogram. It thinks, damn you! It thinks!"

They still wouldn't understand! Felix stared at them recognising their refusal to grasp the obvious and accept the inevitable. He swallowed, the gun a comforting bulk beneath his arm.

"By any standards you care to name," he said quietly, "Abic cannot be sane. It knows nothing of humanity, it's very thought processes must move in alien channels, the world it has experienced is not the world as we know it. It is big and powerful. It could be malicious and I think it is. Or it could simply have the attributes of an accident prone in a magnified degree. That doesn't matter. The important thing is that it is dangerous and must be destroyed."

He took the gun from beneath his coverall.

"You are going to destroy it!"

"You must be mad!" Ottoway stared at Felix with an incredulous expression. "Felix! Is this your idea of a joke!"

"I'm not joking." Felix lifted the gun. "This insane thing is going to be destroyed."

"You mean it!" Ottoway surged forward then halted as Jeff gripped his arm.

"Don't do it. Reg! That's Crombie's gun!"

"The Major—"

"—is perfectly all right." Felix stepped back from the machine resting his shoulders against the wall as he faced the two men. "I don't want to kill you," he said tightly, "but this is too important to argue about. Jeff! Open that housing!"

"Go to hell!"

"Op . . . Ottoway! Don't . . ."

Felix ducked as Ottoway swung a heavy piece of apparatus from the bench poising it to throw into his face. Instinctively he squeezed the trigger, the bark of the gun loud in the confines of the laboratory. Metal shattered in Ottoway's hands and he slumped to the floor.

"You swine—"

Jeff came running, head low, hands outstretched in a flying tackle. Caught off balance Felix had no time to spring clear. Desperately he swung the gun, the heavy weapon smashing across Jeff's temple. Grimly he examined the two sprawled figures.

Jeff wasn't dead and neither, to his surprise, was Ottoway. The bullet had spent its force on the apparatus he had poised to throw, slamming it back in a knockout blow to the jaw. Both men would waken with headaches but that was all.

Relief was lost in the urgency of the moment. The shot would have been heard, he had to work fast.

Ducking under the rail, Felix ran his hands over the metal housing. It was immobile, the dial of a combination lock a bland challenge which he found impossible to meet. Stepping back for fear of ricochettes he aimed the pistol and pressed the trigger.

The hammer fell with a dry click.

Again he tried to fire, again, then frantically pressed the trigger with a succession of dry clicks as the gun stubbornly refused to fire. Breaking it he examined the cartridges. All bore the imprint of the firing pin. Only one had actually exploded.

Slamming the chamber back into position he aimed at the roof, squeezed the trigger, and swore as chips of stone fell from the roof. Again he tried to shoot off the lock and then gave up. There had to be another way.

A thin metal bar stood against one wall and he gripped it, lifting it high before swinging it down towards the box with the full strength of his body.

The bar snapped as he began the downward swing.

It broke off a couple of inches from his hands, snapping as if made of fragile glass, the long, upper portion hurtling across the room to clatter harmlessly against a wall. Thrown off balance by the sudden lack of resistance Felix stumbled and fell heavily against the protective rail. Half-stunned he staggered to his feet and flung the fragment of bar at the machine.

Conscious of the passing of time he stared wildly around the laboratory then snatched up a chair. It was made of a light alloy which yielded as he beat at the machine until it was a useless mass. Irritably he threw it aside, knowing that he was wasting precious time. He needed weight and mass if he hoped to shatter the box or penetrate the housing. That or explosives. The laboratory held neither.

Savagely he tugged at the protective rail then froze as the intercom burst into staccato life.

"Attention ! Attention ! Emergency call to all personnel. Felix Larsen must be apprehended on sight. Guards will go immediately to the bio-physical laboratory and protect Abic from wanton damage. Warning. - Larsen is armed and dangerous. Take no chances !"

Time had run out !

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e i g h t e e n

He met the guard half-way down the passage leading from the laboratory. The man hesitated, his rifle held across his chest and Felix hit him before he could get it into firing position. He fell without a sound as Crombie's pistol cracked against his jaw and Felix jumped over him, diving through the door just as a group of men came running down a passage.

"There he goes !"

"Halt or I fire !"

Lead whined from a wall as he ducked down a corridor, forgetting all caution in the burning need for speed. Twice he cannoned from the roof before adapting his stride. Behind him the shouts of the pursuers faded as he ran through the maze of passageways but he was not deluded into thinking that he had escaped.

He had to find somewhere to hide.

Not for long, that was impossible, but long enough to plan his next move. While he raced at random through the station he was only delaying his inevitable capture.

One of the safety doors blocked the passage and he ran towards it. It opened just as he reached it and he staggered back, blood coursing from his nose, his face a throbbing numbness from the impact with the metal panel. A man stood and gaped at him then slumped as Felix struck viciously at his head.

Where to hide ?

A row of doors lined the wall and he tugged at one. It opened and he caught a glimpse of stacked crates. It was a storeroom and he ducked inside, slamming the door and leaning on it as the sound of running feet raced along outside. Sucking deep breaths he fought the desire to relax as he stared into the darkness. Then, careful to make no sound, he felt his way into the room and crouched behind a pile of boxes.

His face hurt and he touched it, feeling the warm wetness of blood and wondering if he had broken his nose. He wiped the blood on the sleeve of his coverall and cautiously touched the organ, wincing as bone grated beneath his fingers. But, broken or not, the nose was unimportant. He had more urgent things to do.

How to destroy Abic ?

