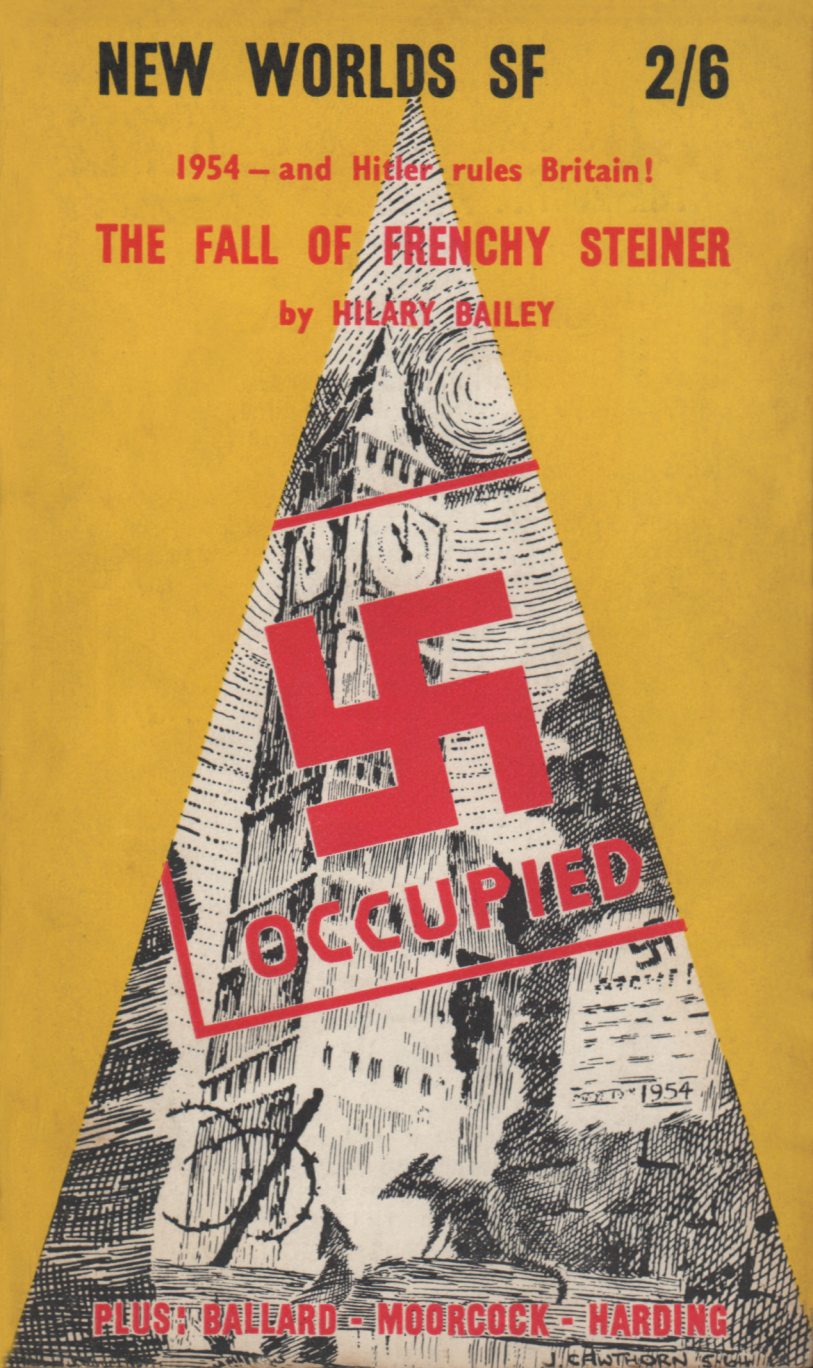
# NEW WORLDS SF 2/6

1954 — and Hitler rules Britain!

## THE FALL OF FRENCHY STEINER

by HILARY BAILEY



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# NEW WORLDS

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# SF

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*Cover from* **The Fall of Frenchy Steiner** *by Cawthorn*

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**We know that Hitler placed a lot of faith in clairvoyants and astrologers, and this helped him lose the war. But what if there had been just one person with a genuine psi-talent. Could history have turned out like — this . . . ?**

# THE FALL OF FRENCHY STEINER

## Hilary Bailey

### one

1954 WAS NOT a year of progress. A week before Christmas I walked into the bar of the Merrie Englande in Leicester Square, my guitar in its case, my hat in my hand. Two constables were sitting on wooden stools at the counter. Their helmets turned together as I walked in. The place was badly lit by candles, hiding the run-down look but not the run-down smell of home-brew and damp rot.

"Who's he?" said one of the PCs as I moved past.

"I work here," I said. Tired old dialogue for tired old people.

He grunted and sipped his drink. I didn't look at the barman: I didn't look at the cops. I just went into the room behind the bar and took off my coat. I went to the wash-basin, turned the taps. Nothing happened. I got my guitar out of its case, tested it, tuned it and went back into the bar with it.

"Water's off again," said Jon, the barman. He was a flimsy whisp in black with a thin white face. "Nothing's working today . . ."

"Well, we've still got an efficient police force," I said. The cops turned to look at me again. I didn't care. I felt I could afford a little relaxation. One of them chewed the strap of his helmet and frowned. The other smiled.

"You work here do you, sir? How much does the boss pay you?" He continued to smile, speaking softly and politely. I sneered.

"Him?" I pointed with my thumb up to where the boss lived. "He wouldn't, even if it was legal." Then I began to worry. I'm like that—moody. "What are you doing here, anyway, officer?"

"Making enquiries, sir," said the frowning one.

"About a customer," said Jon. He leant back against an empty shelf, his arms folded.

"That's right," said the smiling one.

"Who?"

The cops' eyes shifted.

"Frenchy," said Jon.

"So Frenchy's in trouble. It couldn't be something she's done. Someone she knows?"

The cops turned back to the bar. The frowning one said: "Two more. Does he know her?"

"As much as I do," said Jon, pouring out the potheen. The white, cloudy stuff filled the tumblers to the brim. Jon must be worried to pour such heavy ones for nothing.

I got up on to the platform where I sang, flicking the mike which I knew would be dead as it had been since the middle of the war. I leaned my guitar against the dryest part of the wall and struck a match. I lit the two candles in their wall-holders. They didn't exactly fill the corner with a blaze of light, they smoked and guttered and stank and cast shadows. I wondered briefly who had supplied the fat. They weren't much good as heating either. It was almost as cold inside as out. I dusted off my stool and sat down, picked up my guitar and struck a few chords. I hardly realised I was playing *Frenchy's Blues*. It was one of those corny numbers that come easy to the fingers without you having to think about them.

Frenchy wasn't French, she was a kraut and who liked krauts? I liked Frenchy, along with all the customers who came to hear her sing to my accompaniment. Frenchy didn't work at the Merrie Englande, she just enjoyed singing. She didn't keep boyfriends long or often, she preferred to sing, she said. Frenchy's singing was like what she'd give to a boyfriend, but this way

she gave it to everyone. I didn't know why she was called Frenchy. Probably her full name was Franziska.

*Frenchy's Blues* only appealed to the least sensitive members of our cordial clientele. I didn't care for it. I'd tried to do something good for her, but as with most things I tried to do well, it hadn't come off. I changed the tune. I was used to changing my tune. I played *Summertime* and then I played *Stormy Weather*.

The cops sipped their drinks and waited. Jon leant against the shelves, his narrow, black-clad body almost invisible in the shadow, only his thin face showing. We didn't look at one another. We were both scared—not only for Frenchy, but for ourselves. The cops had a habit of subpoenoeing witnesses and forgetting to release them after the trial—particularly if they were healthy men who weren't already working in industry or the police force. Though I didn't have to fear this possibility as much as most, I was still worried.

During the evening I heard the dull sound of far-away bomb explosions, the drone of planes. That would be the English Luftwaffe doing exercises over the still-inhabited suburbs.

Customers came and most of them went after a drink and a squint at the constables.

Normally Frenchy came in between eight and nine, when she came. She didn't come. As we closed up around midnight, the cops got off their stools. One unbuttoned his tunic pocket and took out a notebook and pencil. He wrote on the pad, tore off the sheet and left it on the bar.

"If she turns up, get in touch," he said. "Merry Christmas, sir," he nodded to me. They left.

I looked at the piece of paper. It was cheap, blotting-paper stuff and one corner was already soaking up spilled potheen. In large capitals, the PC had printed: "Contact Det. Insp. Braun, N. Scot. Yd, Ph. WHI 1212, Ext. 615."

"Braun?" I smiled and looked up at Jon. "Brown?"

"What's in a name?" he said.

"At least it's CID. What do you think it's about, Jon?"

"You never can tell these days," said Jon. "Good-

night, Lowry."

"Night." I went into the room behind the bar, packed my guitar and put on my coat. Jon came in to get his street clothes.

"What do they want her for?" I said. "It's not political stuff, anyway. The Special Branch isn't interested, it seems. What—?"

"Who knows?" said Jon brusquely. "Goodnight—"

"Night," I said. I buttoned up my coat, pulled my gloves on and picked up the guitar case. I didn't wait for Jon since he evidently wasn't seeking the company and comfort of an old pal. The cops seemed to have worried him. I wondered what he was organising on the side. I decided to be less matey in future. For some time my motto had been simple—keep your nose clean.

I left the bar and entered the darkness of the square. It was empty. The iron railings and trees had gone during the war. Even the public lavatories were officially closed, though sometimes people slept in them. The tall buildings were stark against the night sky. I turned to my right and walked towards Piccadilly Circus, past the sagging hoardings that had been erected around bomb craters, treading on loose paving stones that rocked beneath my feet. Piccadilly Circus was as bare and empty as anywhere else. The steps were still in the centre, but the statue of Eros wasn't there any more. Eros had flown from London towards the end of the war. I wish I'd had the same sense.

I crossed the circus and walked down Piccadilly itself, the wasteland of St. James's Park on one side, the tall buildings, or hoardings where they had been, on the other. I walked in the middle of the road, as was the custom. The occasional car was less of a risk than the frequent cosh-merchant. My hotel was in Piccadilly, just before you got to Park Lane.

I heard a helicopter fly over as I reached the building and unlocked the door. I closed the door behind me, standing in a wide, cold foyer unlighted and silent. Outside the sound of the helicopter died and was replaced by the roar of about a dozen motor-bikes heading in the general direction of Buckingham Palace where Field

Marshal Wilmot had his court. Wilmot wasn't the most popular man in Britain, but his efficiency was much admired in certain quarters. I crossed the foyer to the broad staircase. It was marble, but uncarpeted. The bannister rocked beneath my hand as I climbed the stairs.

A man passed me on my way up. He was an old man. He wore a red dressing gown and carried a chamber pot as far away from him as his shaking hand could stand.

"Good morning, Mr. Pevensey," I said.

"Good morning, Mr. Lowry," he replied, embarrassed. He coughed, started to speak, coughed again. As I began on the third flight, I heard him wheeze something about the water being off again. The water was off most of the time. It was only news when it came on. The gas came on three times a day for half-an-hour a day—if you were lucky. The electricity was supposed to run all day if people used the suggested ration, but nobody did, so power failures were frequent.

I had an oil stove, but no oil. Oil was expensive and could be got only on the black market. Using the black market meant risking being shot, so I did without oil. I had a place I used as a kitchen, too. There was a bathroom along the corridor. One of the rooms I used had a balcony overlooking the street with a nice view of the weed-tangled park. I didn't pay rent for these rooms. My brother paid it under the impression that I had no money. Vagrancy was a serious crime, though prevalent, and my brother didn't want me to be arrested because it caused him trouble to get me out of jail or one of the transit camps in Hyde Park.

I unlocked my door, tried the light switch, got no joy. I struck a match and lit four candles stuck in a candelabra on the heavy mantelpiece. I glanced in the mirror and didn't like the dull-eyed face I saw there. I was reckless. My next candle allowance was a month off but I'd always liked living dangerously. In a small way.

I put on my tattered tweed overcoat, Burberry's 1938, lay down on the dirty bed and put my hands behind my head. I brooded.

I wasn't tired, but I didn't feel very well. How could I, on my rations?

I went back to thinking about Frenchy's trouble. It was better than thinking about trouble in general. She must be involved in something, although she never looked as if she had the energy to take off her slouch hat, let alone get mixed up in anything illegal. Still, since the krauts had taken over in 1946 it wasn't hard to do something illegal. As we used to say, if it wasn't forbidden, it was compulsory. Even strays and vagabonds like me were straying under license—in my case procured by brother Gottfried, né Godfrey, now Deputy Minister of Public Security. How he'd made it baffled me, with our background. Because obviously the first people the krauts had cleared out when they came to liberate us was the revolutionary element. And in England, of course, that wasn't the tattered, hungry mob rising in fury after centuries of oppression. It was the well-heeled, well-meaning law-civil-service-church-and-medicine brigade who came out of their warm houses to stir it all up.

Anyway, thinking about Godfrey always made my flesh creep, so I pulled my mind back to Frenchy. She was a tall, skinny rake of a girl, a worn out, battered old twenty in a dirty white mac and a shapeless pull-down hat with the smell of a Cagney gangster film about it. I never noticed what was under the mac—she never took it off. Once or twice she'd gone mad and undone it. I had the impression that underneath she was wearing a dirty black mac. No stockings, muddy legs, shoes worn down to stubs, not exactly Ginger Rogers on the town with Fred Astaire. Still, the customers liked her singing, particularly her deadpan rendering of *Deutschland Uber Alles*, slow, husky and meaningful, with her white face staring out over the people at the bar. A kraut by nationality, but not by nature, that was Frenchy.

I yawned. Not much to do but go to sleep and try for that erotic dream where I was sinking my fork into a plate of steak and kidney pudding. Or perhaps, if I couldn't get to sleep, I'd try a nice stroll round the crater where St. Pauls had been—my favourite way of turning my usual depression into a really fruity attack

of melancholia.

Then there was a knock.

I went rigid.

Late night callers were usually cops. In a flash I saw my face with blood streaming from the mouth and a lot of black bruises. Then the knock came again. I relaxed. Cops never knocked twice—just a formal rap and then in and all over you.

The door opened and Frenchy stepped in. She closed the door behind her.

I was off the bed in a hurry.

I shook my head. "Sorry, Frenchy. It's no go."

She didn't move. She stared at me out of her dark blue eyes. The shadows underneath looked as though someone had put inky thumbs under them.

"Look, French," I said. "I've told you there's nothing doing." She ought to have gone before. It was the code. If someone wanted by the cops asked for help you had the right to tell them to go. No one thought any the worse of you. If you were a breadwinner it was expected.

She went on standing there. I took her by the shoulders, about faced her, wrenched the door open with one hand and ran her out on to the landing.

She turned to look at me. "I only came to borrow a fag," she said sadly, like a kid wrongfully accused of drawing on the wallpaper.

The code said I had to warn her, so I shoved her back into my room again.

She sat on my rumpled bed in the guttering candlelight with her beautiful, mud-streaked legs dangling over the side. I passed her a cigarette and lit it.

"There were two cops in the Merrie asking about you," I said. "CID!"

"Oh," she said blankly. "I wonder why? I haven't done anything."

"Passing on coupons, trying to buy things with money, leaving London without a pass—" I suggested. Oh, how I wanted to get her off the premises.

"No. I haven't done anything. Anyhow, they must know I've got a full passport."

I gaped at her. I knew she was a kraut—but why

should she have a full passport? Owning one of those was like being invisible—people ignored what you did. You could take what you wanted from who you wanted. You could, if you felt like it, turn a dying old lady out of a hospital wagon so you could have a joy-ride, pinch food—anything. A sensible man who saw a full passport holder coming towards him turned round and ran like hell in the other direction. He could shoot you and never be called to account. But how Frenchy had come by one beat me.

"You're not in the government," I said. "How is it you've got an FP?"

"My father's Willi Steiner."

I looked at her horrible hat, her draggled blonde hair, her filthy mac and scuffed shoes. My mouth tightened.

"You don't say?"

"My father's the Mayor of Berlin," she said flatly. "There are eight of us and mother's dead so no one cares much. But of course we've all got full passports."

"Well, what the hell are you shambling around starving in London for?"

"I don't know."

Suspicious, I said: "Let's have a look at it, then."

She opened her raincoat and reached down into whatever it was she had on underneath. She produced the passport. I knew what they looked like because brother Godfrey was a proud owner. They were unforgable. Frenchy had one.

I sat down on the floor, feeling expansive. If Frenchy had an FP I was safer than I'd ever been. An FP reflected its warm light over everybody near it. I reached under the mattress and pulled out a packet of Woodies. There were two left.

French grinned, accepting the fag. "I ought to flash it about more often."

We smoked gratefully. The allowance was ten a month. As stated, the penalty for buying on the black market, presuming you could get hold of some money, was shooting. For the seller it was something worse. No one knew what, but they hung the bodies up from time to time and you got some idea of the end result.

"About this police business," I said.

"You don't mind if I kip here tonight," she said. "I'm beat."

"I don't mind," I said. "Want to hop in now? We can talk in bed."

She took off the mac, kicked away her shoes and hopped in.

I took off my trousers, shoes and socks, pulled down my sweater and blew out the candles. I got into bed. There was nothing more to it than that. Those days you either did or you didn't. Most didn't. What with the long hours, short rations and general struggle to keep half clean and slightly below par, few people had the will for sex. Also sex meant kids and the kids mostly died, so that took all the joy out of it. Also I've got the impresion us English don't breed in captivity. The Welsh and Irish did, but then they've been doing it for hundreds of years. The Highlanders didn't produce either. Increasing the population was something people like Godfrey worried about in the odd moments when they weren't eliminating it, but a declining birthrate is something you can't legislate about. What with the slave labour in the factories, cops round every corner, the jolly lads of the British Wehrmacht in every street, and being paid out in food and clothing coupons so you wouldn't do anything rash with the cash, like buying a razor blade and cutting your throat, you couldn't blame people for losing interest in propagating themselves. There'd been a resistance movement up until three or four years before, but they'd made a mistake and taken to the classic methods—blowing up bridges, the few operating railway lines and what factories had started up. It wasn't only the reprisals—on the current scale it was 20 men for every German killed, or 10 schoolkids or 5 women—but when people found out they were blowing up boot factories and stopping food trains a loyal population, as the krauts put it, stamped out the anti-social Judaeo-Bolshevik element in their midst.

The birthrate might have gone up if they'd raised the rations after that, but that might cause a population

explosion in more ways than one.

Anyhow, it was warmer in there with Frenchy beside me.

"Would you mind," I said, "removing your hat?"

I couldn't see her, but I could tell she was smiling. She reached up and pulled the old hat off and threw it on the floor.

"What about these cops, then?" I asked.

"Oh—I really don't know. Honestly, I haven't done anything. I don't even know anybody who's doing anything."

"Could they be after your full passport?"

"No. They never withdraw them. If they did the passports wouldn't mean anything. People wouldn't know if they were deferring to a man with a withdrawn passport. If you do something like spying for Russia, they just eliminate *you*. That gets rid of your FP automatically."

"Maybe that's why they're after you...?"

"No. They don't involve the police. It's just a quick bullet."

I coudn't help feeling awed that Frenchy, who'd shared my last crusts, knew all this about the inner workings of the regime. I checked the thought instantly. Once you started being interested in them, or hating them or being emotionally involved with them in any way at all—they'd got you. It was something I'd sworn never to forget—only indifference was safe, indifference was the only weapon which kept you free, for what your freedom was worth. They say you get hardened to anything. Well, I'd had nearly ten years of it—disgusting, obscene cruelty carried out by stupid men who, from top to bottom, thought they were masters of the Earth—and I wasn't hardened. That was why I cultivated indifference. And the Leader—Our Feuhrer—was no mad genius either. Mad and stupid. That was even worse. I couldn't understand, then, how he'd managed to do what he'd done. Not then.

"I don't know what it can be," Frenchy was saying, "but I'll know tomorrow when I wake up."

"Why?"

"I'm like that," she said roughly.

"Are you?" I was interested. "Like—what?"

She buried her face in my shoulder. "Don't talk about it, Lowry," she said, coming as near to an appeal as a hard case like Frenchy could.

"OK," I said. You soon learnt to steer away from the wrong topic. The way things, and people, were then.

So we went to sleep. When I woke, Frenchy was lying awake, staring up at the ceiling with a blank expression on her face. I wouldn't have cared if she'd turned into a marmalade cat overnight. I felt hot and itchy after listening to her moans and mutters all night and I could feel a migraine coming on.

The moment I'd acknowledged the idea of a migraine, my gorge rose, I got up and stumbled along the peeling passageway. Once inside the lavatory I knew I shouldn't have gone there. I was going to vomit in the bowl. The water was off. It was too late. I vomited, vomited and vomited. At least this one time the water came on at the right moment and the lavatory flushed.

I dragged myself back. I couldn't see and the pain was terrible.

"Come back to bed," Frenchy said.

"I can't," I said. I couldn't do anything.

"Come on."

I sat on the edge of the bed and lowered myself down. Go away, Frenchy, I said to myself, go away.

But her hands were on that spot, just above my left temple where the pain came from. She crooned and rubbed and to the sound of her crooning I fell asleep.

I woke about a quarter of an hour later and the pain had gone. Frenchy, mac, hat and shoes on, was sitting in my old arm chair, with the begrimed upholstery and shedding springs.

"Thanks, Frenchy," I mumbled. "You're a healer."

"Yeah," she said discouragingly.

"Do you often?"

"Not now," she said. "I used to. I just thought I'd like to help."

"Well, thanks," I said. "Stick around."

"Oh, I'm off now."

"OK. See you tonight, perhaps."

"No. I'm getting out of London. Coming with me?"

"Where. What for?"

"I don't know. I know the cops want me but I don't know why. I just know if I keep away from them for a month or two they won't want me any more."

"What the bloody hell are you talking about?"

"I said I'd know what it was about when I awoke. Well, I don't—not really. But I do know the cops want me to do something, or tell them something. And I know there's more to it than just the police. And I know that if I disappear for some time I won't be useful any more. So I'm going on the run."

"I suppose you'll be all right with your FP. No problem. But why don't you co-operate."

"I don't want to," she said.

"Why run? With your FP they can't touch you."

"They can. I'm sure they can."

I gave her a long look. I'd always known Frenchy was odd, by the old standards. But as things were now it was saner to be odd. Still, all this cryptic hide-and-seek, all this prescient stuff, made me wonder.

She stared back. "I'm not cracked. I know what I'm doing. I've got to keep away from the cops for a month or two because I don't want to co-operate. Then it will be OK."

"Do you mean you'll be OK?"

"Don't know. Either that or it'll be too late to do what they want. Are you coming?"

"I might as well," I said. When it came down to it, what had I got to lose? And Frenchy had an FP. We'd be millionaires. Or would we?

"How many FPs in Britain?" I asked.

"About two hundred."

"You can't use it then. If you go on the run using an FB you'd—we'd never go unnoticed. We'll stick out like a searchlight on a moor. And no one will cover for us. Why should they help an FP holder with the cops after her?"

Frenchy frowned. "I'd better stock up here then. Then we can leave London and throw them off the

scent."

I nodded and got up and into the rest of my gear. "I'll nip out and spend a few clothing coupons on decent clothes for you. You won't be so memorable then. They'll just think you're some high-up civil servant. Then I'll tell you who to go to. The cops will check with the dodgy suppliers last. They won't expect FP holders to use Sid's Foodmart when they could go to Fortnums. Then I'll give you a list of what to get."

"Thanks, boss," she said. "So I was born yesterday."

"If I'm coming with you I don't want any slip-ups. If we're caught you'll risk an unpleasant little telling-off. And I'll be in a camp before you can say Abie Goldberg.

"No," she said bewilderedly. "I don't think so."

I groaned. "Frenchy, love. I don't know whether you're cracked, or Cassandra's second cousin. But if you can't be specific, let's play it sensible. OK?"

"Mm," she said."

I hurried off to spend my clothing coupons at Arthur's.

## two

IT WAS A soft day, drizzling a bit. I walked through the park. It was like a wood, now. The grass was deep and growing across the paths. Bushes and saplings had sprung up. Someone had built a small compound out of barbed wire on the grass just below the Atheneum. A couple of grubby white goats grazed inside. They must belong to the cops. With rations at two loaves a week people would eat them raw if they could get at them. Look what had happened to the vicar of All Saints, Margaret Street. He shouldn't have been so High Church—all that talk about the body and blood of Christ had set the congregation thinking along unorthodox lines.

I walked on in the drizzle. No one around. Nice fresh day. Nice to get out of London.

"Any food coupons?" said a voice in my ear.

I turned sharply. It was a young woman, so thin her shoulder blades and cheek bones seemed pointed. In her arms was a small baby. Its face was blue. Its violet-shadowed eyes were closed. It was dressed in a tattered blue jumper.

I shrugged. "Sorry, love. I've got a shilling—any use?"

"They'd asked me where I'd got it from. What's the good?" she whispered, never taking her eyes off the child's face.

"What's wrong with the kid?"

"They've cut off the dried milk. Unless you can feed them yourself they starve—I'm hungry."

I took out my diary. "Here's the address of a woman called Jessie Wright. Her baby's just died of diptheria. She may take the kid on for you."

"Diptheria?" she said.

"Look, love, your kid's half-dead anyway. It's worth trying."

"Thanks," she said. Tears started to run down her face. She took the piece of paper and walked off.

"Hey ho," said I, walking on.

I crossed the Mall and got the usual suspicious stares from the mixed assortment of soldiery that half-filled it. The uniforms were all the same. You couldn't tell the noble Tommy from the fiendish Hun. I looked to my right and saw Buckingham Palace. From the mast flew a huge flag, a Union Jack with a bloody great swastika superimposed on it. I'd never got rid of my loathing for that symbol, conceived as part of their perverted, crazy mysticism. Field Marshal Wilmot had been an officer in the Brigade of St. George—British fascists who had fought with Hitler almost from the start. A shrewd character that Wilmot. He had a little moustache that was identical with the Leader's—but as he was prematurely bald, hadn't been able to cultivate the lock of hair to go with it. He was fat and bloated with drink and probably drugs. He depended entirely on the Leader. If he hadn't been there it might have been a different story.

I walked down Buckingham Gate and turned right into Victoria Street. The Army and Navy Stores had become exactly what it said—only the military elite could shop there.

Arthur was in business in the former foreign exchange kiosk at Victoria Station. I bunged over the coupons. Sunlight streamed through the shattered canopy of the station. There had been some street fighting around here

but it hadn't lasted long.

"I want a lady's coat, hat and shoes. Are these enough?"

Arthur was small and shrewd. He only had one arm. He put the coupons under his scanner. "They're not fakes." I said impatiently. "Are they enough?"

"Just about, mate—as it's you," he said. He was a thin-faced cockney from the City. His kind had survived plagues, sweatshops and the depression. He'd survive this, too. I happened to know he'd been one of Mosely's fascists before the War—in fact he'd kicked a thin-skulled Jew in the head in Dalston in 1938, thus saving him from the gas-chambers in 1948. Funny how things work out.

But somehow since the virile lads of the Wehrmacht had marched in he seemed to have cooled off the old blood-brotherhood of the Aryans, so I never held it against him. Anyway, being about five foot two and weasely with it, he was no snip for the selective breeding camps.

"What size d'you want?" he asked.

"Oh, God. I don't know.'

"The lady should have come herself." He looked suspicious.

"Coppers tore her clothes off," I said. That satisfied him. A cop passed across the station at a distance. Arthur's eyes flicked, then came back to me.

"Funny the way they left them in their helmets and so on," he said. "Seems wrong, dunnit?"

"They wanted you to think they were the same blokes who used to tell you the time and find old Rover for you when he got lost."

"Aren't they?" Arthur said sardonically. "You should have lived round where I lived mate. Still, this won't buy baby a new pair of boots. What's the lady look like?"

"About five nine or ten. Big feet."

"Coo—no wonder the coppers fancied her," he jeered jealously. "You must feel all warm and safe with her. Thin or fat?"

"Come off it Arthur. Who's fat?"

"Girls who know cops."

"This one didn't until last night."

"Nothing dodgy is it?" His eyes started looking suspicious again. Trading licenses were hard to come by these days. I thought of telling him about Frenchy's full passport, but dismissed the idea. It would sound like a fantastic, dirty great lie.

"She's OK. She just wants some clothes that's all."

"If she got her clothes torn off why don't she want a dress? That's more important to a lady than a hat—a lady what is a lady that is."

"Give me the coupons, Arthur." I stretched out my hand. "You're not the only clothes trader around. I came here to buy some gear, not tell you my love life."

"OK, Lowry. One coat, one hat, one pair of shoes, size 7—and God help you if her feet's size 5." Arthur produced the things with a wonderful turn of speed. "And that'll be a quid on top."

I'd expected this. I handed him the pound. As I put the goods in a paper bag I said "I took the number of that quid, mate. If the cops call on me about this deal I'll be able to tell them you're taking cash off the customers. They may not nick you, of course—but they may soak you hard."

He called me a bastard and added some more specific details, then said "No hard feelings, Lowry. But I thought all along this was a dodgy deal."

"You mind your business, chum, I'll mind mine," I said. "So long."

"So long," he said. I headed back towards the park.

Frenchy was asleep when I got back. She looked fragile, practically TB. I woke her up and handed her the gear. She put it on.

"Frenchy, love," I said sadly. "I've got to break it to you—you must have a wash. And comb your hair. And haven't you got a lipstick?"

She sulked but I fetched some water. By some accident Pevensey had missed what was left in the taps. She washed, combed her hair with my comb and we made up her lips with a Swan Vesta.

I stood back. Black coat, a bit short with a fur collar, white beret and black high heeled shoes.

"Honestly, French, you look like Marlene Dietrich," I said partly to give her the morale to carry off the FP-ing, partly because it was almost true. It was a pity she looked so undernourished, but perhaps they'd think it was natural.

"Get yourself some make-up while you're at it."

"Here," she said in alarm, "I don't know what to do."

"You mean you've never *used* that passport," I said.

"You wouldn't if you were me," she replied. For her that was obviously the question you never asked, like 'where were you in '45' or 'what happened to cousin Fred.' Her face was dark.

I passed it off. "You're cracked. Never mind. Just march into the place. Look confident. Tell them what you want. They'll cotton on immediately. You probably won't even need to show it to them. Scoop the stuff up and go. Don't forget they're scared of you."

"OK."

"Here's the list of what we want and where to get it."

"Yeah," she glanced over the list. "Brandy, eh?"

I grinned. "Christmas, after all. You never drink, though."

"No. It does something bad to me."

"Uh huh. Use a slight German accent. That'll convince them."

She left and I went and lay down. I felt tired after all that.

And, lo, another knock at my door. Thinking it was Pevensey wanting me to get him some more quack medicine, I shouted "come in."

He stood in the doorway, a vision of loveliness in his black striped coat and pinstriped trousers. He glanced round fastidiously at my cracked lino, peeling wallpaper, the net curtain that was hanging down on one side of the small greasy window. Well, he had a right. He paid the rent, after all.

I didn't get up. "Hullo, mein Gottfried," I said.

"Hullo, old man." He came in. Sat down on my armchair like a man performing an emergency appendectomy with a rusty razor blade. He lit a Sobranie.

As an afterthought he flung the packet to me. I took one, lit it and shoved the packet under the mattress.

"I thought I'd look in," he said.

"How sweet of you. It must be two years now. Still, Christmas is the time for the family, isn't it?"

"Well, quite... How are you?"

"Rubbing along, thanks, Godfrey. And you?"

"Not too bad."

The scene galled me. When we were young, before the war, we had been friends. Even if we hadn't been, brothers were still brothers. It wasn't that I minded hating my brother, that's common enough. It was that I didn't hate him the way brothers hate. I hated him coldly and sickly.

At that moment I would have liked to fall on him and throttle him, but only in the cold, satisfied way you rake down a flypaper studded with flies.

Besides I still couldn't see why he had come.

"How's the—playing?" he asked.

"Not bad, you know. I'm at the Merrie Englande these days."

"So I heard."

Hullo, I thought, I see glimmers of light. He saw I saw them—he was, after all, my brother.

"I wondered if you'd like some lunch," he said.

Normally I would have refused, but I knew he might stay and catch Frenchy coming back. So I pretended to hesitate. "All right, I'm hungry enough for anything."

We went down the cracked steps and walked up Park Lane. The drizzle had stopped and a cold sun had come out and made the street look even more depressing. Boarded up hotels, looted shops, cracked facades, grass growing in the broken streets, bent lamp standards, the park itself a tangled forest of weeds. It was sordid.

"Thinking of cleaning up, ever, Godfrey?" I asked.

"Not my department," he said.

"Someone ought to."

"No man-power, you see," he said. I bet, I thought. Naturally they left it. One look was enough to break anyone's morale. If you were wondering how defeated

and broken you were and looked at Park Lane, or Piccadilly, or Trafalgar Square, you'd soon know—completely.

Godfrey took me to a sandwich-and-soup place on the corner. A glance and the man behind the counter knew him for an FP holder. So the food wasn't bad, although Godfrey picked at it like a man used to something better.

Conversation stopped. The customers bent their shoulders over their plates of sandwiches and munched stolidly. Godfrey didn't seem to notice. He probably never had noticed. I had to face facts—although a member of my own family, Godfrey had always been a kraut psychologically. Always neat, always methodical, jumping his hurdles—exams, tests and assignments at work—like a trained horse. It wasn't that he didn't care about other people—I can't say I did—he just never knew there was anything to care about.

"How's the department?" I asked, beginning the ridiculous question and answer game again—as if either of us worried about anything to do with the other.

"Going well."

"And Andrea?"

"She's well."

She ought to be, I thought. Fat cow. She'd married Godfrey for his steady civil service job and made a far better bargain that she'd thought.

"What about you—are you thinking of getting married?

I stared at him. Who married these days unless they had a steady job at one of the factories or on road transport, or, of course, in the police?

"Not exactly. Haven't really got the means to keep my bride in the accustomed manner."

"Oh," said Godfrey. Watch it, I thought. I knew that expression. "Oh, they said Sebastian'd been riding Celeste's bike, mother." "Oh, father, I thought you'd given Seb *permission* to go out climbing."

"I mentioned it because they told me you were engaged to a singer at the Merrie Englande."

"Who are they?"

"Well, my private secretary, as a matter of fact. He's a customer."

Yeah, I thought, like a rag-and-bone-man's a customer at the Ritz. He'd heard it from some spy.

"Well," I said. "I can't think how he managed to get that idea. I'm not sure there *is* a regular singer at the Merrie . . ."

"This girl was supposed to be like you—a sort of casual entertainer. A German girl I think he said."

Too specific, chum. That line might just work with a stranger—not with your little brother.

"I think I've met her. In fact I've played for her once or twice. I don't know much about her, though. I'm certainly not engaged to her."

Godfrey bit into a sandwich. I'd closed that line of enquiry. He was wondering how to open another.

"That's a relief. She sounds a tramp."

"Maybe."

"We want to repatriate her—know where she is?"

"Why should I?" I said. "Apart from that, why should I help you? If she doesn't want to be repatriated, that's her business."

"Be realistic, Sebby—anyway, she does want to be, or she would do, if she knew. Her aunt's died and left her a lot of money. The other side has asked us to let her know so she can go home and sort out her affairs."

I went on drinking soup, but I wondered. Perhaps the story was true. Still, I didn't need to put Godfrey on to her—I could tell her myself.

"Well, I'll tell her if I see her. I doubt if I shall. I should leave a message at the Merrie."

"Yes."

He looked up broodingly, staring round in that blank way people have when they're bored with their eating companion.

I followed his gaze. My eyes lit on Frenchy. Loaded with parcels, she was buying food and having a flask filled with coffee at the counter. I went rigid. Frenchy had gained confidence—she was buying like an FP holder. And anyone with that amount of stuff on them attracted attention anyway. She was attracting it all right. Godfrey was the only man in the room who wasn't looking at her and pretending not to. He was just looking

at her. I couldn't decide if he was watching her like a cat or just watching.

"Heard about Freddy Gore," I said.

"No," said Godfrey, not taking his eyes off her.

"He committed suicide," I said.

"Well I'm damned," said Godfrey, looking at me greedily. "Why?"

"It was his wife. He came home one afternoon..." I spoke on hastily. Frenchy was still buying. Half the customers were still pointedly ignoring her—apart from anything else she looked quite good in her new gear. She picked up her stuff and left without showing her FP to the man behind the counter. She left without Godfrey noticing. I brought my tale of lust, adultery, rape and murder in the Gore family to a speedy close. A horrible thought had struck me. Godfrey was a high-up. He knew about Frenchy and he knew I knew her. There were a lot of cops on the job and he might have fixed it so that some were watching my house. Somehow I had to shift him and catch Frenchy before she got back.

"Shocking story," said Godfrey. looking at his watch. "I must be getting back. Like a lift?"

"Not going in that direction," I said. "Thanks all the same."

So he flagged down a passing car and told the sulky driver to take him to Buckingham Palace—the krauts had restored it at huge expense for the Ministry of Security as well as our paternal governor.

I walked slowly down the road, turned off and ran like hell. I caught Frenchy, all burdened with parcels, just in time.

"Better not go back," I gasped. "They may be watching the hotel."

There was a car standing outside a house just down the street. I ran her up to it and tugged at the door. It wasn't locked. I shoved her paper bags, flask and all, in and got in the driving seat.

A stocky man ran out of the house. He had a revolver in his hand. I started up. Frenchy had the passport out. I grabbed it and waved it at the man with the gun.

"Full passport!" I yelled.

He stood staring at the back of the car. He didn't even dare snarl.

"What makes you think they're watching the hotel?" she asked.

I told her about Godfrey.

She frowned. "I must be right about having to run."

"Are you sure it isn't this legacy they say you've inherited?"

"I've only got one aunt and she's broke. Besides, why should your brother get involved in such a silly little business?"

"Because your father's so important. Or perhaps Papa just wants you home and made up the aunt business to cover up the fact that you're his no-good daughter who's dragging about occupied territory, dragging the family name in the mud behind her."

"Could be. It's not though. I'm still not sure—you'll have to believe me. In the past I've been—well—important. It's to do with that, I know."

"What sort of important?"

She began to cry, great, racking sobs which bent her double.

"Don't ask me—oh, don't ask me."

I got hard-hearted. "Come on, Frenchy. Why should I break the law for you?"

"I don't want to remember—I can't remember," she gasped.

"Nuts. You can remember if you want to."

"I can't. I don't want to."

I passed her my handkerchief silently. How important could she have been—at 20 years old? She must have been at school until a couple of years ago.

"Where did you go to school?" I asked, more to pass the time than anything.

"I was at the Berlin Gymnasium for Girls. When I was 13, I—they took me away."

Then the tears stopped and when I glanced at her, she had fainted. I pushed her back so that she was sitting comfortably, and drove on.

As dark came we reached Histon, just outside Cambridge, and spent the night in the car, parked beside a

hedge, inside a field.

When I woke next morning, there was a rifle barrel in my ear.

## three

"OH, GAWD," I said. "What's this?"

A hand opened the car door and dragged me out. I lay on the ground with the barrel pointing at my belly. Above the barrel was a red face topped by a trilby hat. It wasn't a copper anyway.

I glanced sideways at the car. Inside, Frenchy was sitting up. Outside another man pointed a rifle at her temple, through the open window.

"What's all this about?" I said.

"Who're you?" the man said.

"Sabastian Lowry and Frenchy Steiner."

"What're you here for?"

"Just riding—"

The gun barrel dropped. The man was looking at his friend.

Then I saw—Frenchy had her passport out.

He touched his hat and retreated quickly, mumbling apologies. So I got back in the car and we snuggled up and back to sleep.

When we woke up, we had coffee from the flask, and a sandwich. Then we walked round the field. One or two birds cheeped from the bare hedges and our feet sank into ploughed furrows. It was silent and lonely. We walked round and round, breathing deeply.

We sat down and looked out over the big, flat field, sharing a bar of chocolate.

Frenchy smiled at me—a real smile, not her usual what-the-hell grin. I smiled back. We sat on. No noise, no people, no grimy, cracked buildings, no cops. A pale sun was high in the sky. The birds cheeped. I took Frenchy's hand. It felt strange, to be holding someone's hand again. It was warm and dry. Her fingers gripped mine. I stared at the pale, pointed profile beside me, and the long, messy blonde hair. Then I looked at the field again. We started a second bar of chocolate. Frenchy

yawned. The silence went on and on. And on and on.

I was staring numbly across the acres of brown earth when Frenchy's hand clenched painfully on mine.

Slowly, from behind every bush, like the characters in some monstrous, silent film, the cops were rising. On all sides, over the bare bushes, came a pair of blue shoulders, topped by a helmet. They rose slowly until they were standing. Then they moved silently forward. They tightened in.

Frenchy and I rose. The circle closed. To keep in the centre we had to move over to the road. Slowly they drove us out of the field, past our car, through the gate and on to the road. No one spoke. All we heard was the sound of their boots on the earth. Their faces were rigid, like cops faces always are.

Coming through the gate, we saw the reception committee. Three of them. My friend Inspector Braun, all knife-edged creases and polished buttons, and brother Godfrey. And then a short fat man I didn't know. He was wearing a well-cut suit and power, as they say, was written all over him, from his small, neatly shod feet, to his balding head.

Frenchy stepped up to the group. "Hullo, father," she said in German.

"Hullo, Franziska. We've found you at last, I see."

Godfrey smirked. Extra rations for good old Gottfried tomorrow. Maybe the Iron Cross.

So I thought I'd embarrass him. "Hi, Godfrey, old man."

"Morning, Sebastian." How he wished I wasn't shaking his hand. "We're parked up the road. Come on."

So we walked up the road to the shiny blue car that would take us back to God knew where—or what.

How silently they must have moved. What bloody fools we'd been not to get away after those two farmers had copped us. Godfrey and friends had probably had bulletins out for us all morning.

I sat at the back, between Godfrey and the Inspector. Frenchy was in front with her father and the driver.

"It's nice to know officialdom has its more human side," I remarked. "To think that deputy security mini-

ster, a CID Inspector and 50 coppers should all come out on a cold winter's morning to see a young girl gets the legacy that's rightfully hers."

Godfrey said nothing. He merely looked important. From the way Braun didn't grip my arm and the driver didn't keep glancing over his shoulder to see who I was coshing, I got the impression this wasn't a hanging charge. There was a sort of alligator grin in the air—cops taking home a naughty under-age couple who had run off to get married—not that cops did that kind of little social service job these days, but, wistfully, they kept trying to make you think so.

But what *was* the set-up? In front Frenchy had given up talking to her father—he cut every remark off at source. Why? No family rows in public? Frenchy, what I could see of her, looked like a girl on a cart bound for the scaffold. Her father looked like a man determined to knock some sense into his daughter's flighty head as soon as he got her home. Godfrey merely looked pontifical. Braun looked official.

Frenchy tried again. "Father. I *can't* go—"

"Be quiet!" said her father. Godfrey was listening hard. Suddenly I got the picture. *Godfrey and Braun didn't know what it was all about.* And Frenchy's father didn't want them to.

It must be really something, then, I thought.

There was silence all the way back to London. What about me? I thought. I'm just not in this at all. But I bet it's me who takes the rap. The car stopped in Trafalgar Square. Frenchy and her father got out. He hurried her up the steps of the Goering Hotel. Her eyes were burning like coals.

Then Godfrey and Braun pulled me out. "You'll be in a suite here till we decide what to do with you," Godfrey said in a low voice. "Don't worry. I'll do what I can to help."

I won't say tears came to his eyes—I knew just how far he would go to help. I said goodbye to him and Braun led me up the marble steps. The place was crowded with neat soldiery. We were joined by the hotel manager and two coppers. We went up to the top storey and I was

shown my suite. Three rooms and a bathroom. Quite a nice little shack, although somewhat Teutonically furnished. It was elegant, but there was the smell of loot about it. You kept wondering which bit of furniture covered the bloodstains where they'd bayonetted the Countess and her kids one morning.

Then the two policemen stationed themselves, one at the door and one inside with me. That wasn't so pleasant. I wondered when the cop was going to suggest a hand of nap to while away the time before the execution. I looked about appreciatively, sat down on the blue silk sofa and said "What now?"

A waiter came in with tea and toast. One cup. I asked the cop if he'd like some. He refused. As I went to pour out my second cup I saw why, because the room began to spin. "This hotel isn't what it was," I muttered and fell down.

I woke up next morning in a four-poster. Frenchy, in a red silk nightdress and negligee was bending over me with a cup of coffee. I hauled myself up, noticing my blue silk pyjamas, and took the cup.

She sat down at the Louise XIV table beside the bed. She went on eating rolls and butter. Her hair, obviously washed, cascaded down her back like gold thread.

"Very nice," I said, handing back my cup for a refill. "If I didn't wonder whose Christmas dinner I was being fattened for. Where's the cop?"

"I sent him outside."

I began to glance round. The windows were barred.

"You can't get out. The place is heavily guarded and the cops will shoot you on sight."

"That's new?"

She ignored me. "You're quite safe as long as you're with me. I've told them I've got to have you with me."

"That's nice. How long will you be around?"

"I thought you'd spot a snag!"

"Look, Frenchy. I think you'd better tell me what this is about. It's my carcase after all."

"I will," she said calmly. "Prepare yourself for surprises." She seemed very matter of fact, but her face

had the calm of a woman who's just had a baby, the pain and shock were over, but she knew this was really only the beginning of the trouble.

"I told you I was at a gymnasium in Berlin until I was 13. Then I began seeing visions. Of course, the tutors didn't make much of it at first. It's not too unusual in girls at the beginning of puberty. The trouble was, they weren't the usual kind of visions. I used to see tables surrounded by German officers. I used to overhear conferences. I saw tanks going into battle, burning cities, concentration camps—things I couldn't possibly know about. Then, one night, my room-mate heard me talking English in my sleep. I was talking about battle plans, using military terms and English slang I also couldn't possibly have known. She told the House Leader. The House Leader told my father, who was then only a captain in the S.S. Father was an intelligent man. He took me to Karl Ossietz, one of the Leader's chief soothsayers. A month later I was installed in a suite at headquarters. I was dressed in a white linen dress, my hair was bound with a gold band. I'd become part of the German myth . . .

"I was the virgin who prophesied to Atilla, I was thirteen years old and I lived like a ritual captive for four years, officiating at sacrifices and Teutonic Saturnalia, watching goats have their throats cut with gold knives, seeing torch light on the walls—all that. And I thought it was marvellous, to be helping the cause like that. I went into a kind of mystic dream where I was an Ayran queen helping her nation to victory. And in my midnight conferences with the Leader I prophesied. I told him not to attack Russia—I knew he would be defeated. I told him where to concentrate his forces to use them to their best effect. Oh, and much, much more . . .

"Also only I could soothe him when his attacks of mania came on—by putting my hands on him the way I did for you the other day. I'm not a real healer. I can't cure the body. But I can reach into overtaxed or unstable minds and take away the tightness.

"When the war ended, I just left in a daze. They

thought they didn't really need me at that time. There was something in the back of my mind—I don't know what it was—made me come here, with my passport, my safe conducts, my letters of introduction . . . When I saw what I had done to you all—what could I do? I tried to kill myself and failed—maybe I wasn't trying hard enough. Then I tried to live with you, simply because I couldn't think of anything else to do. A stronger person might have thought of practical ways to help—but I'd spent four years in an atmosphere of blood and hysteria, calling on the psychic part of me and ignoring the rest. I was unfit for life. I just tried to forget everything that had ever happened to me."

She shrugged. "That's it."

I stared at her, feeling a horrible pity. She knew she had been used to kill millions of people and reduce a dozen nations to slavery. And she had got to live with it.

"What's it all about now?" I asked.

"They need me again. There must be desperate problems to be solved. Or the Leader's madness is getting worse. Or both. That's why I felt if I could disappear for a month it would be all right. By that time no one could have cleared up the mess." She lit a cigarette, passed it to me and lit one for herself.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. If I don't help they'll torture me until I do. I'm not strong enough to resist. But I can't, can't *can't* co-operate any more. If I had the guts I'd kill myself but I haven't. Anyway, they've taken away anything I could use to do it. That's why all the windows are barred —it's not to stop you escaping. It's to stop me from throwing myself out. I don't suppose you'd kill me quickly, so I wouldn't know anything about it?"

In a sense the idea was tempting. A chance to get back at the Leader with a vengeance. But I knew I couldn't kill poor, thin Frenchy.

I told her so. "I'm too kind-hearted," I said. "If I killed you, how could I go on hoping you'd have a better life?"

"I won't. If I'm needed they'll cage me again. And this time I'll have known freedom. I'll be back in robes,

with incense and torchlight and all the time I'll be able to remember being free—walking in the field at Histon, for example." I felt very sad. Then I felt even sadder—I was thinking about myself.

"What happens next?" I said.

"They'll fly me to Germany. You're coming too."

"Oh, no." I said. "Not Germany. I wouldn't stand a chance."

"What chance do you stand here? If I went and you stayed, you'd be shot the moment I left the building. They can't risk letting you go about with your story."

Her shoulders were bowed. She looked as if she had no inner resources left. "I'm sorry. It's my fault. I should have left you alone. If I'd never made you run away with me you'd be safe now."

That wasn't how I remembered it exactly, but I'd rather blame her than me for my predicament. I agreed, oh, how I agreed. Still, once a gent, always a gent. "Never mind that. I'll come and perhaps we can think of something." I was dubious about that, but by that time I was too far in.

So at eleven that morning we left the hotel for the airport. From Berlin we went by limousine to the Leader's palace. I've never been so afraid in my life. It's one thing to go in daily danger of being shot, or sent to starve in a camp. It's another thing to fly straight into the centre of all the trouble. I was so afraid I could hardly speak. Not that anyone wanted to hear from me anyway. I was just a passenger—like a bullock on its way to the abattoir.

During the trip, Frenchy's father kept up a nervous machine-gun monologue of demands that she would co-operate and promises of a glorious future for her. Frenchy said nothing. She looked drained.

We arrived in the green courtyard of the palace. On the other side of the wall I heard the rush of a water-fall into a pool. The palace was half old German mansion, half modern Teutonic, with vulgar marble statues all over the place—supermen on super-horses. That's the nearest they'd got to the master-race, so far. A white haired old man led the jackbooted party which met us.

Frenchy smiled when she saw him, a child's smile.

" Karl," she said. Even her voice was like the voice of a very young girl. I shuddered. The spell was beginning to operate again—that blank face, the voice of the little school girl. Oh, Frenchy, love, I sighed to myself. Don't let them do it to you. She was being led along by Karl Ossietz, across the green courtyard.

We made a peculiar gang. In front, Ossietz, tall and thin, with long white hair, and Frenchy, now looking so frail a breeze might blow her away. Behind them a group of begonged generals, all horribly familiar to me from seeing their portraits on pub signs. Just behind them rolled Frenchy's father, trying to join in. Then me, with two ordinary German cops. I caught myself feeling peeved that if I made a dash for it I'd be shot down by an ordinary cop.