There were explosives in the arsenal but they would be guarded, especially now they were watching for him. Even if he could get explosives he would have to take them back into the laboratory and detonate them. The place was guarded now and it would be impossible to get back into the place. Jeff and Ottoway would see to that.

But if he couldn't get close to the thing how could he destroy it?

He crouched as the door swung open and light streamed in from the corridor outside. Two men, both alert, peered into the room. They had been well trained. While one looked the other stood ready, his rifle trained into the compartment. Had Felix been less cautious he would be dead or a prisoner by now.

"See anything?" The man with the rifle leaned forward a little.

"No." His companion stepped into the room and slowly turned, his eyes gleaming in the reflected light as he searched the room.

"I knew he wouldn't be here," said the man with the rifle. "He probably ran straight on towards the living quarters. Come on, Harry, Echlan will be waiting for us at the hangar."

The door swung shut and Felix relaxed his grip on the gun. He was trembling a little, a sure sign of nervous tension, but he forced himself to remain where he was. Running, no matter how strong the desire, was useless until he knew where he was going. Grimly he resumed his interrupted train of thought.

Explosives and direct attack were out. He could, he supposed, surrender to the Director and appeal to London but, while that would safeguard his person, it would not destroy the thing in the laboratory. Distance would weaken the urgency and no Government official would, on his own authority, order the destruction of expensive equipment. He would have to strike in some more subtle manner and he would have to do it quickly.

He rose and stepped towards the door waiting until his ears told him that the guards had entered another room. Opening wide the door he stepped into the passage and ran towards the voices hoping to reach them before he was discovered. Luck was against him. The man with the rifle turned, his face startled over the barrel of his rifle as Felix lifted his pistol. Gunfire echoed from the walls.

Something hit Felix's pistol, the bullet from the guard's rifle knocking the weapon up and to one side as he pressed the trigger. Lead screamed from a wall in a wild ricochet and smashed the rifle from the guard's hands. Foolishly he stared at it then Felix was on him, his weighted hand cracking at his jaw, his other hand snatching up the fallen weapon.

Frantically he raced down the passage away from the shouts of the other guard.

There was only one way he could go—only one thing he could do. Abic depended on an electrically powered pump and, if the power to that pump could be cut, the artificial brain would die.

The passage opened on a wide area which seemed filled with people. He thrust through them, the blood-stained coverall, his weapons, the battered mask of his face attracting immediate attention.

"Felix !"

He raced past a man and shouldered another aside before running down a corridor. He had taken the wrong passage and he cursed as he found himself facing a knot of guards. Echlan was among them.

"Felix ! Stop you fool !"

"Stand back !"

The rifle kicked in his hands and lead whined from the ceiling.

"I mean it, Echlan ! Stand back all of you !"

They obeyed, turning as he ordered, faces to the walls, hands resting above their heads. Echlan stared over his shoulder as Felix approached.

"You can't get away, man ! Keep this up and you'll be shot."

"I don't think so." Staring at the sergeant, Felix had an idea. He thrust the pistol beneath his belt and jammed the muzzle of the rifle into the other's spine. "All right, Echlan, you lead the way. I want to get to the power plant, you know where it is."

Echlan didn't move.

"You heard me !" Felix twisted the butt grinding the barrel into the other's back. "You're going to be my hostage." He shouted at the others. "You hear that ? If I'm attacked Echlan dies !" He twisted the butt again. "Right ! Now move !"

"You're mad," said Echlan, but he began to walk down the passage. "You're clean off your rocker."

"Shut up and keep walking."

"What's it all for, Felix? What do you hope to gain?"

"I know what I'm doing!"

"Sure, you want to destroy Abic, but why?"

"The thing's insane. I . . ." Felix broke off. "How did you know what I wanted?"

"Crombie told us. He was found by the guard shortly after you left and gave the warning when he recovered." Echlan stared over his shoulder. "You're sick, Felix. Why don't you just call the whole thing off?"

"Keep walking!"

Felix was puzzled. Crombie had been drugged and, even if the guard had found him, the drug would have taken time to work itself harmless. Echlan answered his unspoken questions.

"Sir Ian came when the guard called in," he said. "He pumped the Major out and gave him something to pull him round. He alerted the station as soon as he recovered."

"I see."

Felix was thoughtful. It accounted for his failure to recognise the warning voice but it told him more than that. Crombie had acted too hastily. He could have sent guards to the laboratory and Felix would have been trapped without a chance to escape. Instead he had issued a general warning. Only his desperate fear for the safety of the brain could have prompted that.

The brain! The damn thing that squatted like a spider in the station, spinning its invisible web of mental force. An idiot intelligence which caused accidents, destroyed men and machines and, because of its insanity, had somehow contaminated the entire personnel of the station.

For madness was contagious, Felix knew that from experience. Abnormal behaviour tends to become the norm and, given a giant cortex with magnified mental emissions how could those around it have retained their sanity? It was the answer to all the oddities he had noticed, the slackening of discipline, the accepted customs which, when viewed coldly, were inexplicable to the people who composed the personnel. They themselves might not know how they had altered but he did.

He tried to win Echlan over.

"Listen," he said urgently. "You are a thinking man. What would you do if something threatened the station?"

"Fight it."

"Right, that's what I'm trying to do. Why don't you help me?"

"You must be joking." Echlan looked over his shoulder.

"If you ask me, that accident you had has affected your brain. What's in the station that's so bad?"

Felix told him. Echlan laughed.

"You don't believe me?"

"How can I? What harm can a thing in a box do?"