Then Karl turned sharply back, stared at me and said: " Who's that? "

Her father said: " He's an Englishman. She wouldn't come without him."

Karl looked furious and terrified. His face began to crumble. " Are you lovers? " he shouted at Frenchy.

" No, Karl," she whispered. He stared long and deeply into her eyes, then nodded.

" They must be separated," he said to Frenchy's father.

Frenchy said nothing. Suddenly I felt more than concern for her—panic for myself. The only reason I'd come here was because she could protect me. Now she could, but she wasn't interested any more. So instead of being shot in England, I was going to be shot right outside the Leader's front door. Still, dead was dead, be it palace or dustbin.

We entered the huge dark hall, full of figures in ancient armours and dark horrible little doors leading away to who knew where. The mosaic floor almost smelt of blood. My legs practically gave way under me. I saw Frenchy being led up the marble staircase. I felt tears come to my eyes—for her, for me, for both of us.

Then they took me along a corridor and up the back stairs. They shoved me through a door. I stood there for several minutes. Then I looked round. Well, it wasn't a rat-haunted oubliette, at any rate. In fact it was the

double of my suite at the Goering Hotel. Same thick carpets, heavy antique furniture, even—I poked my head round the door—the same fourposter. Obviously they picked up their furniture at all the little chateaux and castles they happened to run across on a Saturday morning march.

In the bedroom, torches burned. I took off my clothes and got into bed. I was asleep.

The first thing I saw as I awoke was that the torches were burning down. Then I saw Frenchy, naked as a peeled wand, pulling back the embroidered covers and coming into bed. Then I felt her warmth beside me.

"Do it for me," she murmured. "Please."

"What?"

"Take me," she whispered.

"Eh?" I was somewhat shocked. People like Frenchy and me had a code. This wasn't part of it.

"Oh please," she said, pressing her long body against me. "It's so important."

"Oh—let's have a fag," I said.

She sank back. "Haven't got any," came her sulky voice.

I found some in my pocket and we lit up. "May as well drop the ash on the carpet," I said. "Not much point in behaving nicely so we'll be asked again." I was purposely being irrelevant. Code or no code the situation was beginning to affect me. I tried to concentrate on my imminent death. It had the opposite effect.

"I don't understand, love," I said, taking her hand.

"I had to crawl over the roof to get here," she said, rather annoyed.

"It can't just be passion," I suggested politely.

"Didn't you hear—?"

"My God," I said. "Ossietz. Do you mean that if you're not a virgin, you can't prophesy?

"I don't know—he seems to think so. It's my only chance. He'll make me do whatever he wants me to—but if I can't perform, if it seems the power's gone—it won't matter. They may shoot me, but it will be a quick death."

"Don't be so dramatic, love." I put my cigarette out on

the bed head and took her in my arms. "I love you, Frenchy." I said. And it was quite true. I did.

## four

THAT WAS THE best night of my life. Frenchy was sweet, and actually so was I. It was a relief to drop the mask for a few hours. As dawn came through the windows she lay in our tangled bed like a piece of pale wreckage.

She smiled at me and I smiled back. I gave her a kiss. "A man who would do anything for his country," she grinned.

"How are you going to get back?" I said.

"I thought I'd go back over the roof—but now I'm not sure I'll ever walk again."

I said: "Have I hurt you?"

"Like hell. I'll bluff my way out. The guards will be tired and I doubt if they know anything. Anyway all roads lead to the same destination now."

I began to cry. That's the thing about an armadillo—underneath his flesh is more tender than a bear's. Not that I cared if I cried, or if she cried, or if the whole palace rang with sobs. The torches were guttering out.

She stood naked beside the bed. Then she put on her clothes, said goodbye. I heard her speaking authoritatively outside the door, heels clicking, and then her feet going along the corridor.

I just went on crying. Her meeting with the Leader was in two hours time. If I went on crying for two hours I wouldn't have to think about it all.

I couldn't. By the time the guard came in with my breakfast, I was dressed and dry-eyed. He looked through the open door at the bed and gave a wink. He said something in German I couldn't understand, so I knew the words weren't in the dictionary. I stared at the bed and my stomach lurched. It seemed a bit rude to feel lust for a woman who was going to die. Still I was going to die, too, so it was probably all right. Perhaps there was a heaven—but I doubted if being in bed with Frenchy was part of it. Perhaps they'd take pity on me and put me in the Moslem Section with Frenchy as my houri.

I doubted if there was an imam in the palace though.

Then I realised my condition was getting critical, so I ate my breakfast to bring me to my senses. The four last things, that was what I ought to be thinking about. What were they?

Suddenly I thought of the woman with the baby in the park. If Frenchy couldn't help the Leader, perhaps he'd go. Perhaps they'd lead a better life.

I paced the floor, wondering what was happening now.

This was what was happening . . .

Frenchy was bathed, dressed in a white linen robe with a red cloak and led down to the great hall.

The Leader was sitting on a dais in a heavy wooden chair. His arms were extended along the arms of the chair, his face held the familiar look of stern command, now a cracking facade covering decay and lunacy.

On his lips were traces of foam. Around him were hs advisors, belted and booted, robed and capped or blonde and dressed in sub-valkyrie silk dresses. The court of the mad king—the atmosphere was hung with heavy incomprehensibilities. Led by her father and Karl Ossietz, Frenchy approached the dais.

"We—need—you—" the Leader grunted. His court held their places by will power. They were terrified, and with good reason. The hall had seen terrible things in the past year. There were, too, one or two faces blankly waiting for the outcome. As the old pack-leader sickens, the younger wolves start to plan.

"We — have — sought — you for — half a year," the grating, half-human voice went on. "We need your predictions. We need your—*health!*"

His eyes stared into hers. He leapt up with a cry. "Help! Help! Help!" His voice rang round the hall. More foam appeared at his lips. His face twisted.

"Go forward to the Leader," Karl Ossietz ordered.

Frenchy stepped forward. The court looked at her, hoping.

"Help! Help!" the mad, uncontrollable voice went on. He fell back, writhing on his throne.

"I can't help," she said in a clear voice.

Karl's whisper came, smooth and terrifying, in her ear: "Go forward!"

She went forward, compelled by the voice. Then she stopped again.

"I can't help." She turned to Ossietz. "Can I, Karl? You can see?"

He stared at her in horror, then at the writhing man, making animal noises on the dais, then back at Frenchy Steiner.

"You—you—you have fallen . . ." he whispered. "No. No, she cannot help!" he called. "The girl is no longer a virgin—her power has gone!"

The court looked at the Leader, then at Frenchy.

In a moment, chaos had broken out. Women screamed —there was a rush to the heavy doors. Men's voices rose, shouted. Then came the crack of the first gun, followed by others. In a moment the hall was milling and ringing with shots, groans and shouts.

On the dais, the Leader lay, twisting and uttering gutteral moans. The pack was at frenzied war. Those who had considered the Leader immortal—and many had —were bewildered, terrified. Those who had planned to succeed him now hardly knew what to do. Several of them shot themselves there and then.

I was lying on the bed smoking when Frenchy ran in, slammed and bolted the doors behind the guards and her pursuers. Her hair was dishevelled, she held the scarlet cloak round her. "Out of the window," she yelled, ripping it off. Underneath, her white dress was in ribbons.

I got up on to the window-sill and helped her after me. I looked down towards the courtyard far below. I clung to the sill.

"Go on!"

I reached out and got a grip on a drainpipe. I began to slide down it, the metal chaffing my hands. She followed.

At the bottom, I paused, helped her down the last few feet and pointed at a staff car that was parked near the gates. Guards had left the gates and were probably taking part in the indoor festivities. There was only one there

and he hadn't seen us. He was looking warily out along the road, as if expecting attack.

We skipped over the lawn and got into the car. I started up.

At the gate, the guard, seeing a general's insignia on the car, automatically stepped aside. Then he saw us, did a double-take, and it was too late. We roared down that road, away from there.

The road ahead was clear.

True to form, Frenchy had found and put on an officer's white mac from the back seat.

I slowed down. There was no point in doing 80 towards any danger on the road.

"And have you lost your power?" I asked her.

"Don't know," she gave me an irresponsible grin.

"What was going on below? It sounded like a battlefield."

She told me.

"The Leader's finished. His successors are fighting among themselves. This is the end of the Thousand Year Reich." She grinned again. "I did it."

"Oh, come now," I protested. "Anyway I think we'll try to get back to England?"

"Why?"

"Because if the Empire's crumbling, England will go first. It's an island. They'll withdraw the legions to defend the Empire—it's traditional."

"Can we make it."

"Not now. We'll get out of Germany and then lie low for a few days until the news leaks out in France. Once things start to break down, the organisation will disintegrate and we'll get help."

We bowled on merrily, whistling and singing.

**the end**

**Langdon Jones is a musician. Until recently he played piano with the Band of the Royal Horse Guards—and it takes something special to do that ! He is a very talented young man, editor of TENSOR, one of the best SF fan-magazines. This is his first appearance in a professional magazine—with a story on the moebius strip theme. Here Jones uses the theme to create a horror story—with symbolic overtones—which comes very close to home . . .**

# STORM-WATER TUNNEL

## Langdon Jones

'HELL, I'M SICK of driving,' he thought, and he savagely pulled up the brake and clambered out of the car, hoping to get some respite from the baking heat. It was just as bad outside. The road shivered as if it were trying to seek refuge from the pummelling rays of the sun. He heard the sound of water and went towards the glade from where it came. He pushed his way along a path. The heat had abated a little, and the green of the vegetation was cool to his eyes, the sound of the water cool to his ears.

He came to a river. It surged along, oblivious to the heat. Here and there the water caught the light and changed it into something silver and cool. His eyes followed a line from his feet to the water. The criss-crossed, baked earth gave way to a cool and mysterious world of waving water-weeds. The whole surface of the water was lapping; lapping as if the river were rejoicing, wallowing in its own coolness. But wait, there was a different water-noise somewhere in the distance. He decided to

investigate. He walked along beside the river. Hell, it was hot! The coolness of the river only served to accentuate his own heat. Somewhere ahead there was a great excitement in the water, a surging, bubbling turbulence. The noise grew louder, and as he rounded a bend, he saw the cause of it.

It was just a tunnel, a storm-water tunnel, leading into the water. There was not much water coming from it, and the current only put up a feeble resistance against the river, before it was slewed round in a great skittering of bubbles. At the rectangular mouth there was not a great deal of noise, but from the blackness beyond he could hear a mighty rumble, a rumble of waters, stretching up the tunnel. He imagined the gigantic ribbon of thousands of gallons, surging forward relentlessly.

'Help!' cried a voice, echoing grotesquely. 'Help me!' A man's voice, snaking along the tunnel above the water, 'Help!'

'Hello,' he yelled, vaulting on to the platform in front of the tunnel, over which the water flowed. 'Where are you?'

He tried to squeeze his body through the vertical bars that guarded the tunnel mouth. It was impossible.

'I can't get through these damn bars, I'll have to bend them. Hang on, I'll just get a wrench from my car.' His voice corkscrewed down the shaft as he jumped on to the bank. As he went back along the path, he felt prickles of sweat popping out all over his body. He ran out of the glade and on to the road. The reflected heat hit him like a wall. He ran to the scorching boot of the car, fumblingly took a wrench and a torch, and then ran back to the tunnel.

'Help!' cried the voice. He put the wrench between two of the bars and pushed. The bars didn't give an inch. He tried again, but his foot slipped and he went down on his knees in the water. His foot found a crater in the concrete and he leant his whole weight on to the wrench.

The bars suddenly gave. He dropped the wrench and switched on the torch and squeezed into the tunnel. It was rectangular, three feet six tall and seven feet wide.

The water was on average two inches deep and it had made the floor very slippery. He had to bend almost double, and he cautiously made his way along, pressing his back against the rough ceiling. He had gone for about ten yards when the tunnel curved to the right and opened into a small cavity, with a manhole about a foot above his head. He stood up to rest his aching back.

'Help me!' cried the voice.

The tunnel in front of him was circular with a diameter of about five feet; the first part had obviously been intended to deter would-be explorers. He bowed his head and entered. His steps were echoed with a metallic timbre. The yellow torch beam swung from side to side as his feet sloshed coldly through the flowing water, and lit up the little pearls of condensation strung along the tunnel walls. As far as he could see there was just tunnel; the universe was a yellowish grey universe leading towards a roaring that was steadily getting louder. He looked down and saw that the water was moving faster. And he felt afraid, remembering seeing a storm-water tunnel during a rainstorm. Yes, the water was definitely getting faster, and the roaring louder. Suddenly he saw something ahead. As he got nearer he was still unable to make out what it was. The water was spraying round his ankles now, but not becoming any deeper. He found himself at the bottom of the chute down which the water raced. It was contained in a dark cavern ten feet wide, twenty tall and thirty long. At each side of the chute were about ten gigantic steps each about two feet high. They were obviously intended to slow the water in case of flood. He laboriously climbed the steps until he arrived at the tunnel entrance. He plunged in again and plodded for minutes that seemed like hours until he arrived at the next manhole. There was a pipe sticking out from the wall. He would have to remember that, for he didn't expect every manhole to have one, and it would serve to let him know that the treacherous chute-mouth was ahead on the way back, in case he lost count of the manholes.

On and on he plodded. Two more manholes, round a bend, he lost count of them. His eyes, protesting against

the monotonous vista of grey concrete started giving him hallucinations. He saw the wet streaks down the walls as rough projections, jutting out from the side; and once he saw he was in a manhole and stood up, only to crack his head on the top of the tunnel.

The voice sounded a good bit nearer, and it spurred him on. The manholes were an immense distance above him now, he was deep in the earth. The tunnel seemed full of vague whisperings, it seemed strangely evil in a way he could not define. It seemed somehow—expectant. He giggled; being cooped up must be affecting his thoughts. As he was coming out of what must have been the tenth manhole-cavity, there was an earth-shaking metallic-sounding explosion. He dropped the torch and involuntarily jerked back, muscles tensed. Suddenly he relaxed and laughed as he realised what it was. It was just a car going over a manhole. He hadn't realised how loud it would sound in this giant echo-chamber. He fished out his torch. He hoped it hadn't got too wet. He started off again, then the torch flickered and went out. He was plunged into complete and utter blackness. For a second, blind panic gripped him, but he mentally shook himself and took stock of the situation. He must soon reach the man who had shouted, and going back would be easier with two, and so he decided to press on. He groped his way along the tunnel, pressing his hands against the rough, crumbling cement of the tunnel top. He began to shiver as the cold became more noticeable in the dark. He seemed to be in a different universe or time, had he really, a short time ago, been in a bright world of shimmering heat?

'Help!'

'Hello,' he called, 'Can you hear me?'

His voice sounded strangely reedy and weak. There was an air of tension and it was as if the almost palpable atmosphere quenched the words as soon as they left his mouth. Time seemed to be going slower. There was definitely something wrong, it was not just imagination. The atmosphere, the feeling of approaching horror, his very thoughts, a combination of all three set his nerves screaming. The tension in the air was forcing his feet to drag, drag against his will, drag, drag, although he tried to

force himself forward. It was as if Time were recurring, making him cover the same few paces again and again. Time, Time, why this constant obsession with Time? He stopped dead in the dark as a blindingly clear thought struck him. He had been here before!

He didn't know when, it was as if that was hidden below the conscious level of his mind; but he knew that he had been here before as sure as he knew he existed. It was as if the weight of centuries pressed on his mind and body. He had a sensation of terrific stresses and he felt that his body was being pulled this way and that by strange surges and fluxes. His sight was suddenly shot through with fitful flashes, light feathered in his head. The light fell into cubistic shards, then writhed into shape. The feelings of stress reached a climax.

He saw a picture. He saw a gigantic wheel turning slowly, slowly and that wheel turning another wheel, and that wheel was turning another, further away, and that turned another, and so it went on, on to a blue infinity. Stretching into the convuluted continuum of Time, Space and Existence. Wheels turning, turning in to infinity.

He snapped back into the real darkness of the tunnel. There was no oppressive atmosphere, his mind was quite clear, except for a gnawing fear that made his legs tremble and his body sweat. He tried to move but he could not make his body obey him. He was shivering violently and had to clench his teeth to stop them chattering.

'Help!' he cried, hearing his voice echo grotesquely, 'Help me!' his voice snaked along the tunnel. 'Help!'

'Hello,' a voice answered from the distance, 'Where are you?'

'Help' he cried. 'Please help me!'

The voice replied, corkscrewing down the shaft:

'I can't get through these damn bars, I'll have to bend them. Hang on, I'll just get a wrench from my car.'

**There is still too much ignorance in the world, and the attendants of ignorance are often violence, fear and, sometimes, sorrow . . .**

# GOODBYE, MIRANDA

## Michael Moorcock

*GOODBYE, MIRANDA.*
*Goodbye. Miranda.*
*Miranda.*

He swerved and swooped over the grey water like a seabird. He was quite mad.

*Goodbye, Miranda.*

His crying laugh was ugly against the sounds of the sea. It held far too much pain for any listeners to sympathise with it. They could only react against that sound, try to stop it, quickly. But they couldn't catch him. Nicholas could fly.

*Miranda!*

"I wish I had a gun, Miranda."

"Would you kill him, father?"

"Sure I would. Kill him dead. Why's he do it?"

"He's mad, father. If I got you a gun, would you kill him?"

"Sure I would. dead. I can't stand it. He's tormenting us deliberate."

"I loved him."

"I know you did—once. But that don't give him the excuse to come wailing round here. Just like a banshee. Just like one."

"It's love, father—love turned to madness. He *ought* to be shot. It's what he wants, I think."

"It's what I want, anyhow."

They stayed in the little house on the headland. They wouldn't go out. But he'd been outside for two days and nights, now. The flying madman. Well, he shouldn't have told them about that—levitation—should've kept it to

himself. A man needn't know. But if he does, then he's got to do something about it. He couldn't have his daughter marrying—a spook.

Now look what had happened. He'd found them, at last. Miranda had said he would.

By God, if only he had a gun . . .

*Please come out and say goodbye to me, Miranda.*

He was on the roof again.

*It's only me—Nicholas.*

By the chimney, shouting in that high voice, just like a bird's.

*Say goodbye to me, Miranda.*

She was covering her ears. Her face bunched up in the terrible pain his voice made on her nerves. It was physical pain. "Stop him, father!"

"How can I stop him? If I had a gun I'd shoot him dead."

"We've got to get a gun."

"Where? Where can we get one?"

"You'll have to go to the village."

"Not with him out there."

*Oh, Miranda. Just goodbye.*

"Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye! Go away, Nicholas! Go *away!* Please!"

"He's doing it deliberate. My God, he'll have us mad, too. I'll go down to the village tomorrow. I'll risk it. Three days. My God!"

*Miranda!*

"Tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow, I'll definitely go."

"You said that yesterday."

"Well, I'll go tomorrow. Doesn't he sleep?"

*Miranda! Goodbye.*

She leapt at her father, her pale hands tearing. "Go, father. Get the gun! The gun! The gun!"

"Tomorrow." He struggled with her. "Stop that. I said I'd go tomorrow and I will." His yellow fingers gripped her. "Stop that, now, Miranda!"

"The *gun!*"

"*Go away, Nicholas!*"

Her breathing was a thin noise. She was dirty, her face was lined and the knife was still in her hand. Her father's blood dripped on to her father's corpse.

*Just goodbye, Miranda. That's all. I love you.*

Her thin body shuddered.

She walked towards the door, each step carefully made. She reached for the bolt and the brown sleeve fell down her bruised arm. She pulled back the bolt.

"*Go away, Nicholas!*"

She heard his voice among the torn clouds. *Miranda!*

The air was sharp, as sharp as his voice.

She looked up, over the roof of the house and glimpsed his mad body darting, gliding. She heard the passing of his body above her and saw it wheeling over the sea, heard the voice, shrill, agonised: *Goodbye, Miranda.* She became aware of the heart pushing at her flesh, beneath her breast. She gripped the knife.

*Miranda!*

"Oh . . ." she said as the knife pierced her and she began to fall, first against the swinging door, then back, dropping with a flat sound on the stones of the floor.

When he came back, he saw that the light was swirling around outside the door, released from the house and dissipating into the night. He landed beside the door but was too physically weak to walk so had to glide into the house and see the corpses.

He was puzzled. His dark, thin, ravaged face moved with the effort of thought, but thought was now beyond him.

*Miranda?*

He shook his head slowly, but it was no good.

His body moved backwards out of the door, a foot above the ground.

*Goodbye, Miranda.*

He flew away, but he was still calling, and strangely there was no sorrow in the cry.

**Joseph Green is an American writer rapidly becoming popular in Britain. This story is, we think, one of his best . . .**

# SINGLE COMBAT

## Joseph Green

**The Curtain Rises:**

BLUE RIGEL CAME vaulting over the high tops of the snow-capped mountains, dispelling the deep shadows in the cleft, and the Day of Tribute was at hand. Kala Brabant, six-foot nine of coal-black skin stretched taut over stringy muscles and prominent bones, stood in the door of the king's cave and watched the people of the Saa'Hualla tribe beginning to stir.

Behind him he heard Ahmist, his Number One wife, kicking the three lesser wives out of their bed in the inner room. It was time to make Kala's breakfast, which he insisted be unduly well cooked, and afterwards start preparing food for the numerous expected guests of the king.

Kala stepped outside, into the cold breeze blowing off the shoulder of the Home Mountain, and made a brisk tour of the guards at their stockade posts. The Caves of Kala sat within a large pocket in a sheer face of rock, impossible to approach from the back, and the previous chiefs had built and maintained a high wall across the entrance from the valley. This fortress had not been overrun within the memory of the Saa'Hualla.

A good base from which to conquer a planet, considering the job had to be done with spear and sword.

He met Grabo, the general of his army, as he approached his cave again, and exchanged good-mornings.

"Have any warriors in the tribes taken the oath to kill the king this tribute day, Grabo?" Kala asked after the formal pleasantries.

"None of which I have heard, O King."

"Good. We will need all our warriors for the coming campaign against the Willikazee. And I do not like this useless killing of my own folk. I am glad they realize I cannot be beaten."

"Mighty is the king," responded Grabo mechanically, and left to hunt his own breakfast.

*Mighty is the King!* thought Kala as he ate his thoroughly cooked meat. *Yes, mighty is the Earthman posing as a Saa'Hualla, mighty is the man who uses parapowers against primitive savages. Mighty is the Slaughterer of Warriors, the Killer of Great Men, the Maker of Widows. And how sick at the stomach he is of the whole bloody mess!*

But regrets were a luxury in which he could ill-afford to indulge. There was, as always, too much to do.

He attended to some routine details connected with the day's festivities and then had his great chair pulled out of its corner in his cave and set up outside. He was barely ready when Birananga, one of his two living fathers-in-law, presented himself and two bearers loaded with gifts for his king and son-in-law. It was time to start the political dickering that would consume most of his day. Birananga was chief of a small people to the southeast, one of the few local tribes who had fallen under his authority without the use of force. To the west of both their kingdoms was the large and powerful tribe of the Sinnedocks, whose fat King had acknowledged the overlordship of Kala only after a bloody and terrible battle. He needed to bind a little tighter the bonds of fealty he held over the Sinnedocks, and according to their complicated kinship line he and their fat old king would become relatives if married to sisters. Birananga had a daughter, the apple of his aging eye, who had just reached mating age. If a marriage between her and the old king could be arranged, enabling him to say his "family" ruled this area of the world, it would greatly ease the chafe of acknowledging overlordship.

By the time he had half-argued, half-bullied his father-in-law into reluctant assentation the next chief was waiting to present his tribute and re-swear his fealty.

For the rest of the morning he worked hard at consolidating his already large empire, pitting his tremendous knowledge and keen mind against their native shrewdness and stubborn greed. Like any other overlord he held power primarily through the strength of his sword, but high-pressure politics, to which these primitives were unaccustomed, saved many hours of battle and many gallons of blood.

Blood. The thought of the number of men he had killed personally, and countless others killed in battles he had started, came home again for the hundredth time, with its usual sickening force. He felt physically ill where he sat, and for a moment was afraid he would lose his breakfast, in front of all those assembled guests. He took control of his sympathetic nervous system for a moment, forced down his rising gorge, and calmed himself physically. For mental relief he used a trick he had employed often in his three years on this planet, divorced himself from the scene around him and imagined that he was flying upward into the blue sky, rising far enough into space to permit him to see the faint light of old Sol twinkling in the heavens eleven-hundred light years away. But this relief, too, failed, for the thought came that it was less than half that distance in the opposite direction to the home world of the enemy, the Flish.

**Memory One:**

PROFESSOR KALA BRABANT, head of the classical poetry department at Ruanda University, turned his back on the recruiter from United Government and walked to the window, stood staring out at the blue water of Lake Tanganyika. His small grandchildren were playing in the water near the edge, their ebony skins glittering with droplets jeweled by sunlight. The quiet hum of expensive appliances told him that Temi was in her new control room, preparing dinner for himself and the grandchildren they were babysitting. This was home, this sprawling

white house on the shores of the Long Lake, and his mountain cabin just below the snowline, a half-hour's ride by aircar, provided a place of refuge from all worldly cares. There he had his books, his tapes, the huge collection of unviewed films he had just purchased from the estate of a dead friend; there awaited serenity and contentment.

The short, stout little oriental waited patiently. He possessed degrees as imposing as Kala's, and most of them dealt with understanding and handling people. U.G. used only the best for recruiters, and he was the best of the best.