"If it were a bomb in box you'd think differently," snapped Felix. His voice was sharp with desperation. "Well, Abic is worse than any bomb. I honestly believe that it has altered the personalities of those in this station. Crombie, Ottoway, Jeff, maybe others."

"Sir Ian?"

Felix hesitated. He was thinking of the magnetic-accelerator and its potential. Why should Macdonald have even thought of its construction? And the Eyrie, what explanation could he have for that, other than what Felix suspected?

"Well?" Echlan's voice was a caustic rasp. "Is the Director one of your bogey man's victims?"

"I don't know."

It would be useless to offend the sergeant. Echlan, obviously, had the highest regard for Macdonald and would hear nothing against him. Felix had a flicker of hope. If he could persuade the man that Sir Ian was threatened he might yet win his support.

"Look at it . . ."

He stumbled, his ankle twisting beneath his weight and the rifle muzzle fell from Echlan's spine. He sprang forward towards a branching corridor and ducked into it as Felix recovered. His voice echoed from the tunnel.

"You can't win, Felix. Give up now before you get hurt!"

Then he was gone, the sound of his running feet echoing from the passage.

Felix ran after him, caught a glimpse of a closing door and dived through it just in time to see Echlan vanish from the end of the tunnel. By the time he reached the end the area was deserted. He started down a passage, heard the sound o

voices from the far end and doubled back. The intercom broke into life.

"Attention all personnel. Go to your quarters and remain. Guards in sector eight will move forward and bar passages seventeen to twenty-two. Guards in sector five will withdraw to sector six."

Passages seventeen to twenty-two were those leading towards the power plant. Echlan had reported and Crombie was sealing the area.

It was now impossible to cut off the power.

Felix ran down a corridor, cursing the lack of directions and the similarity of the tunnels but knowing that he had to keep moving. A shout echoed behind him as he passed a junction and he ran frantically from the chasing guards. A wide area opened before him and he ran across it, dived down a tunnel chosen at random and lunged through a safety door. Twenty more paces and he recognised where he was.

He fought the instinct to run to his own quarters. There was no help for him there.

"Felix !" The intercom filled the station with its mechanical voice. "Crombie speaking. Give up before you get hurt."

"Go to hell !"

Felix glared at the black box and resisted the temptation to thumb the button and yell defiance. If he did, then control would have him located.

"Felix, you don't understand." That was Avril's voice. "Please give yourself up. Please !"

He ran from the voice knowing that he couldn't escape it, but running just the same. He was a rabbit running wildly in a warren with the ferrets of guards coming closer all the time. They were in no hurry. He could do no damage. His capture was simply a matter of time.

"Felix !"

Echlan ran towards him, armed guards at his back. Felix fired, the bullet whining from the roof, then ran back down the corridor, his back cringing to the impact of expected lead. The guards didn't fire and he reached the end of the passage, ran down a wider tunnel and reached an unfinished corridor. He ran down it, pressing past a heap of broken stone and halting as he reached the far side of a chamber.

Bleakly he stared at the dead end of the rock face.

"He ran down there, Sarge."

Voices echoed down the tunnel followed by the cautious shuffle of feet.

"Watch it, Sam. He's armed and there's too much cover for my liking."

"He's too quick on the trigger."

"I don't know. He aimed high, remember."

"Shut up!" Echlan's voice rose above the babble. "We know you're in there, Felix, and you can't get out. Throw out your guns and come out with your hands over your head."

Felix didn't answer. He crouched behind the edge of the tunnel and looked down it to where the men were standing. He couldn't see them but, if they tried to approach, they would have to pass the heap of broken stone. Carefully he sighted the rifle.

"Echlan!" His voice followed the crashing echoes of the shot. "Echlan! Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Listen! If any of you try to come in here I'll shoot to kill."

"What good will that do?" The sergeant spoke with quiet reasonableness. "We'll get you in the end. Why don't you just give up?"

"I will—as soon as Sir Ian gets here."

"But—"

"You heard what I said!" Felix sent another bullet into the heap of stone. "I mean it, Echlan. Get the Director here and I'll give up."

It was the only thing he could do. Sir Ian might be contaminated by Abic's insanity but he was still the Director and a responsible person. And there was always the chance that he didn't know. Crombie could have told him that Felix was an enemy agent, anything to account for his actions. Perhaps he, like Echlan, thought that Felix was suffering from the delayed effects of his accident. But he would know the truth, Felix would see to that.

"Felix."

He looked up, aware that he had relaxed his vigilance, then eased his finger from the trigger as he recognised the man standing by the heap of stone.

"Felix?" Macdonald took another step forward. "Where are you?"

"Here." Felix rose. "I'm sorry about this, Sir Ian, but there's something you've got to know."

He told the Director what he had learned. Macdonald listened with quiet courtesy then held out his hand.

"Give me your gun, Felix."

"What are you going to do, Sir Ian?"

"First I think you need a wash and then something for that face of yours. It must be quite painful. The gun, please."

"But Abic? You will destroy it?"

"Shall we discuss that later?" Macdonald was very close. Felix didn't resist as he took the pistol and rifle.

It was good to relinquish responsibility. Good to be able to relax and leave the necessity of making decisions to someone else. He had tried and he had failed, now it was up to the Director.

Felix recognised the withdrawal symptoms and knew they were wrong. A man couldn't run and yield and leave it to others. That was the trouble with the world, too many people were content to leave the very survival of the race to those few who were not retrogressive. It was wrong to ignore the primitive aggressions.

Wrong, and dangerous. Felix knew it as he stepped into the corridor among Echlan and his men. For Macdonald had not been shocked, nor been incredulous. He had displayed none of the reactions Felix had expected and that could mean only one thing.