Kala turned from the window, wringing his hands in deep agitation. "But why me?" he echoed the immemorial cry of man. "I'm a teacher, a philosopher and poet, not a spy. How could I possibly help you? And if I could, why should I?"

Instead of answering, the smaller man dug a relaxer out of his pocket, flicked off the cover and inserted it in a nostril. He breathed deeply for a moment, then cleared his throat and said, "Why you? That's an easy one, Professor. You are the only man we have found who is fully qualified for the job. Nowhere among the forty billion Earthmen here and on the other twenty-nine planets we have colonized is there a Negro tall enough and slim enough for the necessary reconversion, who is also a psionic adept and possesses the necessary high intelligence. That is why I must—why I *shall*—convince you to accept the assignment."

"I am not even convinced of the need."

"Professor Brabant, most of the facts are known to you, but perhaps it is necessary to see them in their proper relation to each other. First, we now live to be two-hundred Eryears, on the average, and recent advances promise still longer lives in the future. Despite this, the drive in man to procreate has not weakened, and every family wants children. They are one of the subjective building blocks on which a happy life is based. With a new generation every thirty years this means our population doubles approximately every eighty-five years, and *Lebensraum* is the single greatest need of the human

race. The only possible place that room may be secured is by colonization of other planets, which the phase-shifted makes practicable. With thirty planets under our control we have, at the moment, plenty of room. But, sir, U.G. does not plan for today, or tomorrow, or a hundred years from now. If the human race learned one single lesson from communism, it was that the future must be planned a thousand years in advance. This we have done, and you, Professor, are an important part of that plan."

"But what you ask is ridiculous! To become a fighter at my age, a warrior king among primitive savages! The entire idea is repulsive in the extreme."

"That may be true, but it is vital and necessary. We are committed, by agreements with the other intelligent lifeforms too strong to be broken, never to colonize a world which contains an intelligent race below Grade Three civilization. There are nine such worlds now known, and we are seeking to lift their level to Three, and at the same time orient them towards Earth. All, of course, in strict secrecy. One day they shall choose their neighbors, and it must be ourselves.

"The Flish know this even better than we, and are far ahead of us in advance planning. Slowly but surely they are winning over uncommitted worlds, developing primitive societies into capable cultures oriented in *their* direction. They do not own a single warship, have never invaded by force a single world. Yet they are conquering the galaxy, world by world and star by star. And they must be stopped! Or ten thousand years from now Earth will stand alone, and the long twilight of the dignity of the individual will be upon us."

"I've heard of the Flish, of course. Everyone has. But aren't they fully human, so much so it's even speculated Earth and Flish unions might be fertile? What is so dreadful about them?"

"Just this, Professor; the word Flish is either singular or plural and the Flish are both. They live a mutual mental symbiosis with each other that our brains, though we are their equal in parapowers, cannot duplicate. Their lives as individuals are secondary to the group life and the

group mind, and such is their power the mental matrix they extend will cover an entire planet. Communism sought to accomplish the same object in the physical world, and we rejected the attempt. Individual freedom of choice, within an ordered society, is our heritage. If we wish to preserve it—to prove that individuals voluntarily working together can accomplish as much as a hive-worker—then we must fight the Flish."

The last small tribal chief finally presented his gifts and re-swore his allegiance as the women were stacking heaping platters of food on the great tables his steward had caused to be erected in front of the caves. It was time for the noon meal. Afterwards the games, and then the bloody climax of the day, when by tribal law too long standing and powerful for even he, who had changed so much, to oppose, any warrior of any subject tribe could challenge the king to a duel by combat, and assume his crown if he won.

Kala ate sparingly of the plentiful food, it being almost too raw for his digestion, and passed the time talking animatedly with his guests, those same lesser kings who had that morning sworn an obedience enforceable only by might and power.

Grabo appeared at the side of the table and caught his eye. With an almost imperceptible motion of his head he indicated the king's cave, and Kala muttered to his vassals that he would be back and rose and went into the shadowed interior. It was deserted at the moment, his wives working outside. In the house of the king there were no children.

Grabo appeared a moment later, his long form looming large in the shadows. "O King, it has come to my ears there may be a challenger after all. There is a young warrior in the tribe of Nil'Abola who has won much fame in combat during the past year, and some of his friends say he is anxious to try the greatest game of all. It is said he is a cunning man, though very young, and they expect him to hold back if there are other challengers, permitting you to tire yourself on them. It would be well to be wary of him."

"Say you he has won all his fame as a warrior within the past year?"

"It is so, O King. A very young man indeed, but still, one who has not lost a fight. He would be chief of the Nil'Abola now, save that he chose instead to fight you and perhaps gain a kingdom."

Kala glanced sharply at Grabo, but the shorter man was looking out the cave into the sunlight. Could Grabo, who had seen him down the greatest of Saa'Hualla warriors with ease, be losing faith in him? Well, it little mattered what this primitive general thought. Kala was invincible, and knew it, and not all the people gathered outside could take him unless they were very lucky indeed.

Kala's hand rose and clutched the great power crystal at his throat as he turned away and strode toward the door. In the sleeve of his hide jacket were two smaller penetration crystals, and in the belt at his waist were a series of six of the glittering bits of glass, two blue amplifiers, two red clarivoy's and two colorless pulsers. The latter he had never used, for they brought madness instead of death. Most of his many kills had been made with the help of the two distorters in the hilt of his curved sword, though his brain could immobilize a non-psionic opponent without aid. The distorters, controlled by his mind, powered by the white crystal and amplified by the blue ones in his belt, could burst a thousand bloodvessels in a man's brain in a few microseconds. He had plunged the curving sword into the heart of many a man dead before he could fall, in order to fool the watchers, but had yet actually to kill a man with it.

Kala Brabant paused in the door a few seconds before stepping out. In Earthly measurements that door was over seven feet high, and there was only just adequate room for him to pass erect. Still, he was a little shorter than the average Saa'Hualla, who stood a full seven feet tall.

**Memory Two:**

HE STOOD NAKED before the full-length mirror in his

hospital room, staring at the dazed disbelief on his own face. The final operation of the series had just been completed, the relatively minor one of killing all hair cells on his body, and he would soon be leaving. This was the first time the doctors had let him see himself.

Knowing verbally what they were doing was no panacea for the shock of seeing the reality of the transformation. They had broken both his femurs and inserted three-inch sections of artificial bone, and later performed the same operation on the humerous bones. The attaching muscles had been extended until they were long threads of hard fiber clinging close to the mutilated bones they served. They had starved him down to tendon and ligament thinness, added pigment to his skin until he was black as coal itself, changed the shape of his eyes and colored his teeth. Still, these were minor changes and could be reversed when his five-year tour of duty was over. No one could give him back the two fingers they had cut off, or the two toes. The fourth metacarpals and fifth metacarsals had been removed completely, and the adjoining carpals and calcaneum bones trimmed to match the slimmer appearance of the Saa'Hualla. Bald-headed, thin-limbed, four-fingered and four-toed, he had emerged from the last operation a Saa'Hualla in all but name and background. And the name was so similar that he was using his given name here!

His curse was that he was one of the few people on Earth who closely enough resembled the Saa'Hualla to make finishing surgery possible. He had been proud of his Batutsi heritage, proud of his height, proud of the color of his skin, which he had considered black until he saw his first movies of the Saa'Hualla. His Hamitic ancestry had given him the lean facial structure, thin lips and high cheekbones common to these primitives, and the accursed doctors had done the rest. And now his wife waited alone in the house in Usumbura, grandchildren he had never seen swam in the blue waters of Lake Tanganyika, and his little cabin below the snowline stood empty and silent.

He straightened his shoulders and moved forward,

aware that Grabo might misinterpret his hesitation as cowardice. Well, he would be right. They could not have picked a worse coward than Kala Brabant, and he had tried to tell them this, but they had laughed at his protestations, those high men of the United Government, laughed and clapped him on the back and sent him in to the psychologists, who confirmed every word he had said. And still it hadn't mattered. With the amplifying crystals and what they had taught him of control he had become an impossible opponent to anyone not equally equipped. So far there had been no call for bravery—only butchery—but if it ever came he was sorely afraid it would find him lacking.

He resumed his place at the table and dawdled with his food a little longer, and then the feast was blessedly over and it was time for the games.

As he was leading his kingly guests toward the hides which had been spread on the ground in a choice location Kala sensed another presence at his back and half-turned his head. Ahmist was striding along just behind him. Without moving her thin lips, and with her voice pitched just loud enough to reach his sensitive ears, she said, "The one who will challenge you is named Listra, and I have arranged with Grabo that he will be challenged to a game of whips, and in such a manner that he may not refuse."

Kala felt a smile twitch at his lips, but did not look back, and after a moment more Ahmist took another direction. He had known that she loved him, in her own primitive way, but this was the first time she had actively interfered in his affairs. He wondered how Temi, his wife of a quarter-century, waiting alone in Usumbura, would have reacted under like circumstances.

Kala and his guests made themselves comfortable on the hides and the games began. The usual contests in running, jumping, spear-casting and swordplay were held, with rich prizes for the winning warriors. Kala found himself repressing a smile when his prize corps of bowmen gave an exhibition of fancy shooting, and his guests stared with amazement and dismay. The bow-and-arrow was a relatively new weapon and had been given scant

attention in the arts of war. It would receive more in the future.

There was a commotion to the left of the seated royalty and voices raised in anger. A moment later two figures strode through the seated spectators and approached the royal seat. At the head, looking very angry, Kala recognized O'Sirinaga, one of his best warriors, a man well over seven feet tall and a little heavier and stronger and most Saa'Hualla. The man trailing him was much smaller, shorter even than Kala, and walked with an insolent, shoulder-swinging swagger very unusual among these long-striding people. He was unusually thick-lipped, and his face was a good deal more full than customary. In fact, to be a member of a race made primarily of skin, bone and ligament, he was almost fat.

O'Sirinaga knelt before him and presented his case in swift, angry phrases. He had been insulted by this pretended warrior from the Nil'Abola and demanded satisfaction. Since dueling between warriors was forbidden on this day he requested the games to be halted long enough to enable him to avenge the insult by laying a few whipmarks across the back of this young imitation of a fighter.

Listra listened to the insults with almost bored inattention, and when questioned by Kala as to whether or not the charge was true he shrugged his well-fleshed shoulders with careless disdain. "If you deny him the opportunity to obtain a few more scars, O King, some other fool will take his place. I have not insulted his ancestors, but since he wishes to fight I would not dream of denying him the privilege. Let us have no more talk."

"Bring the whips," said Kala to a court attendant, and a short moment later they were laid in his hands. He checked them carefully, then presented one to each man, and clapped his hands to indicate the fight might begin.

O'Sirinaga backed away until he was just out of range, cracked his bone-tipped whip in the air a few times, then laid it on the ground behind him and advanced on the smaller man, who had not moved since he walked into the cleared area. He was holding his whip carelessly in front

of him, his large eyes fixed on his opponent, not in a position to strike the larger man without first throwing the long whip behind him.

O'Sirinaga struck, the long braided thong whipping through the air so fast the tip was invisible, the bone barb aimed for the eye of the smaller man. But it struck empty air. In a motion so fast the eyes were unable to follow him the smaller man sprang forward, driving and the sodden sound of leather biting into flesh. Twice was suddenly reversed, the cutting body trailing the ground behind him, the heavy butt gripped like a club in his hand. Before O'Sirinaga could draw in his whip for another stroke, before he could take more than a single step backwards, the Nil'Abola warrior was upon him, and the heavy butt crashed down on his head. The big warrior went down and out, knocked unconscious in the first thirty seconds of the fight.

The constant background chatter of the spectators, the cries of children and the gossiping of women was suddenly halted, and a vast and oppressive silence hung over the assembled people. It was broken by a sharp crack and the soddon sound of leather biting into flesh. Twice more Listra raised his whip and laid long deep cuts across the back of the unconscious man, and then the small warrior tossed the whip across the bleeding body and walked insolently away.

There were cries of outrage from the people of Saa'Hualla, and several of the men leaped to their feet, ready to continue the duel. Kala motioned them down. It scarcely mattered. In a few more hours the young warrior would be dead anyway.

But it was true he was going to regret killing this young man a great deal less than many others he had dispatched to their ancestors.

The rest of the primitive physical games ran their courses. When the last down warrior was carried off he felt satisfied with the day's work. His conquer-with-force-and-rule-with-law tactics were working well, as they had worked in that great empire built by the swords of Rome so long ago. He had a close-knit group of sub-chiefs, each of whom willingly subordinated his personal interests to the

interests of the people as a whole. And each seemed reasonably content to run his own small area, without aspiring too highly to the post held by Kala.

All too soon the field was clear and the people were beginning to straggle back toward the caves, where the huge cooking pots were filled and waiting. The appointed time had come, and old Nakabawa, the high priest, rose to perform his duty, his wrinkled, ancient face turned toward the lowering sun. He droned the words of the ancient ritual in a hasty and careless voice, obviously unaware that a potential challenger lurked among the Nil'Abola. When he finished and Listra stepped forward, drawing his sword, there was a concerted gasp from the audience and those walking toward the cooking pots hurriedly returned to their seats. The day's entertainment was not over. Kala, The Great King, had still another man to kill.

Listra spoke his challenge, sword in hand, and Kala drew his blade and responded in kind. The formaliites for this particular event were simple and soon over. The rules of combat were known to everyone, down to the small children. There remained only the killing to be done, and the event was over for another year.

### The Sun is Setting:

KALA WALKED FORWARD to the edge of the barren ground, a man no longer young, a man to whom the thrill of combat was a stomach-turning experience fit for only the immature. As he reached the last of the grass something flickered by his foot and he glanced downward in time to see a tiny burrowing animal disappear into its hole. The poor creature must have been caught away from its home when the first of the huge crowd had appeared, and had been hiding among the grassblades in fear and trembling ever since.

There was a small stinging sensation on his right ankle, just above his hide shoe, but he ignored the urge to scratch and kept walking. Getting accustomed to insects had been one of his more agonizing adjustments. They were very bad during the warm weather.

For the first time he raised his lowered head and stared his foe in the face. Listra was leaning comfortably on his sword, watching him come, and on the younger man's face was a small smile of satisfaction. He seemed very relaxed and sure of himself for a young and relatively inexperienced warrior going up against the most formidable adversary who had ever appeared among the Saa'Hualla. A very good man, undoubtedly, one whom it would have been worthwhile to save. Too bad it couldn't be.

Nakabawa stepped backward from between the two men and droned a few more words of ritual. At the conclusion he retreated until he was out of the danger area and sat down to watch the fight. The contestants were free to begin at any time.

Kala heaved a mental sigh, raised his sword, saluted the setting sun, and lunged toward his young opponent, the deadly blade glinting in the slanting rays of light, the two jewels in its hilt flashing their own separate color of emerald green. He also activated the crystal at his throat and sent a surge of power into the belt amplifiers, and from there to the distorters in the hilt. The invisible beam leaped ahead of the sword, guided in its general direction by the blade but controlled by the mind of the man behind it. The disruptive force, capable of penetrating a man's skull without visible sign and turning the brain cells into a bloody jelly, crossed the space between man and sword in less than a microsecond . . . and was met and stopped by an inpenetrable barrier of counter-force.

Kala was already leaning forward, stretching out his arm in the long stroke that would sink the sword into the heart of the erect corpse. In those agonizing milliseconds before he could stop the thrusting blade, while his eyes saw the sword of Listra coming easily upward to parry the fast thrust, realization came.

It was obvious, so very obvious. How very stupid he had been, and how wrong. *How conceited, little Superman, how complacent, tall fool! And are you lost, idiot Earthman?* Kala shifted the blunted power of his first thrust, dropped the distorters sent the full power of his

amplified mind into the cerebral centers of his own brain and jumped his time-sense to its highest possible range.

He looked out of his own eyes and saw the sword in his extended hand not yet reaching the apex of its thrust, saw the hard small muscles in his bony arm in the slow act of tensing to stop the forward movement, and then abandoned his eyes entirely and used only the para-senses. He needed the use of null-time in order to sort his sudden new understanding of the situation, and analyze his own part in it.

The first and most obvious fact his lazy senses had not revealed was that Listra was no more a Saa'Hualla than himself. And the second and equally obvious, which had been beating unheeded on his sensibilities since he first laid eyes on the swaggering young warrior, was that Listra was not a man. Kala was dueling to the death with a woman.

*I hated and regretted the physiological changes necessary to change me into a Saa'Hualla. How much more so must it have hurt a young and undoubtedly pretty girl! Good-bye to that great artifice of feminine beauty, the hair, kiss farewell the soft bloody flesh of severed breasts with long strands of milk gland ducts dangling beneath, cry long over buttocks stretched and slimmed to thin covers of long hard muscle, bid goodbye to womanhood!* And if he knew the Flish surgeons they had not stopped there. Underneath those hide trousers would be plastic male sex organs, indetectable from the real except by function. The only feminine attribute remaining was one which even they would have had a hard time concealing, the width of pelvic bones. And this they had hidden by that braggadacio swagger, the exaggerated movement which served to draw the observer's attention to the shoulders.

And why go to so much trouble, when a man would have been far easier to convert? Why the extra work, time, trouble, expense? That, too, was fairly obvious in the person of Listra. Nowhere on her hands was there an ornament, from her neck hung no necklace, in her sword was no glitter of glass. She was a natural psionic, one of those rare individuals so gifted crystals could not

amplify or aid her. She did not need the massed power of the hive-mind, could be sent alone to an alien world, could fight strange humans, pitiful creatures who had never known the oneness of a billion selves, and conquer them without the supporting comfort of an infinity of minds linked tightly to her own. So was also death, death attired in a long thin suit of flesh, death for Kala Brabant, puny Earthman.

And that death was already in his blood.

*With my great power crystal to amplify my weak mind, with laminated layers of silicone doted by the impurities which focus and condense, with those artificial aids of man which bring me up out of nothingness I too am a mighty power of destruction, I too draw upon that power which is above force and twist it to my will, I too am a God. But I am a stupid man above all things, and only an idiot like myself would have ignored that scramble of tiny claws, the small life scuttling to its newly-dug hole, the flea-like carrier who abandoned the bounding body and leaped, compelled by a will beyond his understanding, toward a man's ankle, and landed and clung and bit and chewed until he penetrated the tough black skin and ejected from their snug home within its tiny jaws the swarm of alien life which now pulsed and throbbed and grew within the stinging wound.*

**A Trip Inside, while time passes:**

KALA USED A few milliseconds to refocus his attention on the optic nerve and glanced at the current time-scene. His sword was within a few inches of Listra's and there appeared to be no danger of a counter-thrust before he could assume full body control.

He moved his center of consciousness out of the brain and into the bloodstream, streaking along the tubular passageways with the swiftness of thought itself. An instant later his consciousness was at the scene of combat. The battle had been raging for several minutes and his soldiers were fighting valiantly but steadily giving ground, the entire affair having been overlooked by his higher consciousness until this moment. That tiny insect had

released a flood of unicellular protozoa into the capillaries nearest the dermis, flangellate infusorians which he recognized at once as being closely akin to the dreaded *Trypanosoma rhodesiense* of his own African highlands. But these voracious strangers ate, grew and reproduced with a speed no Earthly life could possibly match. They were disposing of red blood cells at a prodigious rate, and his hard-fighting guard of granular leucocytes were unable to stop them escaping into the surrounding tissues and finding unguarded bloodvessels, from where they were swiftly making their way throughout his body. True, the macrophages in the liver and lymph nodes would get many of them, but those which got through and continued their meal of red cells were going to cause him a serious problem in the near future.

His automatic control system had already started routing more leucocytes to the infected area, but he assumed control of the situation long enough to start every valiant warrior in the nearest pint of blood toward the danger scene. It was going to be necessary virtually to block off this area from circulation, since it was obvious the invaders ate and reproduced four times as fast as a leucocyte could encompass and neutralize a single enemy, and the only way to do it was with their stacked white bodies.

Fast though they moved in response to his direct will it was going to be several full seconds before enough leucocytes arrived to start the blocking action, and he could not wait. Regretfully, he detached a small portion of his consciousness and left it at the scene to direct operations, then returned his primary attention to the mental battle he had started.

### A Trip Outside, Outside Time:

HE FELT THE beginning of the wave as his sword touched Listra's, the mighty battering power of a mind perhaps unique in the galaxy, certainly the most powerful of which he had ever heard. She was hurling the full power of her distorting force at his cerebellum; if he couldn't block it the fight was over. If he could, she had a measure of his amplified strength.

Kala marshalled all his forces, disregarding all other crystals and concentrating through the white power source on his neck to build a wall against the force of her thrust. For the few microseconds it lasted it was close, but fortunately for him it took less power to defend than to attack, and after that instant of vain effort she withdrew, leaving only a small portion of her power still beating constantly at his defenses. But even that small thrust was enough that he had to leave another portion of his consciousness, and a little of his strength, to defend against her.

Kala Brabant considered the use of his pulsers, the givers of madness. They amplified and transmitted on specific wavelengths and in frequencies so high as to be almost beyond count, and they shattered the currents flowing in the delicate neural network of the brain, those currents which were human consciousness. He hesitated now, knowing that it was impossible for a natural psionic, working without crystals, to transmit in pulses. And somewhere in the lower levels of his mind a voice screamed *That's a woman out there Under that stygian skin hiding behind the smooth expanse of breastless chest is the heart of a woman Maybe she has kids at home maybe a husband maybe a lover who waits and gazes sighing at blue moons on darkened worlds Maybe Another Time Another Place we could be friends . . . Lovers . . .*

But then he remembered she was a Flish, in mental communion with every other Flish agent on the planet. He had been thinking of her in earthly terms, and they did not apply. An ant among ants is an ant.

Kala activated the pulsers, sent the beam at her brain.

*Forgive me Temi Ahmist lesser wives forgive the killing of a woman!*

The swords had met, parted with a clash of steel and spark of fire, and his arm was drawing back to hew the second blow that would put the mindless woman out of her lack of consciousness of misery *she blocked the pulsers!*

He felt the opposing wall as solid, almost tangible in its sense of presence, and the pulsating thrusts should have penetrated and disrupted, sliding through in those

almost infinitely small moments of time when her longer wavelength was out of tune with his own. But they didn't. Her defense was so powerful it absorbed each individual pulsation, letting it penetrate only a short distance before it was neutralized and destroyed.

**The Battle Rages on all Fronts:**

SHE HAD PARRIED his stroke and was aiming one of her own. He knew that she, too, was concentrating most of her forces in the mental battles, since their hyper-time parapowers allowed them to move and counter-move a hundred times while even the fastest swordsman struck once, but still, if either forgot the sharp-edged tools of death long enough to let one penetrate on that instant the battle was lost.

He began to move his sword to the position which would catch her stroke, satisfied himself that it was too late for her to change without giving him an opening that would be fatal, and, keeping his guard up against her next probe, moved half his conscious mind to the fleabite on his ankle. A few of the reinforcements he had summoned were beginning to straggle in, but most were still seconds away and the battle was rapidly being lost. More and more of the invading protozoa, long tails lashing, were breaking through the leucocytes and escaping into the central bloodstream, eating red cells by the millions wherever they swam. Unless he finished the other two battles soon and concentrated his forces on these hungry invaders he was a dead man.

Still, he had minutes here. Outside, he had only seconds or less.

He brought nine tenths of his awareness back to the exchange of arrows taking place in the ether and discovered that he was conscious of *Darkness, Vastness, Infinity . . . Lost Suns, Darkening Nebula, Dying Light . . . A Universe Marcescent, Quiescent, Exanimate . . . SIZE . . . Insignificant, Meaningless, Man . . .*

He drew away from the contagion of depression, wondering what had happened to his defense called upon it, threw it up full strength, and discovered what even the

best parapowers on Earth had not been able to tell him. Thought alone, without force or hint of force, was very hard to block. He was still conscious of her depressing projections, still aware of *Darkness . . .* He drew as much consciousness away from the sensation as he could spare, wondering why she was willing to project harmless thought at all, and discovered that his guard had become lax, her sword was sliding over his own and towards his lower abdomen. He twisted his lean hip aside a fraction of a second too late and received a shallow gash on one buttock, and received as well the reason she projected harmless thought.

But two could play at that game. He weakened his defense a little and put part of his power into a counter-attack, hurling at her hairless head a barrage of disconnected fragments of poetry, song and nonsense, enough to throw her non-Earth oriented mind off balance if she should try to understand *Hold that! Hold that! Hold that line! . . . She walks in beauty . . . Go, Tiger! . . . Cloudless climes . . . Edina! Scotia's Darling seat! All hail! . . . When you were a tadpole and I was a fish . . . O a'ye hymeneal powers . . . Side by side in the oozing tide . . . Threescore-fyfteen, a bloomin' bride, This night with seventy-four is ty'd . . . Sae sed, Sae dune; Ye standers hearde . . .*

He hurled Byron, Burns and Carroll at her strong barrier and knew he was getting through when her next stroke faltered. He rejoiced that he had at last found a weapon which worked against her and ignored the clamoring darkness in his mind, sending her music notes, dead love songs, English poetry, all the dregs of a mind educated on every culture but his own. And he turned his weakness against her by sending images of *sex loveliness womanhood babies happiness joy.*

She hit back with *Blackness Lightlessness Nothingness, Quintessence of . . . Vastness Openness . . . SPACE! . . . Arbourg, Arbeg, Arb, Ar . . . Sound Symbol Sign Death! Death! . . . Blood Flow Life Go Deep Woe . . .* But he absorbed without trying to understand, absorbed and sank and buried the alien concepts.