Nothing he had heard had come as a surprise.

n i n e t e e n

They had been very kind. Felix had bathed and changed and Gloria had fixed his face. Now they sat in the Eyrie, the room with the window and the wonderful view. It surprised Felix a little. He was, by the standards of the station, a criminal and had expected to be treated as such. This generosity made him cautious.

"I think you should know," he said, "that I am the direct representative of Sir Joshua Aarons."

"I know."

"You know?" Macdonald's answer startled Felix. Then he guessed. "I see. Gloria?"

"No, you weren't subjected to hypnosis or drugs if that is what you think. But it was obvious that you were other than what you appeared to be. While you lay unconscious after

your accident we were sure of it. You rambled a little. It was a tremendous shock, after all."

"Yes." Felix looked at his hands. "I would like to contact Sir Joshua. I can give your operator the code signal."

"I know Sir Joshua," said Macdonald. "A fine man."

"Are you going to let me talk to him?"

"Certainly. Did you have any doubt?"

There was a catch, Felix was sure of it. The Director couldn't simply let him talk to the head of Security and tell him the truth about the station. No man willingly commits political suicide. Macdonald must have guessed his thoughts.

"We aren't savages here, Felix. What else can we do but permit you to talk with your superior?"

"You could kill me."

Macdonald smiled and shook his head.

"No," he said gently. "That is the one thing we cannot do. We can't kill you any more than you could kill one of us. No one can die that way here in the station."

It took seconds for the full implication of Macdonald's remark to register.

"That's impossible!" Felix surged to his feet and took three steps towards the window. He turned and stared at the calm, bland faces. "That's impossible!" he repeated.

"No. Think about it for a moment."

He had the clues, all of them, and if he had a brain and imagination at all he should be able to find the answer. Not a different man, perhaps, but he was a trained psychologist able to probe actions and find motivations, delving beneath the surface to discover unsuspected truth. There was a wrongness about the station due, he'd guessed, to the presence of the artificial brain. But, ignoring the doubtful question of actual mental possession, just what constituted that stable air of wrongness?

He thought about it, sitting chin on hand, elbow on knee, eyes shadowed as he consciously dismissed all illogical emotion-based reactions to unfamiliar elements, concentrating instead on observed phenonema.

The total absence of strain and tension within the station. The calm acceptance that even would-be suicides could be trusted to continue their duties without fear of harm. The homogenousness of the personnel almost as if they were one big family.

Family !

The Father Image !

The station considered itself to be under some benevolent protection !

But why ? How ?

Then suddenly, the pieces fitted and he knew.

"The accidents," he said. "There are too many coincidences."

"Yes." Macdonald sighed as if with relief. "Now you know what Abic does."

Felix nodded. Now it all seemed so obvious. It had been, as Gloria had said, a matter of looking at the data from a different point of view.

"There are accident prone," said Macdonald, "and there is luck and we have known of the latter since the dawn of Mankind. Always there have been those with charmed lives and there have been the reverse too. So luck, good or bad, must be an actual force, a natural force similar to gravitation or magnetism or even electricity. A force as universal as those we know but on a different plane. It exists, we are surrounded by its effects, but only now can we begin to appreciate how it works.

"Why aren't all accidents the same ? A man can fall a foot and break his neck, another sixty feet and walk away unbruised. A man can try to shoot himself and the cartridge will misfire, another will die from the prick of a pin. Gamblers rely on luck, the probabilities of odds being in their favour and they can develop a skill in which they seem to control the very random factors of chance—if they are as random as we have always believed."

"Are they random ?"

"I think they are, as magnetism is, or electricity, but we can harness those forces and we have, in a way, harnessed the forces which we call luck." Macdonald smiled. "Or rather Abic has done it for us."

It fitted ! It fitted in a way which Felix found almost frightening.

"I believe that only a human brain can control this force," continued Macdonald. "We have all experienced luck both good and bad, and we all know of particularly 'lucky' or 'unlucky' types. Abic is the largest cortex known. It is, in almost every way a facsimile of a human brain. It seems only

reasonable to assume that, whatever powers we possess, it possesses them also, but to a greater degree. Ottoway says, and I agree with him, that our own power is latent, buried in the parts of the brain for which we seem to have no use. Abic's is far from latent."

"But it is locked in a box, deaf, blind, unaware . . ." Felix's voice trailed into silence as he saw his error. Abic was connected to the electrical system of the station and its 'senses' must follow every wire. The intercom boxes alone would relay every scrap of information within the station to the artificial brain and God alone knew what other senses it had been forced to develop. It could probably 'see' magnetism, gravitation, the pulse of electrons and the entire electro-magnetic spectrum.

He had underestimated the brain.

"Gloria says that a lucky accident is a combination of fortuitous circumstances, Sir Ian," he said. Macdonald nodded his head, as he stood by her chair, gently stroking her hair.

"She spotted the unusual circumstances of our accidents almost right away," he said. "Routine checking connected them with Abic, exactly as you yourself found the relationship. We were," his smile broadened a little, "less precipitate shall we say?"

"No, Sir Ian. You were more scientific. Do you know just how this—power—operates?"

"Not exactly, but we can make a reasonable assumption. It is a matter of selecting probabilities. For example, when you aim a pistol and pull the trigger two things can happen. The cartridge will or will not fire. If it does fire then again there is a choice. The bullet may or may not hit the target. If it does hit the target it may or may not strike a vital organ and so on. Luck, good luck, is a matter of selecting and combining positive—beneficial—probabilities. We all, in some degree, have that power. If we are exceptionally good at it then we have a 'charmed life.' Few people, unfortunately, are that good."

It was a facile explanation but there were flaws. Felix could admit that it covered everything which had disturbed him but even so something remained.

"What about Leaver? He died from a minor fall."

"Leaver was an enemy agent. We found a micro-radio when we examined his body. We had picked up odd trans-

missions and suspected him." Macdonald glanced at Avril.
"He deserved to die."

"But—"

"An organism has the right to defend itself," said Gloria gently. It was answer enough.

"But the Commission?" Felix waved her to silence.
"Never mind. I can guess. They must have talked and decided to replace the executive staff of the station and garrisoning it with American personnel. Abic would consider that to be a threat. Rockets are delicate things and it would be simple to ensure that an essential part malfunctioned at a critical moment." He gave a shaky laugh. "How does it feel to be the protected children of a devoted father?"

He hadn't expected an answer.

"But there's one thing which doesn't fit," he said bitterly.
"I tried to kill Abic. Why didn't it eliminate me?"

"Because it couldn't," said Gloria. "Because, within you, is a part of itself!"

Father fighting son. It seemed incredible and yet—father fighting son!

"You know what we do here," said Macdonald grimly.
"We search for better ways to eliminate the human race. Well, we found the ultimate in horror, but even our politicians are not yet so insane that they want to commit suicide. So we looked for something to defeat what we had found. You know about nerve gases?"

Felix nodded.

"Our virus is based on the action of those gases and there can be no defence. So we built the brain to help us find an answer. We wanted something, anything, to save the race from its own madness. Telling them isn't enough. People refuse to believe in annihilation."

"Naturally." Felix stared at the Director. "Does that surprise you? Everyone lives with the knowledge of his own death. Telling him it may be a little closer or more widespread doesn't make it any more dreadful. To any thinking being, personal death is the most dreadful thing there can be. If he can live with that knowledge, how can you hope to frighten him with anything else?"

"But no one admits, consciously at least, that he is going to die," said Gloria.

"Agreed. But he knows that he is living a lie and still he manages to ignore it. Against that armour you don't stand a

chance. Personal death is, after all, a certainty. The ultimate war is only a probability."

Felix looked back at the Director.

"You were saying, Sir Ian?"

"We built the brain," continued Macdonald evenly. "Then Seldon had his accident. In order to save his life we had to attach him to a blood supply. We had to work fast and the only blood we had available was that used by Abic. It worked."

"I see." Felix was beginning to understand. The same blood which had passed through the artificial brain had been introduced to Seldon. The same blood!

"Seldon became—contaminated." Gloria looked steadily at Felix. "The blood contained a virus which acts like a symbiote and lodges in the brain. It spread throughout the station."

She would have been the first, of course, tending Seldon as she did. His breath would have carried it, riding on the air pumped past his larynx, if in no other way. She would have spread it in turn, he remembered the carved bust and the way Macdonald had stroked her hair. They were both human. Perhaps too human. Any contact disease would propagate swiftly in the station. He remembered Avrils' first kiss.

"My illness—?"

"Yes. You, like the rest of us, are protected against mischance. You cannot be killed in accidents that would kill other men. If anyone tries to shoot you, the gun will misfire or the bullet miss."

Felix touched his face.

"That was the most Abic could do," she said. "It was, after all, trying to protect itself."

"The Commission . . .?" He let his voice trail into silence. He knew the answer to that one. No one would have kissed the members of the Commission.

But still there were questions.

"The virus? Can it be controlled?"

"That isn't the difficulty." Macdonald sounded tired. "Why are the destructive things of life always the most prolific? Weeds among crops. Malignant bacteria instead of beneficial? Parasites instead of helpful symbiotes? The hope of the world lies in that virus but, as yet, we cannot develop it to the point where it can be of any real use."

"Develop it?"

"Yes. The entire resources of the station are concentrated on that aim. We need to make it as prolific and as hardy as the nerve virus is deadly."

"Are you insane?" Felix could hardly believe what he was hearing. "Do you intend to spread the disease over earth?"

He remembered the magnetic accelerator and had his answer.

"You traitor!"

"Fool!"

For the first time he saw Macdonald in anger and it was something he would never forget. It was a cold, consuming rage that filled the man and turned him from a pleasant man of title into a ruthless animal of concentrated purpose. But the anger wasn't for Felix, he was too small for such a rage. It was fury at the stupidity of the world.

"Look at it!" Macdonald gestured towards the window beyond which hung the ball of the earth. "Beautiful, isn't it! We should revere it but instead we are trying to destroy it. And we can destroy it, never doubt that. With bombs and microbes we can turn that world into a barren ball of dust. Am I a traitor for trying to prevent that?"

"I . . ."

"What are petty loyalties in such a case?" Macdonald drew a deep breath. "I am no traitor. If Britain can save the world from destruction then she will have cause to be proud. But even if I have to defy my country I will do what has to be done. There is only one real loyalty—loyalty to the human race. Fools must not be permitted to destroy it."

"How can you stop them? Felix felt some of Macdonald's anger. "By threatening the world with your microbes?"

"If necessary, yes!"

"They will annihilate you. All the nations will unite to wipe you out."

"Perhaps, but I doubt it. Unity demands mutual trust and that is something it is safe to assume will not exist. But it will. I hope, never come to that. All we need is time to develop the one thing that will make the world safe forever."