**The Stroke is given, Death Hovers O'er:**

HER NEXT STROKE was almost feeble. He brought his brain back to normal time, for better co-ordination between body and mind, and put most of his faculties into the physical duel. He easily parried the weak thrust, leaped to one side, hit the edge of her sword with his free hand and forced it downward a few inches while he brought his own swinging toward her from the side. On an impulse he could neither define nor explain Kala changed his mind at the last instant and turned the blade so that the flat side smacked into her hip. He continued his motion to the side and at the same time hurled himself forward, anticipating her backward leap, and brought the sword toward her head, flat side forward, for a knockout blow.

It was impossible for her to parry, but she ducked very swiftly and the flat side whistled over her head. And then he was suddenly breathless, out of position, unable to move backward or stop his stroke in time to parry, and knew he had lingered too long outside. The enemy in his blood had done its work and his muscles were weak from oxygen starvation. He was slowly dying where he stood.

He saw the bright blade flashing toward him, the elongated face smiling now in the moment of death, suddenly all female, not a trace of maleness in its soft shadows and fleshy planes, and he wondered, as the sharp point entered his thin chest and pushed towards his heart, how all the gathered savages could fail to see he was being killed by a woman.

**The Final Scene:**

GRABO STARED AT the gush of blood from the punctured heart, running up the sword to the hilt, stared as the body of Kala Brabant hit the ground, dead before he fell, stared at the suddenly stricken look on the face of the intelligent and sensitive young woman who had just committed the deed and thought *Fool of a soft intellectual, idiot of a higher education, great man and benefactor of humanity, how still you lie! If only I could have told*

*you, shared your triumphs, despairs, plans, sorrows! If only this unworthy shadow of your greatness could have died for you . . .*

Nakabawa stepped forward, to do his sad duty and present the new king with the sword of the fallen man, as custom of centuries dictated. He picked it up, gazed at the unblooded surface with a face as expressionless as the wrinkled parchment it resembled, shifted the blade to his hand and held it hilt-formost to the victor, who had regained her composure and accepted it in stony silence.

Nakabawa turned, casting an expressionless glance at the sun, still visible as a rim of light above the distant mountaintops, and started to turn away. And Grabo the backup man moved forward, drawing his sword from its scabbard, the blade glinting in the dying light.

*"I challenge the King to combat!"*

**The Curtain Closes.**

**A moral tale in the vein of Kafka or Peake. Lee Harding is a well-known Australian writer.**

# THE EVIDENCE

## Lee Harding

HE IS THE One Who Watches.

I have seen him many times. Standing idly upon a street corner, or insidious within a darkened doorway, a vague figure like crumpled newspapers. And at night I have seen him below my window, barely visible in the half light beyond the street lamp. Everywhere I have felt the chill weight of his dispassionate appraisal, and have wondered: can those cold eyes see even unto my very soul? And why does he haunt my waking hours when his shape and form belongs to the darkland of nightmare?

It is difficult to recall a time without this silent watcher. He seems to have been there all my life, unseen until now, a barely perceptible shadow upon the fringe of my vision.

But why should I see him now—and not before? Yet I know that he has always been there. Silent. Invisible. *Watching.*

Surely there must have been a *first* time. A moment from out of the wreck of the past when I first noticed his intrusion upon my life. But it is useless to try to remember. Fear has soaked up what remains of my sanity like a ragged piece of blotting paper. It becomes increasingly difficult to recall even the most prosaic detail of my day to day existence.

This, then, is the terror. To find oneself tottering upon the brink of madness, driven there by a mute and frightening agent from the haunted hinterland of the mind.

One cannot ignore *him*. God knows I have tried. If only he would *move*. Or say something. Perhaps even

smile. Then I could begin to think of him as a fellow traveller bound up in the same continuum as myself.

Yet I cannot. More and more he seems as one . . . *apart.*

Consider this: your life passes from day to day in a pattern of ordered chaos you have managed to make acceptable. Minor details vary but the routine remains essentially the same. And then one day you notice that you are being *watched.*

At first you are not really terrified—that comes later. *Much* later. You have learned to live with Security, and while you feel slightly uneasy you know that there is no real cause for alarm. Your file is clean. But on the other hand . . .

One never really knows, for certain. Yesterday's good deed so easily becomes tomorrow's crime. Such is the climate of our world.

So you begin to worry. You start paying attention to your watcher. Details become suddenly important. A picture takes shape:

A small, dark man in a long grey overcoat and a sallow, expressionless face.

That is all. There is nothing more. And that is when you dismiss the idea of Security. *They* would never be so obvious. This character looks like someone out of an old B-movie.

But if not Security—from whom?

In restaurants, he is always sitting at a corner table.

In the mornings, he is the driver of the vehicle parked next to me at each intersection. The pedestrian I almost bump into on my way home in the evenings. I have even seen his shadowy form moving silently across the darkened lawns when I have looked down from the towering Presidential chambers in the later hours of the night.

He becomes a part of the daily routine. An enigmatic observer, identity a mystery . . . Visible only to yourself, he begins to appear.

And that is when you begin to wonder if perhaps you are going mad . . .

My mind aches. My body sweats. I wonder what time it is? Evening. I am sure of that much. When did I have the shutters placed over the bedroom windows? It seems ages ago. And yet—surely it was only last week? Last month?

Yesterday.

Sometime, then. After I saw him standing on the pavement below, looking up at my window.

Even across that darkened distance I could feel the cold weight of his eyes.

Does he never sleep?

Do I, any more?

I sometimes think not. Time has become a treacherous serpent. I am beleaguered by a horror in stone. A mindless automaton who never moves, never speaks, never smiles.

The shutters make no real difference. I can feel those eyes of his upon me yet.

I wonder what he is looking for. And *why*. If I knew the answer to those two questions . . .

I have discarded the idea of Analysis. My position is difficult. Word of my consulations would inevitably percolate through Security. The President would soon know. I fear the pressures that would be brought to bear upon his already weary shoulders.

So here was the choice: to let myself be driven mad by an hallucination or . . .

Accept *him*.

Ignore him. Pay no attention to his childish observations. Pretend that he just isn't there. For what else could *he* be but a figment of my own tortured mind, a product cast up upon the dross of consciousness by the great and unseen tides sweeping across the face of the earth?

That, at least made some sort of sense. In this godforsaken world there are very few things that do.

For a while it worked. But have you ever tried to ignore someone who appears to know your innermost thoughts? I suppose one could do this easily enough with a stranger—but what do you do when confronted with a person at once completely unfamiliar, yet who without a word or gesture or an expression seems to *know*

just who and what you are?

Why do I feel myself drowning in a mirror whenever I look at him?

Wild were my fancies then. I imagined myself the victim of an elaborate and subtle attempt to discredit me in the eyes of the President and the Unoccupied world. A deliberate illusion designed to render me a gibbering lunatic in as short a time as possible.

Oh, devious and cruel are the ways of the Enemy.

A sop, then, to my anguished psyche. A week, perhaps two, of relative peace. Of crooking a mental snook at my watcher, of thinking again of the future.

A reprise but not a remedy. I had to think further still. Wilder. Perhaps not the Enemy at all. Rivalry from within. I was considered unnecessary.

Ah, the difficulty of living under the Games. Each day it becomes more difficult to define one's adversaries . . .

The world begins to darken. A succession of nights and days without character or purpose. I wrestle with figures until my mind screams out in protest. Yet I must work. My work is important. The President is relying upon me in . . . in how many days? When is the conference due?

I hurriedly scan a calendar, search wildly for some clue to the date of today.

Thursday the tenth.

I have only two days left. The schedule must be comlete by then.

Oh God, give me time. Give me *time* . . .

Miraculously, it becomes morning. I pause at a pavement cafe for hot chocolate. I see that he is standing a little further down the counter. For once, his eyes are turned away. They are focussed upon the little black notebook before him. One white hand write laboriously across the white pages.

My hand shakes violently as I reach for the chocolate. I watch him from out of the corner of my eye, feeling the cold globules of sweat erupt from the constricted pores of my skin. The chocolate is warm but . . . tasteless.

I wonder what he is writing.

And it is a change to see him occupied. His cold eyes turned away from me.

He looks up. An icy wind roars through my soul. The chocolate spills from my grasp. There is a sound from a million miles away as the plastic mug bounces upon the sidewalk. And then everything is swept away. We are locked together this man and I, in our own private hell.

It suddenly becomes of the utmost importance to know what he is writing in his little book.

We stare at each other for a very long time. I impaled like a fly pinned abruptly to a wall of silence. My soul bared to that icy stare.

*What was he writing?*

The universe had screamed to a stop. The fate of all time seemed to depend upon my reading what he had written.

Madness. Megalomania. Yet—I *had* to know.

What is it? I demanded. What are you writing?

No answer.

My fear boiled into fury. I reached out a hand and tore the notebook from under his hands.

The pages were covered with ridiculous shorthand. Or the inane scribblings of an idiot.

Incomprehensible.

I swore and threw the book away. All of my wrath, all of my humiliation, my despair, I turned upon the watcher.

Only to find him no longer there.

Gone. Only a void where he had sat. No sign of him along the street.

I searched frantically for the discarded notebook.

Unsuccessfully.

The musty corridors of the Presidential buildings brought back a semblance of reality. I clutched tightly to the brown leather briefcase so full of death and made my way to the conference chambers.

The hours dragged by. This and that was laboriously tabled. I let my mind wander through the foggy cupboards of my life, watching the passage of clouds through

the windows. The President remarked that I looked rather pale. I made an excuse of migraine and fell to studying my papers.

When I was finally called upon to table my report it was only with the greatest difficulty that I managed to stand up and arrange my thoughts to a degree of coherency. Each sentence seemed to weigh several tons, drawn from my lips by the greatest effort I had even known.

The room swam dizzily out of focus a number of times. I was aware of my stumbling delivery. Yet pressed on. There was no other way.

Slowly, like a great weeping sore, the figures tumbled from my lips.

The destructive potential of the anti-matter bombs. Our narrow margin of development. The condition of the African Federation and the Russian Free States. The growing insolvency of Latin America. Despair. Trade barriers. The decision. The caves, deep in the mountains. For the Few. Percentages of survival. Estimated property loss in mega-millions. Cultural loss—incalculable. Better forget about it. Wisest course.

And more. It no longer seemed my voice but rather that of some mindless robot reciting a pre-arranged tape.

And finally, there was nothing more to be said. A great silence was all that remained.

My vision cleared. I saw that grim, semi-circle of faces around me.

And one other.

He was standing by the far window, black notebook in hand, returning a long, slim pen into his breast pocket.

The Watcher.

A sharp cry forced its way through my lips before I could prevent it. My legs collapsed beneath me. I fell back in my chair with a sullen thud.

The faces looked surprised. A group formed quickly around me.

It is nothing, I said. Nothing at all. Just . . . migraine.

I let the Vice President help me to my feet. My eyes struck out for the Watcher, but he was no longer there.

I let them half-carry me to the dispensary. Where I

was pumped full of sedative and left to rest for a few hours. Then sent home.

To wait.

There was nothing more to do. I knew that. My paper was finished and presented. Now there was only the interminable waiting.

A great peace descended upon me. For the first time in many weeks and months I knew what it was like to rest. I lay in my bed and watched the daylight fade from the bald sky, felt the cool of evening drift in upon my fevered brow. And saw the the lights come on.

They came for me in the evening. As I had always known they would. It seemed that I had been expecting them all my life.

I was not asleep. My mind was clearer than it had been for a very long time.

There were three of them. Polite young men in grey dustcoats. They stood around my bed, waiting.

I nodded and got up. I was dressed in a few minutes. One of them motioned to me and I followed him out of the room. The other two fell in behind me.

Nor did it seem strange when we did not cross into the living room but instead a great, long hallway. Astonishingly bare and bright. It seemed to go on forever.

We walked in silence. There seemed little need for words.

We arrived in a small ante-room. Bare except for a desk, a chair and a filing cabinet. And a door in the other side.

I was led over to the desk and introduced to an officious looking woman.

Name, she asked.

I told her.

Occupation?

Tactical Advisor.

A pause. Then: In what capacity?

The application of Games Theory to thermo-nuclear war.

She looked up. Oh. We've been waiting for *you*.

She pressed a rubber stamp upon a slotted card which bore my name and popped it into a chute. There was

an air of finality in the movement.

Did I really feel like the last piece in a gigantic jig-saw?

She waved me towards the other door.

My escorts were gone. But another stood patiently beside the open door.

We entered a vast auditorium. So huge that my mind reeled at the distances involved. The galleries disappeared into mist.

My guide opened a short gateway in a long, winding railing that stretched out of sight. I was crowded in with all the other people staring silently ahead. Towards the centre of the auditorium, where three figures sat before a long, low table.

I took up my position calmly. Only for an instant did my attention wander to those around me. I saw almost every important face in the world. My fellow prisoners. The President himself was barely six paces away. Staring, like all the rest, stonily ahead.

We were all here, I realized. *All of us.*

I looked back to the centre of the room. In time to see a familiar figure in a long grey coat brush past where I stood and move solemnly out across the clear space.

He was carrying a little black book in his hand. I watched him deposit it carefully upon a million other similar books stacked neatly before the three figures, and then walk back to join the ranks of grey-coated men forming great, towering ranks on our right. All alike. All staring impassively ahead.

One instinct, the last I possessed, made me lean forward and grab his arm as he passed.

He swung around to face me.

"What's in it?" I asked. "What's *in* that book?"

The cold eyes remained forever dispassionate. "Why," he answered, "the evidence, of course."

And moved away to join his fellows.

I turned around and faced the three figures at the table and the great golden light that had suddenly grown up around them.

Only then did I understand the nature of the court now in session, and who were the accused.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## First Fix

Dear Sir,

I was very pleased to see the form that the new NEW WORLDS has taken. In many ways the magazines have, in the past, prevented the literary development of SF. Aimed from the first at a curiously semi-juvenile audience, they have perpetuated SF as a self-contained, almost decadent, genre. John Carnell was the first to try and break away from this trend; publishing serious fringe material he tried to develop SF as the valid experimental literature of the 20th century. With a crisper format and a more relaxed publishing schedule, you stand an excellent chance of continuing this development.

Ballard's review was the kind of article that I have always wanted to see in an SF magazine. It was beautifully written and genuinely interesting; an intelligent criticism, rather than a hasty review that says little more than the blurb. His serial was excellent too, it promises to be amongst the best works he has written. The apocalyptic spread of the cosmic sub-atomic cancer forms a peculiarly terrifying image in an age when biological cancer is feared like the plague—and is, for all we know, a psychosomatic disease. The other stories help to make up one of the best balanced issues I have read, though Aldiss's was hardly the best of this type.

My only regret on finishing the magazine is that it will be another two months before I can have another fix of speculative fantasy.

**Peter White, 75, Ashley Road, Epsom, Surrey**

## Optimistic

Dear Sir,

Will say nothing about the Ballard serial since we obviously haven't got to the heart of the matter yet. Admire greatly the physical description of the whole crystalline scene, though; especially after imagining myself trying to describe Sanders' flight through the forest without becoming monotonously repetitive about jewels, ice, etc.

I think I would have been floundering after a page and a half. Merritt would have revelled in a setting like this. And then, of course, there's the powerful attraction of common objects encased in crystal or glass; another Ballard hypnotic device?

Brunner's story is inconsistent in one way—could the narrator have told it in this way? Wouldn't his mental passenger have altered the viewpoint throughout the entire story, rather than only in the concluding paragraphs? Come to that, would the promise of a kind of immortality really be alluring enough to break down the wish for personal privacy? Fine if *you* are dying and can get a transfer, but not so fine, I fancy, if you are healthy and are asked to be a host. Could you really bear the mental presence of your friends? After all, even your friends don't reveal everything about themselves; those that do, tend to be extremely uncomfortable company. Enjoyed Bayley's story, although I reckon Rodrone was being rather optimistic in assuming that intergalactic space could conceal the Lens, since hundreds of years would pass during his journey and all kinds of scientific progress might occur in that time which would make location a possibility . . .

**James Cawthorn, 4, Wolseley Street, Gateshead 8, Co. Durham**

## Shaker

Dear Sir,

No. 142 arrived on Saturday. I think it's a pity that the contents should be far superior to the impression given by the packaging. I'd suggest it would help sales appeal to drop this triangular design in favour of a plain rectangular picture with the lettering on bands at top and botton. The interior layout is plain and legible and that's the most important point. It was a bit of a shaker to see Brian make one of his characters state that the circumference of a circle is pi r squared . . . but no doubt two hundred eager 13-year-olds have complained about this already.

**John Brunner, 43, Parkhill Road, London, NW 3**

*Sales seem to back up our theory that the triangular*

*design has the bookstand appeal. Every paperback issued at the moment seems to have the design you suggest, and we're trying to get a new approach into the covers as well as the contents of the magazine. The bloomer in the Aldiss story? Well, it shows that the character would never have passed the exams he was originally swotting for . . .* Editor.

## Pointless

Dear Sir,

I am happy to see that you have re-introduced the pictorial cover. I think this one by Cawthorn is excellent, the rather crude colouring marred somewhat the general effect. I hope that you have other covers by artists, who today are not so often seen. To have a serial in a bi-monthly magazine is to me a rather pointless act. As I have to wait until I have both parts before I begin to read it, a two months gap in the middle of a story is too long. Would not it be better to put out one issue containing the book length story and in the next have only short stories. Over the two issues, there is the same number of short stories and novels.

**Desmond Squire, 24, Riggindale Road, S.W. 16**

## Outside Expansion

Dear Sir,

The term "sense of wonder" has been so over-used, it is these days merely a cliche. Yet in spite of the endless discussions that have resolved around it, I don't think anyone has really come up with a definite reason why 'sense of wonder' is not in evidence these days in SF.

The fact that most people seem to have missed is that sense of wonder has not just disappeared from SF, it has disappeared from the world as a whole. Once upon a time, we wanted to get to the moon and out into space simply because the whole adventure was so glorious and so exciting, so stimulating, it was worth practically anything man could put into it. Now, just about the only reason the USA is continuing—on reduced funds—with its moon shot programme is that of national prestige. The original stimulus of Russian competition has been supplemented by the knowledge that the USA would look

extremely foolish if it stopped in its tracks at this stage. They are so occupied with the material facts of life they seem to have forgotten how to dream or wonder at the universe. So many scientists have the age old complaint that there is so much to put right on earth before we venture into space, when surely it is obvious that right back through history there has always been an unfortunate minority, and that it seems likely there always will be. The road to progress is through expansion, not introspection.

There is nothing peculiar about the absence of sense of wonder in contemporary SF; it is in complete harmony with the state of the world at present. We live in so material and diseased an environment it would in fact be very surprising if an author could, at present, produce a book with a genuine feeling of awe and respect for space travel and the conquest of other worlds. We know that it is statistically extremely possible that many other stars have planets, and that many of these planets contain life; yet we still think in terms of slower-than-light travel, as if Einstein's laws were Absolute Truth. Science forgets its history of discovery by means of disproving previous theories and building up new ones, and comes to a dead stop, limited by acceptance of the laws as we have them now. Unless thinking becomes less limited and horizons and minds broaden to take in the wonder of the universe not only will we have no sense of wonder, we will gradually stagnate on an overpopulated planet, too short-sighted to see beyond our immediate problems of space flight, too involved with our troubles to understand that the only true solution to population explosion is expansion outside our own world.

**Charles Platt, Editor, BEYOND, 8, Sollershott West, Letchworth, Herts.**

*We can't say we agree with you entirely, but your letter's controversial enough to win the prize—a copy of Brian Aldiss's THE DARK LIGHT YEARS.*

## Very Lucky

Dear Sir,

I have just bought NEW WORLDS 142, and, I might add, I was very lucky to get it, as it was the last copy left on the stand. This is most unusual as NEW WORLDS used to take a month to clear, and this issue has sold out in five days. This is very hopeful for the future. I should now like to send you a word of thanks. On your recommendation in SCIENCE FANTASY I tried Peake's "Titus" trilogy. I spent hours of happy bliss with *Titus Groan*, thinking there could be nothing better. Then came *Gormenghast!* And to cap it all, *Titus Alone*. I can honestly say that I have never had such deep reading pleasure with any other books.

**David J. Orme, 23, Nutfield Road, East Dulwich, London, S.E.22.**

## Which Side of the Fence ?

Dear Sir,

First of all, delayed congratulations on taking over the editorship of NEW WORLDS, and—heavens to Betsy!—bringing the price down. *The Star Virus* held my interest most. Bayley has an exciting touch, and a sure hand when it comes to delineating a character; but I thought the ending rather trite, and I was rather disappointed in his hero Rodrone.

Burroughs, I suppose, must be quite something seeing that you and Ballard both give him such a terrific write-up. Does this mean that SF is about to go 'beat' and 'intellectual'? I'm not very sure which side of the fence I'm on. At the same time, I do feel that there is room for a mag. catering for this end of the SF spectrum.

**Edward Mackin, 17, Oxford Street, Liverpool, 7.**

*While there's no intention of devoting the whole magazine to 'beat' and 'intellectual' stories (after all, how many good ones are produced per year?) we intend to give really off-beat stories space, so long as they are well—and intelligently—written. This, naturally, goes for any type of SF story. Variety, and steady progress towards better, more exciting SF, is our key-note.*—Editor.

Send letters as soon as possible to The Editor, NEW WORLDS SF, 17 Lake House, Scovell Street, London, S.E.1. A prize of a hard-cover SF title for the best letter in every issue.

# BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION — 1964

AS FAR AS we know, there is no other branch of literature which has produced anything like Science Fiction 'fandom.' Apart from a great many local clubs throughout the world—mainly in the USA and Britain—there are various national organisations, made up of SF fans, writers, editors, publishers and artists, which hold yearly conventions and organise other events from time to time.

The British Science Fiction Association was founded in 1960, publishes a regular journal, VECTOR, keeps its members in touch with "behind the scenes" information on the SF scene, what's being published, what's *been* published (there are several excellent checklists compiled for BSFA members) and organises a well-attended SF Convention every Easter.

The mood of these conventions is informal—many of the attendees are not BSFA members—and the programme is designed to fit in with the social activities of the enthusiasts. Private and public discussions are always lively and range over all topics (as many fans agree, a four-day convention consisting of nothing but talk about SF might easily spoil the appetite for the stuff). Previous Guests of Honour have included novelists Kingsley Amis, Edmund Crispin and, this year, E. C. Tubb. There is ample opportunity for readers to meet their favourite SF writers and there is no barrier between professional and fan.

This year's convention at Peterborough was particularly marked for the easy way in which the professional element mixed with the fan element. American writers Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett turned up rather unexpectedly and were very welcome guests, speaking of their work in a session in the programme hall, answering questions about the US scene and chatting with the fans at room parties, in the hotel lounge and bar. Other writers

included E. C. Tubb, Kenneth Bulmer, Lan Wright and J. Ramsey Campell, the fantasy author. Many of the regulars couldn't make it this year, but will undoubtedly make it next—Brian Aldiss is in Jugoslavia, Harry Harrison was tied up in Denmark, John Brunner, Kingsley Amis and Tom Boardman had other commitments. The Fancy Dress Ball was one of the best in years and the judges had difficulty in choosing the winners. There was a show of SF films—some professional, some amateur—two auctions where it was possible to bid for a wide selection of books, magazines, original manuscripts and art work—various discussions on different subjects, and lots of off-programme card games, parties and impromptu activities of a somewhat unrestrained nature. . .

This year was also marked for its high proportion of younger BSFA members, many of whom had a Calvinistic zeal to "reform" the SF scene and make sure fans talked about SF and nothing but.

Older members and professional writers were a trifle bewildered by these young reformers who granted them no mercy. In many ways this influx is a good thing—particularly for the BSFA—and the amateur magazines which the newer members are putting out with titles like ALIEN, BEYOND and ZENITH are serving as a testing ground for tomorrow's critics and writers. The BSFA can be proud of itself for the speed and ease with which it assimilates the new member. Since its formation, it has done a great deal to broaden the horizons of the SF fan world and produce conventions which are both enjoyable in a social way and stimulating in other ways.

One of the main items on the programme was a tribute by the authors to John Carnell and Nova Publications. At the end of this, the BSFA presented a plaque expressing its appreciation to Mr. Carnell for his help and encouragement of the BSFA since its formation.

Next year, it seems, there will probably be two major SF conventions held in Britain. The usual BSFA Easter Convention will take place at Birmingham and the World Science Fiction Convention (with attendees from all over the world, particularly from the USA—many big-name

authors are expected to attend) will probably be held in London over August Bank Holiday week-end. Details of both, plus details of how to join the BSFA itself, can be obtained from the Hon. Secretary, 77 College Road North, Blundellsands, Liverpool 23.

Maybe we'll see you at the next one?

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## BOOKS

GUNNER CADE IS gunning again— in a hardcover edition from Victor Gollancz *(Gunner Cade 15s)*. The late Cyril Kornbluth and Judith Merrill (of the anthologies) got together on this some years ago, under the name of Cyril Judd. It is still a good, intelligently written adventure SF tale, which at times gives a very real impression of a possible future society. Gunner Cade belongs to a monastic order of gunners who have a ritualistic mystique about their weapons, lead rigid lives knowing nothing of the outside world, and are expected only to obey their superiors and fight. Eventually Cade is convinced that he and his fellow gunners are being duped by the heirarchy and sets off to discover what the world is really like. Some amusing incidents follow, as he finds himself completely unfitted for the ordinary world. Also he is very handsome, but knows nothing of sex or women, which gives him a little trouble (less than one might expect!). The plot runs along smoothly until the villains are unmasked, the plot uncovered and Cade gets his girl. Exciting, unpretentious stuff in the best tradition.