Macdonald grew suddenly calm and Felix revised his previous hasty opinion. Macdonald wasn't a fanatic. Nor was he insane. He was simply a dedicated man. There was a world of difference.

He was right, of course, there was no doubt about that. If the virus could be developed and spread over the planet then global war would be a nightmare of the past. In fact, any sort of war would be impossible. With the probability factor working to save each man from harm, how could guns fire, bombs explode, bacteria be released?

For a moment Felix sat in a dream world of imagination. He started as Avril touched his hand.

"Well, Felix?"

"Well, what?" He was confused. They were all, he noticed, watching him. He felt very small as he realised why.

"I thought I was investigating you," he said. "I imagined that I was being clever but, all the time, it was you who were investigating me. Was the experiment a success?"

"It was necessary, Felix," said Gloria. She did not apologise. "We had discussed what was best to do. Some thought that if our discovery was announced to selected scientists, we would gain their co-operation. Others doubted that. Then you arrived and offered us the chance to conduct a controlled experiment. It was—interesting."

"I can imagine," said Felix drily. She shook her head.

"No, Felix, we weren't making sport of you. We couldn't be certain that the virus had bred true or even that it was still active once assimilated. You proved that it had and that it was. Now all we need is time."

"You'll have your time," he said, and suddenly made his decision. "With luck on our side how can we lose?"

"We?" He saw the hope in her eyes, in all their eyes.

"Yes." He rose and felt Avril's hand slip within his own.

"Sir Joshua is waiting for my report. It will be favourable but I will tell him I should remain. He will agree—with Seldon of no further use he will have little choice. Together we'll get the world out of its mess." He squeezed Avril's hand.

"Felix!" She looked at him, her eyes bright. They grew brighter as he said the three words she had waited to hear. It was natural for them to kiss.

"One last question, Sir Ian." Felix stood, his arm around Avril's waist. "Why did you build this room and this window?"

"To remind us of our humanity," said Macdonald softly, he was looking at the earth.

"Just in case we should ever be tempted to forget."

Guest Editorial continued

but introduced more humour and technical discipline. Gone was the f-t-l ship built by a back-yard genius and launched blithely at random ; Deegan used the sadly neglected concept of a liner-sized vessel carrying hundreds of specialists along a many-years route of interstellar exploration. Gone, too, was the irresponsible racialism of pre-Fearn comics : Fearn's aliens were generally interesting rather than evil, and Deegan's crews were forbidden to employ weapons against intelligent beings even for self-preservation. A healthy change from transplanted Westerns whose aliens were (and, alas, still are) depraved monsters richly meriting inevitable mass destruction. "To them, we are the aliens." An enlightened attitude which may one day prevail ; perhaps after the death of the last English tourist who derides the ignorant foreigners overseas who can't speak English.

Then I read Bryan Berry's *And the Stars Remain*, a tale of Man's first starship, launched in glory then lost but for one fragment that drifts years later into our solar system—

From the metal there seemed to rise an odd, stale odour—the smell of time and space and destruction ; an odour of other worlds. On it there were marks—deep marks, as though some vast, gargantuan fingers had crushed what once had been a spaceship as a child might crush a grape, letting this small piece fall away to circle endlessly in space . . .

For the Planners watch over the galaxy, preventing immature races from contaminating others ; apologetically but firmly swatting down Man's starship as a man might kill a tsetse fly. Ten years later, few stories have equalled the initial impact of this one. More than most others, it impressed me with science fiction's value as a vehicle for ethical argument combined with entertainment.

But I was younger ; the themes were new to me. Studied now, these three personal milestones on the road to the finest science fiction impress less, and display in varying degrees their varying faults ; but despite this they still exhibit some of the qualities needed nowadays—immense speculation, disturbing or majestic themes, memorable characters—human or otherwise—and a sprinkle, sometimes a great torrent, of unashamedly poetic writing.

"Yes, but surely most stories are meant to kill time for readers and provide beer-money for writers?" Perhaps; but need this be so obvious? Much current work scarcely *tries*; its keynote is the leaden clunk of listlessness.

Captain Rogers squinted cynically through the open lock, and spat. Sirius VII wasn't much to look at. Sickly jungle surrounded the ship. The natives weren't much to look at, either. They stood dolefully surveying the ship with incurious eyes. Rogers grunted, belched, scowled at Jenkins. "Well?" he lippled. The pudgy linguist gave him a nervous glance, scratched his bald pate, said, "We twigged the lingo in nothing flat, see, but I got the jitters—something's not quite right . . ." And a sudden, inexplicable chill crept in from the sweating festering jungle . . .

The Natives are Not All They Seem; two more pages and the snags begin, the plot writhes slickly, but all ends well; and an hour later you'd have trouble in naming the planet, the ship, the natives, captain, linguist, story, or the author himself—not that the latter would be worth remembering, unless as a precaution against buying more of his probably prolific output. Such bored superficiality contributes to the prevailing greyness.

Although Ivan Yefremov's *Andromeda* proves that the other extreme is as bad:—

"Why aren't you sleeping?" he asked the navigator.

"I was thinking . . ." she began hesitantly, "and now, when we are faced with great danger, I bow my head before the might and majesty of man who has penetrated to the stars, far, far, into the depths of space! Much of this is customary for you, but I'm in the Cosmos for the first time. Just think of it, I'm taking part in a magnificent journey through the stars to new worlds!"

Erg Noor smiled wanly and rubbed his forehead.

So did I; but for different reasons. The fault lies not in the concept, however, but in the naive treatment. Despite frequent tract-like explanations and reciprocal solemn lectures by close friends, *Andromeda* often sparked my imagination; pruned and transmuted by Clarke, it might have produced another *The City and the Stars*. Its characters could at least pause and marvel, unlike the harassed scuttering shadows flitting through our magazines.

Look! Within a hundred light-years of Earth, how many stars? Stars with planets? *Habitable* planets? *Inhabited* planets? *Intelligent* inhabitants? *Intelligent humanoid*

inhabitants? On the wildest optimistic estimate I can't see explorers becoming as depressingly blase as these old sweats of current hackwork who see each posting as another bleeding bind and its inhabitants as another bunch of wogs. Too much is taken for granted by stale writers in staler stories. The first necessity, clarity of perception, is missing, and the result is fiction as dull as recordings made by oxide-coated heads, or photographs from cameras with dusty lenses.

No one expects a half-crown magazine to be packed with deathless prose; but in a hundred-odd pages of vaunted fantasy, science fiction, extrapolation, technological speculation or whatever you want to call it, there should be at least one idea, event, situation, scene or character that remains vividly in the mind, and too often there isn't. That long-used basis, an interplanetary contact, can still be an occasion filled with wonder and a challenge to the beliefs and attitudes of all concerned—if the author has the sincerity and imagination to visualise it in other than stock superficial terms and describe it with thoughtfully chosen words. And by all means have raging conflicts—but remember that the conference table can be as exciting as the battlefield. It simply takes more time, work and wit to substitute a clash of philosophies for the sizzle of flesh and the underfoot crunch of bones.

And introduce historical perspective! In the year 10,000 A.D., our descendants might be shuffling the stars in the Andromeda Galaxy like packs of cards; or they might be rediscovering the making of fire and wheels. They will not, however, be all white, English or American, named George and Bill, uttering 1960 slang, smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, spending shillings or dollars, and in all ways indistinguishable from the neighbours of some of our witless scribes.

Jim Donovan gazed soberly through the port into endless black gulfs beyond the Galactic Rim. He sighed, scratched his crew-cut, made a laconic entry in the Birmingham's log with his ballpen, grabbed himself a carton of sweet coffee from the auto-dispenser and fumbled in his coat pocket for a cigarette. Sourly he cursed the monotony of patrol duty; idly he wondered how Mavis and the kids were faring, in the new homestead on Yoghurt VII—then he stiffened, square jaw clenched tightly, keen blue eyes following those ominous shapes that sped like eerie phantoms from the night towards the herd—Rustlers!!! Jim swore luridly, dug

in his—Whoops, forgot my market ; I meant : *engaged his supratomic Neg-entropic hyperdrive (Mark IV) and—*

Meanwhile, still dirtier dangers are fermenting in the Supreme Galactic Administrative Centre whose micro-files cover six planets to a depth of twenty miles :—

Supreme Galactic Co-Ordinator Hugo Schrilheim shoved some documents aside, lit a cigar, squinted speculatively at his secretary's trim curves over a cup of coffee whose lukewarm appearance made his ulcer twinge ; beyond the girl's red hair the plasticalendar showed 10,000 A.D., Ancient Terran Reckoning. Schrilheim scowled at the date, glanced again into his coffee cup, sniffed distastefully. " Got that Yoghurt VII demand typed yet, Miss Jones ?" he barked. By damn, he'd show those Rim hicks they wouldn't flout the authority of SUPGALADMINCENT !!!

The Wild West, and bureaucracy duplicated—triplicated ? —nay, googolplexicated—on Galactic scope ; the future is dismal indeed.

Remember Russell's *Wasp* ? I enjoyed it, but not as s-f. With minor changes its locale could have been Nazi Germany. It was smooth and entertaining, but far from satisfying as *science fiction*. Whereas some of the most striking stories of recent years have come from amateurs or newcomers who seemed to have set out not " to write a story " but to write *this* story. Evidently some idea nagged, amused or inspired them into activity ; and, although perhaps unwieldily by professional standards, the results had compensating qualities—such as freshness, warmth, and lovingly polished, attractive writing. Smoothness may be achieved with experience—but not, I hope, at the expense of those qualities. To me, many such stories have offered the tang of wine after Russell's pleasant but prosaic beer. Now, I like beer—but not when I find it in a wine bottle ! And science fiction or fantasy should be a wine bottle to all of us. So forget the Rustlers on the Rim ; rot the Co-Ordinator's ulcer ; let our descendants differ from ourselves. Writers, freshen up and take time and trouble ; the only early rewards may be enhanced reputation and self-respect, but dividends may follow. And we'll have more *Brainwaves*, *Missions of Gravity*, *Demolished Men*, *Preludes to Space*, *Saucers of Loneliness*, *Waiting Grounds* and *Cold Equations*.

John Ashcroft

Film Review

The Day of the Triffids

"X"

Eastman Colour

Cinemascope

Starring HOWARD KEEL and NICOLE MAUREY

With JANETTE SCOTT and KIERON MOORE (by special arrangement)

Rating : *****

A Security Pictures production

For the past nine months a great aura of mystery has surrounded the expected birth of the long-awaited film version of John Wyndham's best selling s-f novel. It was as if, after an immaculate conception, something went wrong and the embryo turned the wrong way. Certainly, even before the players had finished acting their parts, odd things happened—the budget was slashed and the exteriors were filmed in England instead of Spain (where much of the action now takes place) entailing a great deal of scenic building at the studios. Then everything went under wraps while the special effects were put in—and, of course, the Triffids themselves remained as top secret as a new Government invention.