A wild, compelling and provocative book is Jacques Barzun's *Science: The Glorious Entertainment* (Secker & Warburg 42s). Few orthodox scientists would agree with most of what he has to say—a lot of it consists of accusations against scientists which, judging by those scientists we know, don't seem to hold much water. M. Barzun complains that the scientific attitude to things has extended into the world of the arts, where it can be a destructive force. He argues, as many have done in the

past (with little cause) that analysis of one's pleasures makes them less pleasurable. That isn't all he argues—M. Barzun is an individualist and he has ideas about almost everything. Worth getting from the library.

Two paperbacks on similar themes have come out recently — Dennis Gabor's *Inventing the Future* (Penguin 4s) and Arthur C. Clarke's *Profiles of the Future* (Pan 3/6). Of the two, Clarke's covers a wider range of subjects and is more likely to please the scientifically-minded. Almost all the themes of SF are analysed in Mr. Clarke's book—from the future of transport to the death of the universe. There are dozens of ideas here for SF stories—many of which have hardly been touched on yet. A stimulating book. Professor Gabor looks at what he considers to be the three great dangers facing our civilisation — nuclear destruction, crippling overpopulation and the Age of Leisure. The latter he considers as important—if not more so—as the former. The tone of the book is optimistic and the style highly readable. A welcome change, at least, from the gloomier predictions of, say, Packard—though about as substantial.

## Recent US Paperbacks

*Since a certain amount of U.S. paperback SF is beginning to appear in Britain, and since most U.S. titles can now be ordered through specialist dealers like FANTAST (Medway) Ltd., we think that it's worth while keeping readers in touch with some of the best . . .*

**BUDRYS' INFERNO** by Algis Budrys, Berkley Books, 50c (app 4/-).

**YOU WILL NEVER BE THE SAME** by Cordwainer Smith, Regency Books, 50c (app 4/-).

**THE DRAGON MASTERS/THE FIVE GOLD BANDS** by Jack Vance, Ace Double Books, 40c (app 3/6).

ON THE STRENGTH of novels like *Some Will Not Die* and *Rogue Moon*, Budrys is gaining a solid reputation. This collection won't do much to increase it, but the stories are on the whole well-written, have some interesting ideas and Budrys can handle character quite well, too. The opening story *Silent Brother* tells of the return of the first interstellar ship and the reactions of the cripple who helped build the ship, as he watches the crew disembark. The rest of the story is concerned with mysterious actions he finds himself making in his sleep, and has a denouement which is not particularly original, and wasn't in 1956 when the story first appeared. *The Man Who Tasted Ashes* has vague overtones of Graham Greene, with its central character a disgraced minor diplomat living in Washington who's commissioned by an alien race to kill a foreign ambassador and start WW3. Perhaps the best story, with a good twist.

*Lower Than Angels* is the longest story, concerning a man who lands on a planet, is mistaken for a god by natives, spends a lot of time trying to convince them otherwise—too much time, the story drags. *Dream of Victory* deals with an android who wants to be human in every way. Shallow 'psychological' yarn in which some Americans seem to specialise. *Contact Between Equals* : an entertaining little thriller about an eternal triangle, a brain transplant and a BEM. *The Peasant Girl* : folksy tale of how supermutants and ordinary people live together. *And Then She Found Him* : about people able to be 'invisible' to us. *Between The Dark And The Daylight* : about people mutating to meet conditions on alien world. *The Skirmisher*: about, it seems, a man from a future overcrowded Earth who comes back to stop problem at source . . . 9 stories, quite good value, but unremarkable style makes them forgettable. Just as there's a British 'standard style,' so there is an American one, and Budrys uses it in most of the stories.

Cordwainer Smith is very different. His style is rich and sharp, his moods and images are exciting, and the physical things he describes often seem to take on metaphysical perspective. Smith's real name is the best kept secret in SF, and rumour has it that he has a Top Job in the White House. If so, then he must be the most imaginative

politician in the States. His people are lonely figures, archetypal, who inhabit haunting spacescapes that mingle horror and beauty— Romantic, in the best sense. In style, mood and plot he seems to draw on the myths and legends on the past to create myths and legends of the future. Very rarely his stories degenerate into whimsy and he does to his own material what Disney did to *Le Morte D'Arthur*, via T. H. White, in *The Sword in The Stone.* Smith has written a short introduction to his book :

> Every day, any day, in the human mind transcends all the wonders of science. It doesn't matter who people are, when they lived, or what they are doing—the important thing is the explosion of wonder which goes on and on and is stopped only by death. Everyone is a Lear, an Othello, a Desdemona, a Prospero, a Caliban—more wonderful than a Moon rocket, more complicated than an H-bomb, more complicated than a tropical hurricane. It is the job of the writer to seize the wonders and let the reader see Mankind within himself.

This will give you a good idea of what Smith at his best achieves. He has everything that is admired in Ray Bradbury and much more depth, scope and intellectual direction. The stories are : *No, No, Not Rogov* : a Russian scientist tunes in to a future scene and goes insane at the sight— ' The golden shape on the golden steps executed shimmering intricacies of meaning. The body was gold and still human. The body was a woman, but more than a woman. On the golden steps, in the golden light, she trembled and fluttered like a bird gone mad.' *The Lady Who Sailed ' The Soul '* : a legend of the future, of the love affair between Helen America and Mr Grey-no-more, (' Other ages were to compare their life with the weird, ugly-lovely story of the Go-Captain Taliano and the lady Dolores Oh ') who pilot light-powered sailing ships among the stars. *Scanners Live In Vain* : about men wired into super-efficient machines to steer spaceships of which they are a mechanical part. The famous *The Game of Rat And Dragon*, about the odd denizens of space and the means found to fight them. *Golden The Ship Was—Oh ! Oh !*

*Oh* ! : a gigantic hoax played by a decadent Earth on her enemies. *Alpha Ralpha Boulevard* : love, death and a quest for real values. *Mark Elf* : somewhat unsuccessful, showing Smith's weakness for whimsy, though the basic theme of a militant Germany rising again and again throughout history to threaten everyone else is somewhat terrifying and mirrors a fear still very much alive in the world (including in Germany). Highly recommended.

Jack Vance is best-known for his well-done space-operas which are usually intelligently written and highly entertaining. *The Dying Earth* (recently imported) and *The Dragon Masters* are both written in a deliberately archaic style. Most of the time this is effective. In the latter, Vance deals with two warring races—Mankind, which has its last outpost on a desolate planet, and the Basics, who are overrunning the Galaxy. Both have captured enemy soldiers and bred them into unthinking varieties of fighting beasts. Joaz Banbeck, central character, strives to unite his planet before next attack of the Basics. When this story appeared in a shorter form, in GALAXY, it won last year's Hugo Award. The longer version seems hastily revised for the book, but is worth getting. *The Five Gold Bands* is the other novel in this ' double book,' is much earlier Vance and is an entertaining adventure story spoiled by its stage-Irish hero.

**—James Colvin**

## STORY RATINGS No. 139

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Open Prison (I) .. | .. James White |
| 2. | The Time Dweller .. | .. Michael Moorcock |
| 3. | A Pair of Paradoxes .. | .. Brian W. Aldiss |
| 4. | Die and Grow Rich .. | .. John Rackham |
| 5. | The Unexpected Martyr | .. R. W. Mackelworth |

Next issue contains a story by new writer Jones, sure to be controversial. Plus serial, shorts, features. Out **Aug. 26.**

**Equinox — the time when the sun crosses the equator and day and night are of equal duration. Apart from being one of the most beautiful stories we have ever read, this is also one of the best . . .**

# EQUINOX

## J. G. Ballard

Conclusion

**six**

TWO MONTHS LATER, when describing the events of this period in a letter to Dr. Paul Derain, Directot of the Fort Isabelle leproserie, Sanders wrote:
*. . . but what most surprised me, Paul, was the extent to which I was prepared for the transformation of the forest—the crystalline trees hanging like icons in those luminous caverns, the jewelled casements of the leaves overhead, fused into a lattice of prismatic colours, through which the sun shone in a thousand rainbows, the birds and crocodiles frozen into grotesque postures like heraldic beasts carved from jade and quartz—what*

*was most remarkable was the extent to which I accepted all this as part of the natural order of things, part of the inner pattern of the universe. True, to begin with I was as startled as everyone else making his first journey up the Matarre River to Mont Royale, but after the initial impact of the forest, a surprise more visual than anything else, I quickly came to understand it, knowing that its hazards were a small price to pay for its illumination of my life. (Indeed, the rest of the world seemed drab and inert by contrast, a faded reflection of this bright image, forming a grey penumbral zone like some half-abandoned purgatory).*

*All this, my dear Paul, the very absence of surprise, confirms my belief that this illuminated forest in some way reflects an earlier period of our lives, perhaps an archaic memory we are born with of some ancestral paradise where the unity of time and space is the signature of every leaf and flower. It's obvious to everyone now that in the forest life and death have a different meaning from that in our ordinary lack-lustre world. Here we always associated movement with life and the passage of time, but from my experience within the forest near Mont Royale I know that all motion leads inevitably to death, and that time is its servant. It is, perhaps, our unique achievement as lords of this creation to have brought about the separation of time and space. We alone have given to each a separate value, a distinct measure of their own which now define and bind us like the length and breadth of a coffin. To resolve them again is the greatest aim of natural science—as you and I have seen, Paul, in our work on the virus, with its semi-animate, crystalline existence, half-in and half-out of our own time-stream, as if intersecting it at an angle . . . often I think that in our miscroscopes we were looking upon a minuscule replica of the world I was to meet later in the forest slopes near Mont Royale.*

*However, all these belated efforts have now been brought to an end. As I write to you, here within the quiet and emptiness of the Hotel Europe at Port Matarre, I see a report in a two-week-old issue of* Paris-Soir *(Louise Peret, the young Frenchwoman who is with me*

*here, doing her best to look after the wayward whims of your former assistant, had hidden the paper from me for a week) that the whole of the Florida peninsula in the United States, with the exception of a single highway to Tampa, has been closed and that to date some three million of the state's inhabitants have been resettled in other parts of the country. But apart from the estimated losses in real estate values and hotel revenues ("Oh, Miami," I cannot help saying to myself, "you city of a thousand cathedrals to the rainbow sun!") the news of this extraordinary human migration has prompted little comment. Such is mankind's innate optimism, our conviction that we can survive any deluge or cataclysm, that most of us unconsciously dismiss the momentous events in Florida with a shrug, confident that some means will be found to avert the crisis when it comes.*

*And yet, Paul, it now seems obvious that the real crisis is long past. Tucked away on the back page of the same issue of* Paris-Soir *is the short report of the sighting of another 'double galaxy' by observers at the Hubble Institute on Mount Palomar. The news is summarised in less than a dozen lines and without comment, although the implication is inescapable that yet another focal area has been set up somewhere on the surface of the earth, in the temple-filled jungles of Cambodia or the haunted amber forests of the Chilean highland. But it is still only a year since the Mount Palomar astronomers identified the first double galaxy in the constellation Andromeda, the great oblate diadem that is probably the most beautiful object in the physical universe, the island galaxy M 31. Without doubt, these random transfigurations throughout the world are a reflection of distant cosmic processes of enormous scope and dimensions, first glimpsed in the Andromeda spiral.*

*We now know that it is time ("Time with the Midas touch" as Ventress described it) which is responsible for the transformation. The recent discovery of anti-matter in the universe inevitably involves the conception of anti-time as the fourth side of this negatively charged continuum. Where anti-particle and particle collide they not only destroy their own physical identities, but their*

*opposing time-values eliminate each other, subtracting from the universe another quantum from its total store of time. It is random discharges of this type, set off by the creation of anti-galaxies in space, which have led to the depletion of the time-store available to the materials of our own solar system.*

*Just as a supersaturated solution will discharge itself into a crystalline mass, so the supersaturation of matter in a continuum of depleted time leads to its appearance in a parallel spatial matrix. As more and more time "leaks" away, the process of supersaturation continues, the original atoms and molecules producing spatial replicas of themselves, substance without mass, in an attempt to increase their foothold upon existence. The process is theoretically without end, and it may be possible eventually for a single atom to produce an infinite number of duplicates of itself and so fill the entire universe, from which simultaneously all time has expired, an ultimate macrocosmic zero beyond the wildest dreams of Plato and Democritus.*

*In parenthesis: Reading this over my shoulder, Louise comments that I may be misleading you, Paul, by minimising the dangers we all experienced within the crystalline forest. It's certainly true that they were very real at the time, as the many tragic deaths there testify, and that first day when I was trapped in the forest I understood nothing of these matters, beyond those which Ventress confided to me in his characteristically ambiguous and disjointed way. But even then, as I walked away from that jewelled crocodile up the sloping lawn towards the white-suited man watching me from the window, his shot-gun pointed at my chest . . . . .*

## seven

LYING BACK ON one of the glass-embroidered chesterfields in the bedroom upstairs, Dr. Sanders rested after his chase through the forest. As he climbed the staircase he had slipped on one of the crystallising steps and momentarily winded himself. Standing at the top of the staircase, Ventress had watched him clamber awkwardly

to his feet, the glacé panels splintering under his hands. Ventress's small tight face, the pale skin now mottled by vein-like colours, was without expression. His eyes gazed down, showing not even a flicker of response as Sanders grappled for his balance at the bannisters. When Sanders at last reached the landing Ventress motioned him towards the door with a curt gesture. He then took up his position at the window, driving the butt of the shot-gun through the broken panes as they annealed themselves.

Dr. Sanders brushed the frost off his suit, and picked at the small crystal splinters embedded like glass needles in his hands. The air in the house was cold and motionless, but as the storm subsided, moving away across the forest, the process of vitrification seemed to diminish. Everything in the high-ceilinged room had been transformed by the frost. Several plate-glass windows appeared to have been fractured and then fused together above the carpet, and the ornate Persian patterns swam below the surface like the floor of some perfumed pool in the Arabian Nights. All the furniture was covered by the same glacé sheath, the arms and legs of the straight-backed chairs against the walls embellished by exquisite curlicues and helixes. The imitation Louis XV pieces had been transformed into huge fragments of opalescent candy, whose multiple reflections glowed like giant chimeras in the cut-glass walls.

Through the doorway opposite Dr. Sanders could see into a small dressing-room, and assumed he was sitting in the principal bedroom of an official residence maintained for some visiting government dignitary or the chairman of one of the mine companies. Although elaborately furnished, the room was devoid of all personal possessions or ornaments. For some reason, the large double-bed—a four-poster, Sanders guessed from the patch on the ceiling—had been removed, and the other furniture had been pushed to one side by Ventress. He still stood by the open window, peering down at the stream where the jewelled boat and the crocodile lay embalmed. His thin beard gave him a fevered and haunted aspect. Half-bent over his shot-gun, he pressed closer to the window, ignoring the sections of crystal sheath that

he dislodged from the heavy brocaded curtains.

Dr. Sanders began to stand up, but Ventress waved him back.

"Rest yourself, doctor. We'll be here for some time." His voice had become harder and the gloss of ironic humour was absent. He glanced away from his gun-barrel for a moment. "When did you last see Thorensen?"

"The mine-owner?" Sanders pointed through the window. "Just after we ran to search for the helicopter. Are you looking for him?"

"In a manner of speaking. What was he up to?"

Dr. Sanders turned up the collar of his jacket, brushing away the fine spurs of frost that covered the material. "He was running around in circles like the rest of us, completely lost."

"Lost?" Ventress let out a derisive snort. "The man's as cunning as a pig! He knows every dell and cranny of this forest like the back of his hand."

When Sanders stood up and approached the window Ventress beckoned him away impatiently. "Keep away from the window, doctor. With a brief gleam of his old humour, he added: "I don't want to use you as a decoy just yet."

Ignoring this warning, Sanders glanced down at the empty lawn. Like footsteps in dew-covered grass, the dark prints of his shoes crossed the sequinned surface, merging slowly into the pale green slope as the process of crystallisation continued. Although the main wave of activity had moved off, the forest was still vitrifying itself. The absolute silence of the jewelled trees seemed to confirm that the affected area had multiplied many times in size. A frozen calm extended as far as he could see, as if he and Ventress were lost somewhere in the grottoes of some immense glacier. To emphasize their proximity to the sun, everywhere there was the same fantastic corona of light. The forest was an endless labyrinth of glass caves, sealed off from the remainder of the world and lit by subterranean lamps.

Ventress relaxed for a moment. Raising one foot to the window-sill, he surveyed Dr. Sanders. "A long journey, but one well worth making, doctor?" he asked.

Sanders shrugged. "I haven't reached the end of it yet, by any means—I've still got to find my friends. However, I agree with you, it's an extraordinary experience. There's something almost . . . rejuvenating about the forest. Do you — ?"

"Of course, doctor." Ventress turned back to the window, silencing him with one hand. The frost glimmered on the shoulders of his white suit in a faint palimpsest of colours. He peered down at the crystal vegetation along the stream. After a pause he said: "My dear Sanders, you're not the only one to feel these things, let me assure you."

"You've been here before?" Sanders asked.

"Do you mean . . . deja vu?" Ventress looked around, his small features almost hidden behind the beard.

Dr. Sanders hesitated. "I meant literally," he said.

Ventress ignored this. "We've all been here before, doctor, as everyone else will soon find out—if there's *time*." He pronounced the word with a peculiar inflexion of his own, drawing it out like the tolling of a bell. He listened to the last echoes reverberate away among the crystal walls, like a fading requiem. "However, I feel that's something we're all running out of, doctor—do you agree?"

Dr. Sanders tried to massage some warmth into his hands. His fingers felt brittle and fleshless, and he looked at the empty fireplace behind him, wondering whether this ornate recess, guarded on either side by a large gilt dolphin, had been fitted with a chimney flue. Yet despite the cold air in the house he felt less chilled than invigorated.

"— running out of time?" he repeated. "I haven't thought about it yet. What's your explanation?"

"Isn't it obvious, doctor? Doesn't your own . . . 'speciality,' the dark side of the sun we see around us here, provide a clue? Surely leprosy, like cancer, is above all a disease of time, a result of over-extending oneself through that particular medium?"

Dr. Sanders nodded as Ventress spoke, watching the man's skull-like face come alive as he discussed this element that he appeared, on the surface at least, to

despise. "It's a theory, I suppose," he agreed when Ventress had finished. "Not . . ."

"Not scientific enough?" Ventress threw his head back. In a louder voice, he declaimed: "Look at the viruses, doctor, with their crystalline structure, neither animate nor inanimate, and their immunity to time!" He swept a hand along the sill and scooped up a cluster of the vitreous grains, then scattered them across the floor like smashed marbles. "You and I will be like them soon, Sanders, and the rest of the world. Neither living nor dead!"

At the end of this tirade Ventress turned away and resumed his scrutiny of the forest. A muscle flickered in his left cheek, like distant lightning marking the end of a storm.

"Why are you looking for Thorensen?" Dr. Sanders asked. "Are you after his diamond mine?"

"Don't be a damn fool!" Ventress swore over his shoulder. "That's the last thing—gemstones are no rarity in this forest, doctor." With a contemptuous gesture, he scraped a mass of crystals from the material of his suit. "If you want I'll pluck you a necklace of Hope diamonds."

"Then what are you doing here?" Dr. Sanders asked evenly. "In this house?"

"Thorensen lives here."

"What?" Incredulously, Sanders looked around again at the ornate furniture and gilded mirrors, thinking of the tall burly man at the wheel of the dented Chrysler. "I saw him for only a few moments, but it doesn't seem in character."

"Precisely. I've never seen such bad taste." Ventress nodded to himself. "And believe me, as an architect I've seen plenty. The whole house is a pathetic joke." He pointed to one of the marquetry divans with a spiral bolster that had translated itself into a brilliant parody of a rococo cartouche, the helix twisting like the overgrown horns of a goat. "Louis Nineteen, or Twenty perhaps?"

Carried away by his jibes at the absent Thorensen, Ventress had turned his back on the window. Looking

past him, Dr. Sanders saw the crocodile trapped in the stream lift for a moment on its weak legs, as if snapping at a passer-by. Interrupting Ventress, Sanders pointed down at it, but another voice anticipated him.

"Ventress!"

The shout, an angry challenge, came from the crystal shrubbery along the left-hand margins of the lawn. A moment later a shot roared out into the cold air. As Ventress swung around, pushing Sanders away with one hand, the bullet crashed into the ceiling over their heads, bringing down a huge lattice-like section that splintered around their feet. Ventress flinched back, then fired off a shot at the shrubbery. The report echoed around the petrified trees, shaking loose their vivid colours as the impact struck the frozen boughs.

"Keep down!" Ventress scuttled along the floor to the next window, then worked the barrel of the shot-gun through the frosted panes. He peered down for a few moments, then stood up cautiously when the cracking of a distant tree marked the retreat of their hidden assailant.

Ventress walked across to Sanders, who was standing with his back to the wall next to the window.

"All right. He's gone."

"Was that Thorensen?"

"Of course." This brief passage-at-arms seemed to have relaxed Ventress. The shot-gun cradled loosely in his elbow, he strolled around the room, now and then pausing to examine the puncture left by the bullet in the ceiling. "We'd better leave now," he announced at last. "There's no point in staying. Where are you going?"

"Mont Royale, if that's possible."

"It won't be." He pointed through the window. "The storm centre is directly between here and the town. Your only hope is to reach the river and follow it back to the army base. Who are you looking for?"

"A former colleague of mine and his wife. Do you know the Bourbon Hotel? It's some distance from the town."

"Bourbon?" Ventress screwed up his face. "Sounds like the wrong century. It's an old ruin, God only knows where."

They made their way down the crystal stairway. In the hall Ventress paused among the jewelled pillars, dozens of reflections of himself glowing in the glass-sheathed walls and furniture. Sanders followed him through the entrance, involuntarily raising his hands to watch the prismatic rainbows of light that ran around the edges of his suit and face.

Quickly they crossed the lawn, then disappeared through the trees towards the stream. Behind them the house loomed among the trees like a wedding cake. Ten yards ahead of Dr. Sanders, Ventress darted from left to right. Always he was on the look-out for Thorensen. Which of them was searching for the other Sanders could not discover, nor the subject of their blood-feud. For some reason Ventress seemed to assume that Sanders had taken his side in this private duel. Sanders guessed that Ventress had sensed some spark of kinship during their voyage by steamer from Libreville and that he was a man who would plunge his entire sympathy or hostility upon such a chance encounter.

For half an hour they moved along the fossilised stream. Ventress remained in the lead, the shot-gun held warily in front of him, his movements neat and deliberate, while Sanders limped behind. Now and then they passed a jewelled power cruiser embedded in the crust, or a petrified crocodile reared upwards and grimaced at them soundlessly, its crystalline skin glowing with a thousand mirrors as it shifted in a fault of coloured glass.

"Can't we get back to Mont Royale?" Dr. Sanders shouted, his voice echoing among the vaults. "We're going deeper into the forest."

"The town is cut off, my dear Sanders. Don't worry, I'll take you there in due course." Ventress leapt nimbly over a fissure in the surface of the stream. Below the mass of dissolving crystals, a thin stream of fluid rilled down a buried channel.

Led by this white-suited figure with his preoccupied gaze, they moved on through the forest, sometimes in complete circles as if Ventress were familiarising himself with the topography of this jewelled twilight world. Whenever Dr. Sanders sat down to rest on one of the vitrified

trunks and brushed away the crystals forming on the soles of his shoes, despite their constant movement, Ventress would wait impatiently, watching Sanders with ruminative eyes as if deciding whether to abandon him to the forest. The air was always icy, the dark shadows closing and unfolding around them.

Then, as they pressed on into the forest, leaving the stream in the hope of joining the river lower down its course, they came across the wreck of the crashed helicopter.

At first, as they passed the aircraft lying like a jewelled fossil in a small hollow to the left of their path, Dr. Sanders failed to recognise it. Ventress stopped. With a sombre expression on his face he pointed to the huge machine, and Sanders remembered the helicopter plunging into the forest half a mile from the inspection area. The four twisted blades, veined and frosted like the wings of a giant dragonfly, had already been overgrown by the trellises of crystals hanging downwards from the nearby trees. The fuselage of the craft, partly buried in the ground, had blossomed into an enormous translucent jewel, in whose solid depths, like emblematic knights mounted in the base of a medieval ring-stone, the two pilots sat frozen at their controls, their silver helmets giving off an endless fountain of light.

"You won't help them now." Averting his face, a rictus of pain twisting his mouth, Ventress began to move away. "Come on, Sanders, or you'll soon be like them. The forest is changing all the time."

"Wait!" Sanders climbed over the fossilised undergrowth, kicking away pieces of the glass-like foliage. He pulled himself around the dome of the cockpit canopy. "There's a man here, Ventress!"

Together they climbed down into the floor of the hollow below the starboard side of the helicopter. Stretched out over the serpentine roots of a giant oak, across which he had been trying to drag himself, was the crystallised body of a man in military uniform. His chest and shoulders were covered by a huge cuirass of jewelled plates, the arms enclosed in the same gauntlet of annealed prisms that Sanders had seen on the man dragged from the river

at Port Matarre.

"It's Radek!" Sanders gazed down at the visor that covered the man's head, like an immense sapphire carved in the shape of a conquistador's helmet. Refracted by the scores of prisms that had effloresced from the man's face, his features seemed to overlay one another in a dozen different planes, but Dr. Sanders could still recognise the pale, weak-chinned face of Captain Radek, the physician in the army medical corps who had first taken him to the inspection site. He realised that Radek had gone back after all, probably searching for Sanders when he failed to emerge from the forest, and instead had found the two pilots in the helicopter.

"Ventress!" Sanders pressed his hands against the crystal breast-plate, trying to detect any signs of warmth within. "He's still alive inside this, help me to get him out of here!" When Ventress stood up shaking his head at the glittering body, Sanders shouted: "Damn it, Ventress, I know this man!"

Gripping his shot-gun, Ventress began to climb out of the hollow. "Sanders, you're wasting your time." He shook his head, his eyes roving between the trees around them. "Leave him there, he's made his own peace."

Pushing past him, Sanders straddled the crystalline body and tried to lift it from the hollow. The weight of the body was enormous, and he could barely move one of the arms. Part of the head and shoulder, and the entire length of the right arm had annealed themselves to the crystal outgrowths from the base of the oak. As Sanders began to kick at the winding roots, trying to free the body, Ventress shouted in warning, but Sanders bent down and managed to jerk the body free. Several large pieces of the crystal sheath fell from the face and shoulders, and with a cry Ventress jumped down into the hollow. He held Sander's arm tightly. "For God's sake, man, you bloody —— !" However, when Sanders pushed him aside he gave up and turned away.

After a pause, his small bitter eyes watching Sanders, he stepped forward and helped him lift the jewelled body from the hollow.

A hundred yards ahead they reached the bank of the

stream. The tributary had expanded into a channel some ten yards in width. In the centre the fossilised crust was only a few inches thin, and they could see the running water below. Leaving Radek's glistening form on the bank, where it lay with arms outstretched, slowly deliquescing, Dr. Sanders snapped a large bough off one of the trees and began to break the crust over the water. Then he pulled the belt from his trousers and lashed the bough to Radek's shoulders. Some six feet long, the piece of timber would support Radek's head above the water long enough for him to regain consciousness.

Ventress made no comment when Sanders described this slim hope, and helped him carry the body to the aperture above the water. They lowered it into the water, and watched it swirl away down the white tunnel, the washed crystals on Radek's arms and legs glimmering below the water, his half-submerged head resting on the bough.

Exhausted by the effort needed to carry the heavy figure to the stream, Dr. Sanders limped across to the bank. He sat down on the marbled sand, picking at the sharp needles that pierced his palms and fingers. "There's a chance, that's all, but it was worth taking. They'll be watching down-river, perhaps they'll see him."

Ventress walked over to Sanders. His small body was held stiffly, his bearded chin tucked in. For a moment the muscles of his bony face moved, as if he were composing his reply with great care. He said: "Sanders, you were too late. Perhaps one day you'll know what you took away from that man."

Dr. Sanders looked up. "What do you mean?"

Ventress ignored this. "Just remember, doctor—if you ever find me like that, leave me. Do you understand?"

They moved off through the forest, neither speaking to the other, Sanders sometimes falling fifty yards behind Ventress. Several times he thought Ventress had abandoned him, but always the white-suited figure, his hair and shoulders covered with a fine fur of frost, appeared into view before him.

At last they reached the fringes of a small clearing, bounded on three sides by the fractured dancing floor of a

bend in the river. On the opposite bank a high-gabled summer house pushed its roof towards the sky through a break in the overhead canopy. From the single spire a slender web of opaque strands extended to the surrounding trees, like a diaphanous veil, investing the glass garden and the crystalline summer house with a pale marble sheen, almost sepulchral in its intensity. As if reinforcing this impression the windows on to the veranda around the house were encrusted with elaborate scroll-like designs, like the ornamented stone casements of a tomb.

Waving Sanders back, Ventress approached the fringes of the garden, his shot-gun raised before him. For the first time Sanders had known him Ventress seemed uncertain of himself. He gazed across at the summer house, like an explorer venturing upon some strange and enigmatic shrine in the depths of the jungle. High above him, its wings pinioned by the glass canopy, a golden oriole flexed slowly in the afternoon light, liquid ripples of its aura circling outwards like the rays of a cruciform sun.

Ventress drew himself together. After waiting for any sign of movement from the summer house, he darted from tree to tree, then crossed the frozen surface of the river with a feline step. Ten yards from the summer house he stopped again, distracted by the glowing oriole in the canopy above his head.

"Ventress!"

A shot roared into the clearing, its report echoing around the glass trees. Startled, Ventress crouched down on the steps of the summer house, peering up at its sealed windows. From the edge of the clearing fifty yards behind him appeared a tall blond-haired man in a black leather jerkin, the mine-owner Thorensen. Revolver in hand, he raced towards the summer house. He stopped and fired again at Ventress, the roar of the explosion reverberating around the clearing. The crystal trellises of the moss suspended from the trees frosted, collapsing around Dr. Sanders like the shattered walls of a house of mirrors.

Leaping down from the veranda, Ventress made off like a hare across the river, bent almost double as he darted

over the faults in the surface. With a last backward glance, his thin beared face contorted with fear, he reached the shelter of the trees and disappeared among them.

The rapidity with which all this had happened left Dr. Sanders standing helplessly by the edge of the clearing, his ears ringing with the two explosions. He searched the forest for any signs of Ventress, but already the silence was returning.

"You! Come here!" Thorensen was standing on the veranda. He gestured Sanders towards him with his revolver. The leather jerkin he wore over his blue suit made his large frame seem trimmer and more muscular. Below the blond hair his long face wore an expression of sullen wariness. When Sanders approached he came down the steps, scrutinising him suspiciously. "What are you doing around here? Aren't you one of the visiting party? I saw you on the quay."

Dr. Sanders explained that he had been trapped after the crash of the helicopter. He described the discovery of Radek's body, but Thorensen only nodded dourly.

"Maybe he has a chance," he commented, and then added, as if to reassure Sanders: "You did the right thing."

Sanders noticed that, unlike Ventress's suit and his own clothes, Thorensen's remained unaffected by the frost. "Can you take me back to the army post?" he asked. "I've been wandering around in the forest all afternoon. Do you know the Bourbon Hotel?"

A morose frown twisted Thorensen's long face. "The army's a long way off. The freeze is spreading all through the forest." He pointed across the river with the revolver. "What about Ventress? The bearded man. Where did you meet him?"

"He was taking shelter in a house near the river. Your house, he said. Why did you shoot at him? Is he a criminal—trying to steal from your mine?"

Thorensen nodded after a pause. His manner was somehow furtive and shifty. "Worse than that. He's a madman, completely crazy." He turned and started to walk up the steps, waving to Dr. Sanders as if prepared to let him make his own way into the forest. "You'd better

be careful, there's no knowing what the forest is going to do. Keep moving, but circle around on yourself, or you'll get lost."

"Wait a minute!" Sanders called after him. "Can't I rest here?—I'm all in. I need a map, I've got to find this Bourbon Hotel. Perhaps you have a spare one?"

"A map? What good is a map now?" Thorensen hesitated, glancing up at the summer house, as if worried that Sanders might in some way defile its luminous whiteness. As the doctor's arms fell limply to his sides he relented. "All right. You can come in for five minutes." This concession to humanity was obviously torn from him.

Dr. Sanders climbed the steps on to the veranda. The summer house consisted of a single circular room and a small kitchen at the rear. Heavy shutters had been placed against the windows, now locked to the casements by the interstitial crystals, and the only light entered through the door.

Thorensen glanced around at the forest again and then holstered his pistol. He turned the door handle. Through the frosted panes Dr. Sanders saw the dim outlines of a high four-poster bed, obviously that removed from the bedroom in the mansion where he and Ventress had sheltered from the storm. Gilded cupids played about the mahogany canopy, pipes to their lips, and four naked carytids with upraised arms formed the corner posts.

Thorensen cleared his throat. "Mrs. Thorensen," he explained in a low voice. "She's not too well."

## eight

FOR A MOMENT they gazed down at the occupant of the bed, who lay back on a large satin bolster, a febrile hand on the silk counterpane. At first Sanders thought he was looking at an elderly woman, probably Thorensen's mother, and then realised that in fact she was little more than a child, a young woman in her early twenties. Her long platinum hair lay in a white shawl over her shoulders, her thin high-cheeked face raised to the scanty light. Once she might have had a nervous porcelain beauty, but

her wasted skin and the fading glow of light in her half-closed eyes gave her the appearance of someone preternaturally aged, reminding Dr. Sanders of his patients in the children's ward at the hospital near the leprosierie in the last minutes before their death.

"Thorensen." Her voice cracked faintly in the amber gloom. "It's getting cold again. Can't you light a fire?"

"The wood won't burn, Serena. It's all turned into glass." Thorensen stood at the foot of the bed, peering down at the young woman. In his leather jacket he looked like a policeman uneasily on duty in a sick-room. He unzipped the jacket. "I brought these for you, Serena. They'll help you."

He leaned forwards, hiding something from Dr. Sanders, and then spilled several handfuls of red and blue gemstones across the counterpane. Rubies and sapphires of many sizes, they glittered in the thinning afternoon light with a fevered power.

"Thorensen, thank you . . ." The girl's free hand scuttled across the counterpane to the stones. Her child-like face had become almost vulpine with greed. For a moment an expression of surprising craftiness came into her eyes, and Sanders sensed why the burly mine-owner treated her with such deference. Seizing a handful of the jewels, she brought them up to her neck and pressed them tightly against her skin, where the bruises formed like fingerprints. Their contact seemed to revive her and she stirred her legs, several of the jewels slipping to the floor. She gazed up at Dr. Sanders, and then turned to Thorensen.

"What were you shooting at?" she asked after an interval. "There was a gun going off, it gave me a headache."

"Just a crocodile, Serena. There are some pretty smart crocodiles around here, I have to watch them."

The young woman nodded. With a hand filled with jewels she pointed at Sanders. "Who's he? What's he doing here?"

"I found him outside. He's all right, don't worry." Thorensen waved Sanders towards the kitchen door. "You get some rest now, Serena."

"But, Thorensen, I need more of these, you only brought me a few today . . ." Her hand, like a claw, searched the counterpane. Then she turned away from them and seemed to subside into sleep, the jewels lying like scarabs on the white skin of her breast.

Thorensen nudged Dr. Sanders with his elbow and they stepped into the kitchen. Before he closed the door Thorensen looked down at the young woman with wistful eyes, as if frightened that she might dissolve into a last brittle dust if he left her.

Only half-aware of Sanders, he said vaguely: "We'll have something to eat."

The small kitchen was almost empty, a disconnected refrigerator standing on the cold stove. Thorensen opened the door and began to empty the remainder of the jewels on to the shelves, where they lay like cherries among the half-dozen cans. A light glacé frost covered the enamel exterior of the refrigerator, as everything else in the kitchen, but the inner walls remained unaffected.

"Who is she?" Dr. Sanders asked as Thorensen pried the lid off a can. "Shouldn't you try to get her away from here?"

Thorensen stared at Sanders with his ambiguous expression. He seemed always to be concealing something, his blue eyes fractionally lowered below the doctor's. "She's my wife," he said with a curious emphasis, as if unsure of the fact. "Serena. She's safer here, as long as I watch out for Ventress."

"Why should he want to hurt her? He seemed normal enough to me."

"He's insane!" Thorensen said with sudden force. "He spent six months in a straight-jacket! He wants to take Serena back to his crazy house in the middle of the swamp." As an afterthought, he added: "She was married to Ventress."

As they ate, forking the cold meat straight from the can, he told Sanders something of Ventress, the strange melancholy architect, who had designed many of the new government buildings in Lagos and Accra, and then two years earlier abruptly abandoned his work in disgust. He had married Serena, at the age of seventeen after

bribing her parents, a poor French colonial couple in Libreville, within a few hours of seeing her in the street outside his office. He had then carried her away to a grotesque folly he held built on a water-logged island among the crocodiles in the swamps ten miles to the north of Mont Royale, where the Matarre River expanded into a series of shallow lakes. According to Thorensen, Ventress had rarely spoken to Serena after the marriage ceremony, and prevented her from leaving the house or seeing anyone except a blind negro servant. Apparently he saw his young bride in a sort of Pre-Raphaelite dream, caged within his house like the lost spirit of his imagination. Thorensen had found her there, already tubercular, on one of his hunting trips, when his power cruiser had broken its propeller shaft. He visited her several times during Ventress's absences, and she finally escaped with him. He sent her off to a sanatorium in Southern Rhodesia, and the great house filled with its imitation antiques had been prepared for her homecoming, now forestalled by Ventress's arrival. After her disappearance and their divorce Ventress had gone berserk and spent some time as a voluntary patient at an asylum. Now he had returned with the single-minded ambition of abducting Serena and taking her off once more to his house in the swamps, and Thorensen seemed convinced, perhaps sincerely, that Ventress's morbid and lunatic presence was responsible for Serena's lingering malaise.

However, when Sanders mentioned that he was a doctor and asked to see the young woman again, in the hope that he would be able to persuade Thorensen to remove her from the frozen forest, the mine-owner quickly demurred.

"She's all right here," he told Sanders doggedly. "Don't worry."

"But, for God's sake, your wife needs medical care. Don't you realise—"

"She's all right!" Thorensen insisted. He stood up and looked down at the table, his stooped figure like a gallows in the dusk. "Look, doctor, I've been in this forest longer than you. It's not much of a chance for her, but it's the only one."

Half an hour later Sanders left them together, barricaded in the white sepulchre of the summer house. At Thorensen's words he had realised the man's motives for trying to keep the young woman inside the affected zone, preferring this half-animate immolation within the crystal vaults to her physical death in the world outside. Perhaps he had seen insects and birds pinioned alive inside their prisms, and guessed that this offered the one means of escape for his dying wife.

Following the river, Sanders set off towards the inspection site which Thorensen said was some three-quarters of a mile down-stream. With luck an army unit would be stationed at the nearest margins of the affected zone, and the soldiers would be able to retrace his steps and rescue the mine-owner and bride.

Thorensen's lack of hospitality did not surprise Sanders. In turning him out into the forest he was using him, in Ventress's phrase, as a 'decoy,' confident that the architect would immediately try to reach him for news of his former wife. As Sanders made his way along the petrified surface he glanced over his shouder at the dark grottoes along the banks, listening for any footsteps, but the glass sheaths of the trees sang and crackled with a thousand voices as the forest cooled in the darkness. Above, through the lattices that stretched at intervals across the river, he could see the fractured bowl of the moon. Around him, in the vitreous walls, the reflected stars glittered like myriads of fireflies.

At this time he noticed that his own clothes had begun to glow in the dark, the fine frost that covered his suit spangled by the starlight. Spurs of crystal grew from the dial of his wrist-watch, imprisoning the hands within a medallion of moonstone.

An hour later the river had widened into a broad glacier. Across the surface Sanders could see the distant roof-tops of Mont Royale. Like a causeway of frozen gas soaring high over the Milky Way, it was riven by deep faults. At its bottom flowed the dark water of the original channel. Sanders peered over the edges, hoping for some sign of Captain Radek's body stranded on the beaches of ice below.

Forced to leave the river when the surface broke into a succession of giant cataracts, he approached the outskirts of Mont Royale. The frosted outline of the white picket fence and the debris of scattered military equipment marked the site of the former inspection area. The laboratory trailer, and the tables and equipment nearby, had been enveloped by the intense frost. The branches in the centrifuge had blossomed again into brilliant jewelled sprays. Sanders picked up a discarded helmet, now a glass porcupine, and drove it through a window of the trailer.

In the darkness the white-roofed houses of the mining town gleamed like the funerary temples of a necropolis, their cornices ornamented with countless spires and gargoyles, linked together across the roads by the expanding tracery. A frozen wind moved through the deserted streets, which were waist-high forests of fossil spurs, the abandoned cars embedded within them like armoured saurians on an ancient ocean floor.

Everywhere the process of transformation was accelerating. Sander's feet were encased in huge crystal slippers. It was these spurs which enabled him to walk along the edges of the roadway, but soon they would fuse together and lock him to the ground.

The eastern entrance to the town was sealed by the forest and the erupting roadway, and he limped back to the river, hoping to climb the series of cataracts and make his way to the base camp to the south. As he scaled the first of the crystal blocks he could hear the underground streams beneath the morraine sluicing away into the open river.

A long crevice with an overhanging wall ran diagonally across the cataract, and led him into a series of galleries like the aerial terraces of a baroque cathedral. Beyond these the ice-falls spilled away on to a long white beach that seemed to mark the southern limits of the affected zone. The vents of the buried channels lay among the ice-falls, and a clear stream of moonlit water ran between the blocks and opened out into a shallow river, at least ten feet below the original course. Sanders walked slowly along the frozen white stretch of the beach, looking up at the vitrified forest on either side. Already the trees

were duller, the crystal sheaths lying in patches against the sides of the trunks, like half-melted ice.

Fifty yards along the ice beach, which narrowed as the water swept past it, Sanders saw a man's dark figure standing beneath one of the overhanging trees. With a tired wave, Sanders began to run towards him.

"Wait!" he called, afraid that the man might sidestep into the forest. "Over here . . ."

Ten yards from him Sanders slowed to a walk. The man had not moved from beneath the tree. Head down, he was carrying a large piece of drift-wood across his shoulders—a soldier, Sanders decided, foraging for firewood.

As Sanders drew up to him, the man stepped forward, in a gesture that was at once defensive and aggressive. The light from the ice-falls illuminated his ravaged body.

"Radek!—good God!" Appalled, Sanders stumbled back, almost tripping over a half-exposed root in the ice. "Radek—?"

The man hesitated, like a wounded animal uncertain whether to surrender. Across his bleeding shoulders he still carried the heavy wooden yoke which Sanders had fastened there. The left side of his body gave a painful heave, as if he were trying to throw off this incubus but he was unable to raise his hands to the buckle behind his head. The right side of his body seemed to hang loosely, suspended from the wooden cross-tree like a long-dead corpse. A huge wound had been torn across the shoulder, the flesh bared down to the elbow and breast-bone, and the right side of the face and neck had been exposed nearly to the bone. The raw flesh, in which a single eye gazed inertly at Sanders like the insane twin of its blinking companion, still ran with blood.

Collecting himself, and recognising the belt with which he had fastened the wooden spar to Radek's shoulders, Dr. Sanders moved forwards, gesturing to the man as if to pacify him. He remembered Ventress's warning, and the pieces of crystal carapace that he had torn away from the body when he had dragged Radek from beneath the helicopter. Then, too, he remembered Aragon tapping his gold eye-tooth and saying 'Covered . . . ? My

tooth is the whole gold, doctor.'

"Radek, let me help you . . ." Sanders edged forward as Radek hesitated. "Believe me, I wanted to save you—"

Still trying to shift the wooden spar from his shoulders, Radek gazed down at Sanders. Unformed thoughts seemed to cross his face, and then the eyes came into focus.

"Radek . . ." Sanders raised a hand to restrain him, unsure whether Radek would charge and attack him or bolt like a wounded beast into the forest.

With a shambling step, Radek drew nearer. A strange grunt-like noise came from his throat. He moved again, almost toppled by the swinging spar.

"Take me—" he began. There was another lurching stride. He held out a bloody arm like a sceptre. "Take me *back* . . . !"

He struggled on, the heavy spar swinging his shoulders from left to right, one foot flapping down on to the ice, his face lit by the jewelled light from the forest in front of him. Appalled, Sanders watched him as he jerked forward, the bleeding arm held out as if to clasp Sanders' shoulder. Already, however, he seemed to have forgotten Sanders, his attention fixed on the light from the ice-falls.

Sanders moved out of his way, ready to let him go by, but with a sudden side-step Radek swung the wooden beam and drove Sanders in front of him. "*Take me*—!"

"Radek—!" Winded by the force of the blow, Sanders stumbled ahead, like a helpless onlooker driven towards some bloody Golgotha by its intended victim. Crab-like, one lurching stride after another, his pace quickening as his prismatic light of the forest mingled with his blood, Radek pressed on, the swinging beam across his shoulders cutting off Sanders' escape.

Sanders ran ahead of him towards the ice-fall. Twenty yards from the first of the blocks, where the clear streams of the subterranean channel ran across his feet like his memories of the world beyond, he turned and raced down into the dark shallows. As Radek let out his stricken cry for the last time Sanders plunged to his

shoulders in the river and swam away across the silver water.

## nine

SOME HOURS LATER, as he walked dripping through the edges of the illuminated forest, Sanders came to a wide road deserted in the moonlight. In the distance he saw the outlines of a white hotel. Its long facade and tumbled columns made it look like some ancient flood-lit ruin. To the left of the road, the forest slopes moved gently upwards to the blue hills above Mont Royale and the river valley.

This time, as he approached the man standing beside a Land-Rover in the empty forecourt of the hotel, his wave was answered by a ready shout. A second figure patrolling the ruined hotel ran across the drive. A search-light on the roof of the car was played on to the road in front of Dr. Sanders. The two natives, wearing the uniform of the local hospital service, came forward to meet him. In the light from the forest their liquid eyes watched Dr. Sanders carefully as they helped him into the car, their dark fingers involuntarily feeling at the drenched fabric of his suit.

Five minutes later, after a short drive along the road and down a side turning past an old mine-works, they entered the compound of the mission hospital. A few oil lamps burned in the outbuildings, and a handful of native families sheltered by their carts in the yard, reluctant to take shelter indoors. The men sat in a small group by the empty fountain in the centre, the smoke from their cheroots forming white plumes in the darkness.

"Is Dr. Clair here?" Sanders asked the driver. "And Mrs. Clair?"

"They both here, sir." The driver glanced across at Sanders, still unsure of the real identity of this apparation that had materialised from the crystalline forest. "You Dr. Sanders, sir?" he ventured as they parked.

"That's it. They're expecting me?"

"Yes, sir. Dr. Clair in Mont Royale yesterday for

you, but trouble in the town, sir, he go away."

"I know. Everything went crazy—I'm sorry I missed him."

As Sanders climbed out of the car a familiar rotund figure in a white cotton jacket, short-sighted eyes below a domed forehead, hurried down the steps towards him.

"Edward—? My dear chap, for heaven's sake . . . !" He took Sanders' arm. "Where on earth have you been?"

Sanders felt himself relaxing for the first time since his arrival at Port Matarre, indeed since his departure from the leproserie at Fort Isabelle. "Max, I wish I knew—it's good to see you." He shook Clair's hand, holding it in a tight grip. "It's been insane here—how are you, Max? And how's Suzanne?—is she . . . ?"

"She's fine, fine. Hold on a moment." Leaving Sanders on the steps, Clair went back to the native drivers by the Land-Rover and patted each of them on the shoulder. He looked around at the other natives in the compound, waving to them as they squatted on their bundles in the dim light of the flares. Half a mile away, beyond the roofs of the outbuildings, an immense pall of silver light glowed in the night sky above the forest. Sanders realised the effort which Max was making to restrain the natives from abandoning their families and bolting off into the bush.

"Suzanne will be thrilled to see you, Edward," Max said as he rejoined him. He seemed more preoccupied and withdrawn than Sanders had remembered him. "We've talked about you a lot—I'm sorry about yesterday afternoon. Suzanne had promised to visit one of the mine dispensaries, and when Thorensen contacted me we got our lines crossed." The excuse was a palpably lame one, and Max smiled apologetically.

They entered an inner courtyard and walked across to a long chalet at the far end. Sanders stopped, glancing through the windows of the empty wards. Somewhere a generator hummed, and a few electric light bulbs glowed at the ends of corridors, but the hospital seemed deserted.

"Max—I made a most apalling blunder," he began. Sanders spoke rapidly, hoping that Suzanne would not

appear and interrupt him. Half an hour from then, as the three of them relaxed over their drinks in the comfort of the Clairs' lounge, Radek's tragedy would cease to seem real. "This man Radek—a captain in the medical corps—I found him in the centre of the forest, completely crystallised—you know what I mean?" Max nodded, his eyes looking Sanders up and down with a more than usually watchful gaze. Sanders went on. "I thought the only way of saving him was to immerse him in the river—but I had to tear him loose! Some of the crystals came off, I didn't realise—"

"Edward!" Max took his arm and tried to steer him along the path. "There's no—"

Sanders pushed his hand away. "Max, I found him later, I'd torn half his face and chest away—!"

"For God's sake!" Max clenched his fist. "Your's wasn't the first mistake, don't reproach yourself!"

"Max, I don't—understand me, it wasn't just that!" Sanders hesitated. "The point is—he wanted to go *back*! He wanted to go back into the forest and be crystallised again! He knew, Max, he *knew*!"

Lowering his head, Clair moved away a few paces. For a moment he stared down at the gravel chips. Then he glanced up at the darkened French windows of the chalet, where the tall figure of his wife watched them from a half-opened door. "Suzanne's there," he said. "She's pleased to see you, Edward, but..." Almost vaguely, as if distracted by matters other than those which Sanders had described, he added: "You'll want a change of clothes, I think I have a suit that will fit you somewhere—one of the European patients, diseased, if you don't mind that—and something to eat. It's damned cold in the forest."

But Sanders was looking at Suzanne Clair. Instead of coming forward to greet him, she had retreated into the darkness of the lounge, but Sanders could see the warm smile on the pale lantern of her face. She was wearing a night-robe of black silk that made her tall figure seem almost invisible against the shadows in the lounge, the face floating like a nimbus above it.

"Edward..." Max began to say as they stepped into

the lounge, but Sanders was walking forward between the moonlit furniture.

"Suzanne . . . it's wonderful to see you." Sanders took her hand with a laugh. "I was frightened you might have both been swallowed up by the forest. How are you?"