In August last year, the lid was lifted a little and I saw all the 'stills' but was asked *not* to disclose anything about the actual Triffids, being informed, too, that the film would probably be released in October. In that month the news was that apparently none of the film renters would show the movie. Too bad? Or too horrific? Nobody is prepared to say, but by then some of the author's and the players' personal feelings had begun to rub off on to myself and I was prepared to write it off as a bad third-rate science fiction film.

It was with these thoughts in mind that John Wyndham and myself, together with a small group of s-f writers and critics, approached the Rank private theatre recently for a preview, made even more apprehensive by the advance information that the film would probably not be as bad as we expected.

Ninety-five minutes later, it was with a great feeling of relief that we walked out into the Spring sunshine of Wardour Street to find traffic and humanity acting quite normally and no sign of the dreaded Triffids. For most of the preceding hour and a half I had been transported into a world of ever-increasing menace to mankind, which not even author Wyndham's writing skill had quite produced in the book itself; into a realism which will undoubtedly be labelled "horror" by the majority of film critics, but, for me, produced no horror as such, so well done was the production, but exuded a creeping *menace* so powerful that I almost believed the human race was in dire peril. The tension just never lets up as layer upon layer of the story unfolds—from the beginning of the blindness, induced by the unearthly and brilliant meteorite display, to the grim battle for survival against the sentient plant-like Triffids brought from outer space by the meteorites themselves and spawning under ideal conditions.

Executive producer Philip Yordan, who also wrote the script, has kept reasonably close to Wyndham's original story line although the minor changes are many and varied to improve the story visually—and the author was one of the first to acknowledge their worth when we breathed normally once more. Instead of the trip to Sussex from London by the various survivors, Bill Masen (well played by Howard Keel) rescues Susan (Janine Fane) from one of the most realistic train wrecks I have ever seen, crosses the Channel, meets a young Frenchwoman, Christine Durrant (Nicole Maurey) and the great trek fraught with peril starts for Alicante in Spain. What cannot be described in words is the world we are so used to tumbling in burning ruins around the survivors—the technical effects in this respect are *tremendous* and great credit must be given to producer George Pitcher and director Steve Sekely for the realism infused into every scene.

The film, like the book, is divided roughly into two sections—the coming of the blindness and its effects upon humanity and the coming of the Triffids and their effect upon the survivors, but a third theme runs steadily through the film—the desperate search for a means of killing off the Triffids. Marine biologist Tom Goodwin (Kieron Moore) and his wife, Karen (Janette Scott) are doing research in a lighthouse off the English coast when the menace comes and Triffid spores land and mature on their rocky islet. Here, the apparently doomed

pair try desperately to find a method of killing the plant-things, while terror and tension piles steadily higher as the Triffids successfully invade the lighthouse and the Goodwins are trapped. The sequence of scenes in this episodic portion of the film are a story in themselves and it is my guess that *this* was a new part put into the film after the original hiatus, for no pictures from this appeared in the original stills. If so, it is a stupendous after-thought and lifts the whole thing into a new realm.

Mere words, however, cannot convey the excellence of the drama or even the plot—it has to be seen to be believed! Certainly every credit line at the beginning deserves its place, for this must be a film of completely integrated teamwork, with credits for directing, producing, acting, camerawork, technical skull-duggery and special effects, music and sound.

Surely, this must stand as an example of how to make a good science fiction film. The secret of its success, however, lies in the fact that there is no light relief, no romance, no laugh lines (intended or otherwise) no let-up from the main premise of the story—that this is a direct threat to mankind's existence. Overshadowing everything, the almost sentient Triffids steal scene after scene, looking so real that it is hard to realise they are man-made. Through the eyes of the camera I often felt they were trying to get through the screen to attack their creator, sitting in front of me. During one dramatic scene, a close-up of an advancing Triffid, its squelching advance coupled with the eerie death-rattle sound from the creature's 'head,' author Michael Moorcock whispered, "I *like* suspense, but I won't be able to stand much more of this!"

That is the keynote to this great s-f film.

Suspense—and menace.

With apologies to colleague Robert Bloch, who invented the schizoid murderer—this film starts where "Psycho" left off!

As a footnote, let me add that "Triffids" has already been chosen as the leading film to be shown at the forthcoming Festival Internazionale del Film di Fantascienza to be held in Trieste during July. It well deserves it.

John Carnell

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Next month's issue allows us that rare privilege of publishing a long novelette in between serials ; in this case, it is the last story in Joseph Green's present Loafer series and culminates the whole history of the integration of human beings and aliens. In "Refuge" Mr. Green shows mankind in a forthright but rather unenviable manner—a truth which should make many of us pause and think.

Short stories run the gamut of themes from John Rackham's "The Last Salamander" (an extremely interesting story centred in a power station) and Michael Moorcock's "Flux" (a twisted Time story which has a few shades of Wells in it) to Bill Spencer's "The Nothing" (about Something) and R. W. Mackelworth's "Pattern of Risk."

Story ratings for No. 126 were :

- | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|---|---|-------------------|
| 1. Dawn's Left Hand (Part 1) - | - | - | - | Lan Wright |
| 2. The Subliminal Man - | - | - | - | J. G. Ballard |
| 3. Ecdysiast - | - | - | - | Robert Presslie |
| 4. The Big Tin God - | - | - | - | Philip E. High |
| 5. Burden of Proof - | - | - | - | David Jay |
| 6. The Statue - | - | - | - | R. W. Mackelworth |

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**Bill Masen (HOWARD KEEL) tries flame-
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Produced by GEORGE PITCHER
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