"Very happy, Edward." Still holding Sanders' arm, Suzanne turned to face her husband. "Delighted that you've come, you'll be able to share the forest with us now."

"My dear, I think the poor man has had more than his fair share already." Max bent down behind the sofa against the bookshelf and switched on a desk lamp that had been placed on the floor. The dim light illuminated the gold lettering on the leather spines of his books, but the rest of the room remained in darkness. "Do you realise that he's been trapped in the forest since early yesterday afternoon?"

"Trapped—?" Turning away from Sanders, Suzanne went over to the french windows and closed the door. For a moment she looked out at the brilliant night sky over the forest. She sat down in a chair near the black-wood cabinet against the far wall. "Is that quite the word to use? I envy you, Edward, it must have been a wonderful experience."

"Well . . ." Accepting a drink from Max, who was now half-filling his own glass from the whiskey decanter, Sanders leaned against the mantelpiece. Hidden in the shadows by the cabinet, Suzanne was still smiling at him, but this pleasant reflection of her former good humour seemed overlayed by the curiously ambiguous atmosphere in the lounge. He wondered whether this was merely due to his own fatigue, but there seemed something out of key in their meeting, as if some unseen dimension had been let obliquely into the room.

Sanders raised his glass to Suzanne. "I suppose one should call it wonderful," he said. "It's a matter of degree—I was completely unprepared for everything here."

"How marvellous—you'll never forget it." Suzanne sat forward. She wore her long black hair in an unusual manner, well forward over her face, so that it concealed

her cheeks. "Tell me about it all— Edward, I— "

"My dear." Max held up his hand. "Give the poor man time to catch his breath. Besides, he'll want to get to bed now, we can discuss it all over breakfast." To Sanders he explained: "Suzanne spends a lot of time wandering through the forest."

"Wandering—? " Sanders repeated. "What do you—"

"Only through the fringes, Edward," Suzanne said. "We're on the edge of the forest here, but there's enough—I've seen those jewelled vaults." With sudden animation, she said: "Do you know that a few mornings ago when I went out just before dawn my slippers were beginning to crystallise—they were turning into diamonds and emeralds on my feet! "

With a smile, Max said: "My dear, you're the princess in the enchanted wood."

"Max, I *was*." Suzanne nodded, her eyes gazing steadily at her husband as he looked down at the carpet. She turned to Sanders. "Edward, we could never leave here now."

Sanders shrugged doubtfully. "You may have to. The affected area is spreading. God only knows what the source of all this is, but there doesn't seem much immediate prospect of stopping it."

"Why try? " Suzanne looked up at Sanders. "Shouldn't we be grateful for the forest for giving us such a bounty? "

Max finished his drink. "Suzanne, you're moralising like some native preacher. All Edward wants at this moment is a change of clothes and a warm bed." He went over to the door. "I'll be with you in a moment, Edward. There's a room ready for you. Help yourself to another drink."

When he had gone Sanders said to Suzanne, as he filled his glass with soda: "You must be tired. I'm sorry to have kept you up."

"Not at all. I sleep during the day now—Max and I decided we should keep the dispensary open round the clock." Aware that the explanation was not wholly convincing, she added: "To be frank I prefer the night. One can see the forest better."

"That's true. You don't seem frightened of it,

Suzanne."

"Why should I be? It's so easy to be more frightened of one's feelings than of the things that prompt them. The forest isn't like that—I've accepted it, and all my fears." In a quieter voice, she added: "I'm glad you're here, Edward. I'm afraid that Max doesn't really understand what's happening in the forest—I mean in the widest sense—to all our ideas of time and mortality. How can I put it? '*Time, like a dome of many-coloured glass, Stains the white radiance of eternity.*' But I'm sure you understand."

Carrying his glass, Sanders walked across the darkened room. Although his eyes had become accustomed to the dim light, Suzanne's face still remained hidden in the shadows behind the blackwood cabinet. The faintly enigmatic smile that had hovered about her mouth since his arrival was still there, almost beckoning to him. As he drew closer to her he realised that this slight upward inclination of the mouth was not a smile at all, but a minor facial rictus caused by the nodular thickening of the upper lip. The skin of her face had a characteristic dusky appearance, which she had managed to hide by her long hair and a lavish use of powder. Despite this camouflage, he could see the nodular thickening all over her face and in the lobe of her left ear as she drew back fractionally in her chair, raising her shoulder. Already, after his years of experience at the leper hospital, he could see the beginnings of the so-called leonine mask.

In deference to her, he moved away across the room. "At the time I was sorry that you left Fort Isabelle," he said after a pause, "I could barely restrain myself from following you immediately. Now, of course, I'm very glad you came. It may seem a strange choice to some people, but I understand. Who could blame you for trying to leave the dark side of the sun?"

Suzanne shook her head, puzzled by this cryptic reference. "What do you mean?"

Sanders hesitated. Although she appeared to be smiling, Suzanne was in fact trying to control this involuntary movement of her mouth. Her once elegant face was

twisted by a barely concealed scowl.

He gestured vaguely. "I was thinking of our patients at Fort Isabelle. For them—"

"It's nothing to do with them. Edward, you're tired, I musn't keep you up any longer." With a brisk movement, Suzanne stood up, her slim figure taller than Sanders. For a moment her white powdered face looked down at him with the same skull-like intensity he remembered in Ventress. Then once again the smile supervened. "Good night, Edward. We'll see you at breakfast, you have so much to tell us."

## ten

LITTLE MORE THAN an hour later, as he lay half-asleep in his room at the rear of the chalet, Dr. Sanders heard the sounds of a distant commotion from the compound of the hospital. Almost too tired to sleep, and yet sufficiently exhausted not to listen more closely, he ignored the raised voices and the flickering beam of the Land Rover's searchlight carried over the roof and reflected through the blinds off the tall trees outside.

Later, when the noise began again, he looked at his watch and saw that it was a few minutes past three o'clock. The engine of an antiquated truck was being started in the compound. As it coughed and seized, and the voices chattered around it, he heard more footsteps running in and out of the chalet. All the servants seemed to be up, wandering in and out of the rooms and opening and shutting the cupboard doors.

When he saw someone with a torch inspecting the vegetation outside his window, Sanders climbed from his bed and dressed.

In the dining-room he found the house-boy looking out through the open window into the forest.

"What's going on?" Dr. Sanders asked him. "Where's Dr. Clair?"

The houseboy pointed towards the compound. "Dr. Clair with car, sir. Trouble in forest, he gone to look."

"What sort of trouble?" Sanders stepped over to the

french windows. "Is it moving nearer?"

"No, sir, not moving. Dr. Clair say you sleep, sir."

"Where's Mrs. Clair? Is she around?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Clair busy now."

"What do you mean?" Dr. Sanders pressed. "I thought she was on night duty. Come on, man, what the devil's going on—where is Mrs. Clair?"

The houseboy hesitated, his lips soundlessly forming the polite formulas which Max had left him for Sanders' benefit. Then he blurted out: "Mrs. Clair go off, run away from hospital. Dr. Clair with car, he say you stay here, sleep."

Dr. Sanders drummed a fist into his palm. "So she's gone back into the forest—poor woman!"

The houseboy glanced at Sanders. "You know, sir?"

"No, I just guessed. I'm afraid I was a little indiscreet. Each of us has something we can't bear to be reminded of—where's that truck going?"

The antiquated engine had come to life, and its din was drumming all over the hospital. The houseboy unlatched the french windows and ran on ahead across the inner courtyard. When Sanders reached the compound the truck was making a slow circuit of the fountain, half a dozen of the native orderlies sitting up behind the cabin. After a few shouts to and fro the driver stopped and Sanders clambered up over the tailboard.

They reached the main highway five minutes later, then rumbled on through the darkness towards the white hulk of the Bourbon Hotel, where the Land-Rover was parked, its searchlight playing on the forest. As it swept across the crystalline trees, like an immense tipping of broken glass, the white prisms glittered as far away as the river half a mile to the south. Jumping down from the truck, Dr. Sanders went over to the Land-Rover and questioned the native driver. None of the men had seen Suzanne leave. After leaving them a few hasty instructions to form a search party, Max had plunged off into the forest.

From the confused melée around the two vehicles, it was plain to Sanders that none of the men had any intention of entering the forest. When Sanders pressed one of them he made some muttered reference to the

'white phantoms' that patrolled its inner reaches, presumably these spectres were glimpses of Ventress and Thorensen in pursuit of each other, of himself and, perhaps most terrifying of all, of Radek stumbling with his cross as he searched for his lost grave.

Five minutes later, when he saw that the search party was no closer to forming itself—the crew of the Land-Rover insisted on remaining by their searchlight, and most of the men on the track moved off to the Bourbon Hotel and squatted down with their cheroots among the fallen columns—Dr. Sanders set off alone along the highway. To his left, the glitter of the forest threw the cold moonlight across the macadam at his feet, and lit up the entrance to a small side-road that ran off towards the river a hundred yards ahead. When he reached it, and looked down this narrow defile that led away into the illuminated world, Sanders hesitated for a moment, listening to the fading voices of the natives. Then he pressed his hands into the pockets of his suit and moved off along the verges of the road, picking his way among the glass spurs that rose more and more thickly around him.

An hour later he reached the river, and crossed a ruined bridge that tilted down onto the frozen surface like a jewelled web, its girders hung with silver. The white surface of the river wound away around the frosted trees. The few craft along the banks were now so heavily encrusted that they were barely recognisable. Their light seemed darker and more intense, as if they were sealing their brilliance within themselves.

By this time his suit had begun to glow again in the dark, the fine frost forming crystal spurs on the fabric. His shoes were enclosed in thickening bowls of prisms.

The town was empty. Limping in and out of the deserted streets, the white buildings looming around him like sepulchres, he reached the harbour. Standing on the jetty, he could see across the frozen surface of the river to the cataract in the distance. Even higher now, it formed an impenetrable barrier between himself and the lost army somewhere to the south.

Shortly before dawn, he limped back through the

town, in the hope of finding the summer-house where Thorensen and his young bride were sheltering. He passed a small section of the side-walk that remained clear of all growth, below the broken window of a jewellery store. Handfuls of looted stones were scattered across the pavement, ruby and emerald rings, topaz brooches and pendants, intermingled with countless smaller stones and industrial diamonds. This abandoned harvest glittered coldly in the moonlight.

As he stood among the stones Sanders noticed that the crystal outgrowths from his shoes were dissolving and melting, like icicles exposed to sudden heat. Pieces of the crust fell away and deliquesced, vanishing without trace into the air.

Then he realized why Thorensen had brought the jewels to his wife, and why she had seized on them so eagerly. By some optical or electromagnetic freak, the intense focus of light within the stones simultaneously produced a compression of time, so that the discharge of light from the surfaces reversed the process of crystallisation. Perhaps it was this gift of time which accounted for the eternal appeal of precious gems, as well as of all baroque painting and architecture. (Their intricate crests and cartouches, occupying more than their own volume of space, so contained a greater ambient time, providing that unmistakable premonition of immortality sensed with St. Peter's or the palace at Nymphenberg. By contrast the architecture of the 20th century, characteristically one of rectangular unornamented facades, of simple Euclidean space and time, was that of the New World, confident of its firm footing in the future and indifferent to those pangs of mortality which haunted the mind of old Europe).

Quickly Dr. Sanders knelt down and filled his pockets with the stones, cramming them into his shirt and cuffs. He sat back against the store front, the semi-circle of smooth pavement like a miniature patio, at whose edges the crystal undergrowth glittered like a spectral garden. Pressed to his cold skin, the hard faces of the jewels seemed to warm him, and within a few seconds he fell into an exhausted sleep.

He woke into brilliant sunshine in a street of temples, a thousand rainbows spangling the gilded air with a blaze of prismatic colours. Shielding his eyes, he lay back and looked up at the roof-tops, their gold tiles inlaid with thousands of coloured gems, like pavilions in the temple quarter of Bangkok.

A hand pulled at his shoulder. Trying to sit up, Sanders found that the semicircle of clear sidewalk had vanished, and his body lay sprawled in a bed of sprouting needles. The growth had been most rapid in the entrance to the store, and his right arm was encased in a mass of crystalline spurs, three or four inches long, that reached almost to his shoulder. Inside this frozen gauntlet, almost too heavy to lift, his fingers were outlined in a maze of rainbows.

Sanders dragged himself to his knees, tearing off some of the crystals. He found the bearded man in the white suit crouching behind him, his shot-gun in his hands.

"Ventress!" With a cry, Sanders raised his jewelled arm. "For God's sake?"

His shout distracted Ventress from his scrutiny of the light-filled street. His lean face with its small bright eyes was transfigured by strange colours that mottled his skin and drew out the pale blues and violets of his beard. His suit radiated a thousand bands of colour.

He moved towards Sanders, pointing warningly at the strip of crystals torn from his arm. Before he could speak there was a roar of gunfire and the glass trellis encrusted to the doorway shattered in a shower of fragments. Ventress flinched and hid behind Sanders, then pulled him backwards through the window. As another shot was fired down the street they stumbled past the looted counters into an office where the door of a safe stood open on to a jumble of metal cash boxes. Ventress snapped back the lids on the empty trays, and then began to scoop together the few jewels scattered across the floor.

Stuffing them into Sanders' empty pockets, he pulled him through a window into the rear alley, and from there in the adjacent street, transformed by the overhead lattices into a tunnel of crimson and vermilion light. They stopped at the first turning, and Ventress beckoned to

the forest fifty yards away.

"Run, run! Anywhere, through the forest! It's all you can do!"

He pushed Sanders forwards with the butt of his shotgun, whose breach was now encrusted by a mass of silver crystals, like a medieval flintlock. Sanders raised his arm helplessly. In the sunlight the jewelled spurs coruscated like a swarm of fire-flies. "My arm, Ventress! It's reached my shoulder!"

"Run! Nothing else can help you!" Ventress's illuminated face flickered angrily, almost as if he were impatient of Sanders' refusal to accept the forest. "Don't waste the stones, they won't last you forever!"

Forcing himself to run, Sanders set off towards the forest, where he entered the first of the caves of light. He whirled his arm like a clumsy propeller, and felt the crystals recede slightly. With luck he soon reached a small tributary of the river that wound in from the harbour, and hurled himself like a wild man along its petrified surface.

For hours he raced through the forest, all sense of time lost to him. If he stopped for more than a minute the crystal bands would seize his neck and shoulder, and he forced himself on, only pausing to slump exhausted on the glass beaches. Then he pressed the jewels to his face, warding off the glacé sheath. But their power slowly faded, and as they facets blunted they turned into nodes of unpolished silica.

Once, as he ran through the trees, his arm whirling before him, he passed the summer-house where Thorensen kept guard over his dying wife. He heard Thorensen fire at him from the veranda, perhaps confusing his spectral figure with that of Ventress.

At last, late that afternoon, when the deepening ruby light of dusk settled through the forest, he entered a small clearing where the deep sounds of an organ reverberated among the trees. In the centre was a small church, its gilt spire fused to the branches of the surrounding trees by the crystal tracery.

Raising his jewelled arm, Sanders drove back the oak doors and entered the nave. Above him, refracted by the

stained glass windows, a brilliant glow of light poured down upon the altar. Listening to the organ, Sanders leaned against the altar rail and extended his arm to the gold cross set with rubies and emeralds. Immediately the sheath slipped slightly and began to dissolve like a melting sleeve of ice. As the crystals deliquesced the light poured from his arm like an overflowing fountain.

Turning his head to watch Dr. Sanders, Father Balthus sat at the organ, his thin fingers drawing from the pipes their great unbroken music, which soared away, interweaved by countless overtones, through the stained panels of the windows to the distant dismembered sun.

For the next three days Sanders remained with Balthus, as the last crystal spurs dissolved from the tissues of his arm. All day he knelt beside the organ, working the bellows with his jewelled arm as rippling graces of Palestrina and Bach echoed around them. As the crystals dissolved the wound he had torn in his arm ran with blood again, washing the pale prisms of his exposed tissues.

At dusk, when the sun sank in a thousand fragments into the western night, Father Balthus would leave the organ and stand out on the porch, looking up at the spectral trees. His slim scholar's face and calm eyes, their composure belied by the nervous movements of his hands, like the false calm of someone recovering from an attack of fever, would gaze at Sanders as they ate their small supper on a foot-stool beside the altar, sheltered from the cold embalming wind by the jewels in the cross.

At first Sanders thought that Balthus regarded his survival as an example of the Almighty's intervention, and made some token expression of gratitude. At this Balthus smiled ambiguously. Why he had returned to the church Sanders could only guess. By now it was surrounded on all sides by the crystal trellises, as if overtopped by the mouth of an immense glacier.

One morning Balthus found a blind snake, its eyes transformed into enormous jewels, searching hesitantly at the door of the porch, and carried it in his hands to the altar. Balthus watched it with a wry smile when, its sight returned, it slid away among the pews.

On another day Sanders woke to the early morning light and found Balthus, alone, celebrating the Eucharist. The priest stopped, half-embarrassed, and over breakfast confided: "You probably wonder what I was doing, but it seemed a convenient moment to test the validity of the sacrament."

He gestured at the prismatic colours pouring through the stained glass windows, whose original scriptural scenes had been transformed into paintings of bewildering abstract beauty. "It may sound heretical to say so, but the body of Christ is with us everywhere here—" he touched the thin shell of crystals on Sanders' arm "—in each prism and rainbow, in the ten thousand faces of the sun." He raised his thin hands, jewelled by the light. "So you see, I fear that the church, like its symbol—" here he pointed to the cross "—may have outlived its function."

Sanders searched for an answer. "I'm sorry. Perhaps if you left here—"

"No!" he insisted, annoyed by Sanders' obtuseness. "Can't you understand? Once I was a true apostate—I knew God existed but could not believe in him." He laughed bitterly at himself. "Now events have overtaken me."

With a gesture he led Sanders down the nave to the open porch, and pointed up to the dome-shaped lattice of crystal beams that reached from the rim of the forest like the buttresses of an immense cupola of diamond and glass. Embedded at various points were the almost motionless forms of birds with outstretched wings, golden orioles and scarlet macaws, shedding brilliant pools of light. The bands of liquid colour rippled outwards through the forest, the reflections of the melting plumage enveloping them in endless concentric patterns. The overlapping arcs hung in the air like the votive windows of a city of cathedrals. Everywhere around them Sanders could see countless smaller birds, butterflies and insects, joining their miniature haloes to the coronation of the forest.

Father Balthus took Sanders' arm. "Here in this forest everything is transfigured and illuminated, joined together

in the last marriage of space and time."

Towards the end, on the third day, as they stood side by side with their backs to the altar, his conviction seemed to fail him. The aisle transformed itself into an occluding tunnel of glass pillars. With an expression almost of panic Balthus watched the keys of the organ manuals frosting like the coins of a bursting coffer, and Sanders knew that he was searching for some means of escape.

Then at last he rallied, seized the cross from the altar and pressed it into Sanders' arms. With a sudden anger born of absolute conviction he dragged Sanders to the porch and propelled him to one of the narrowing vaults.

"Go. Get away from here! Find the river!"

When Sanders hesitated, the heavy sceptre weighing upon his bandaged arm, Balthus shouted fiercely: "Tell them I ordered you to take it!"

Sanders last saw him standing arms outstretched to the approaching walls, in the posture of the illuminated birds, his eyes filled with wonder and relief at the first circles of light conjured from his upraised palms.

Struggling with the golden incubus, Sanders made his way towards the river, his tottering figure reflected in the hanging mirrors of the moss like a lost Simon of Cyrene pictured in a medieval manuscript.

He was still sheltering behind the cross when he reached the summer house where Thorensen and the young woman had taken refuge. The door was open, and Sanders looked down at the bed in the centre of a huge fractured jewel, in whose frosted depths, like swimmers asleep on the bottom of an enchanted pool, Serena and the mine-owner lay together. Thorensen's eyes were closed, and the delicate petals of a blood-red rose blossomed from the hole in his breast like an exquisite marine plant. Beside him Serena slept quietly, the unseen motion of her heart sheathing her body in a faint amber glow, the palest residue of life. Where Thorensen had died trying to save her, she lived on in her own half-death.

Something glittered in the dusk behind Sanders. He turned to see a brilliant chimera, a man with incandescent arms and chest, race past among the trees, a cascade of particles diffusing in the air behind him. He flinched

back behind the cross, but the man had vanished as suddenly as he had appeared, whirling himself away among the crystal vaults. As his luminous wake faded Sanders heard his voice echoing across the frosted air, the plaintive words jewelled and ornamented like everything else in that transmogrified world.

"*Serena . . . ! Serena . . .!*"

## eleven

TWO MONTHS LATER, as he completed his letter to Dr. Paul Derain, Director of the leper hospital at Fort Isabelle, in the quiet of his hotel bedroom at Port Matarre, Sanders wrote:

*. . . it seems hard to believe, Paul, here in this empty hotel, that the strange events of that phantasmagoric forest ever occurred. Yet in fact I am little more than 40 miles as the crow (or should I say, the gryphon) flies from the focal area ten miles to the south of Mont Royale, and if I need any reminder there is the barely healed wound on my arm. According to the bartender downstairs—I am glad to say that he, at least, is still at his post; almost everyone else has left—the forest is now advancing at the rate of some four hundred yards each day. One of the visting journalists talking to Louise claims that at this rate of progress at least a third of the earth's surface will be affected by the end of the next decade, and a score of the world's capital cities petrified beneath layers of prismatic crystal, as Miami has already been—no doubt you have seen reports of the abandoned resort as a city of a thousand cathedral spires, a vision materialised from St. John the Divine.*

*To tell the truth, however, the prospect causes me little worry. As I have said, Paul, it is obvious to me now that the origins of the Hubble Effect are more than physical. When I stumbled out of the forest into an army cordon five miles from Mont Royale two days after seeing the helpless phantom that had once been Ventress, the gold cross clutched in my arms, I was determined never to visit the forest again. By one of those ludicrous inversions of*

*logic, I found myself, far from acclaimed as a hero, standing summary trial before a military court and charged with looting. The gold cross had apparently been stripped of its jewels—the generous benefaction of the mining companies—and in vain did I protest that that these vanished stones had been the price of my survival. Only the intercession of Max Clair and Louise Peret saved me. After a fruitless search for Suzanne, poor Max had made his escape in a similar fashion. At our suggestion a patrol of soldiers equipped with jewelled crosses entered the forest in an attempt to find Suzanne and Ventress, but they were forced to make their retreat.*

*Whatever my feelings at the time, however, I know now that I shall one day return to the forest at Mont Royale. Each night the fractured disc of the Echo satellite passes overhead, illuminating the midnight sky like a silver chandelier. And I am convinced, Paul, that the sun itself has begun to effloresce. At sunset, when its disc is veiled by the crimson dust, it seems to be crossed by a distinctive lattice-work, a vast portcullis that will one day spread outwards to the planets and the stars, halting them in their courses.*

*As the example of that brave apostate priest who gave the cross to me illustrates, there is an immense reward to be found in that frozen forest. There the transfiguration of all living and inanimate forms occurs before our eyes, the gift of immortality a direct consequence of the surrender by each of us of our own physical and temporal identity. However apostate we may be in this world, there perforce we become apostles of the prismatic sun.*

*So when my recovery is complete I shall return to Mont Royale with one of the scientific expeditions passing through here. It should not be too difficult to arrange my escape and then I shall return to the solitary church in that enchanted world, where by day fantastic birds fly through the petrified forest and jewelled crocodiles glitter like heraldic salamanders on the banks of the crystalline rivers, and where by night the illuminated man races among the trees, his arms like golden cartwheels and his head like a spectral crown . . .*

Putting down his pen as Louise Peret entered the room,

Dr. Sanders folded the letter and placed it in an old envelope from Derain in which he had written asking for Sanders' plans.

Louise came over to the desk by the window and put her hand lightly on Sanders shoulder. She wore a clean white dress that emphasised the drabness of the rest of Port Matarre.

"Are you still writing to Derain?" she asked. "It's a long letter."

"There's a lot to say." Sanders sat back, clasping her hand as he looked out at the deserted arcade below. A few military landing craft were moored against the police jetty, and beyond them the dark river swept away into the interior.

"Are you resigning then?" Louise asked. "I think you should reconsider . . . we've talked—"

"My dear, one can't re-consider things to a hundred places of decimals. Somewhere one's just got to make a decision." Sanders took the letter from his pocket and tossed it on to the desk. Not to hurt Louise, who had stayed with him in the hotel since his rescue, he said: "Actually, I haven't made up my mind yet—I'm just using the letter to work the whole thing out."

Louise nodded, looking down at him. Sanders noticed that she had begun to wear her sunglasses again, unconsciously revealing her own private decision about Sanders and his future, and their inevitable separation. However, minor dishonesties such as this were merely part of their own tolerance of one another.

"Have the police any news about Anderson?" Sanders asked. Louise still went down to the prefecture every morning in the hope of getting some news about her lost colleague, partly, Sanders guessed, to justify her extended stay in Port Matarre.

"Nothing. But no-one is entering the zone now." Louise shrugged. "It's worth trying, though."

"Of course." Sanders stood up, leaning on the injured arm, and then put on his jacket.

"How is it?" Louise asked. "Your arm. It seems all right now."

Sanders patted the elbow. "Yes, I think its completely

healed. Thank you, Louise, it's been good of you. You know that."

Louise regarded him from behind her sunglasses. A brief smile touched her lips. "What more could I do?" She laughed at this, and then strolled to the door. "I must go up to my room and change for lunch. Enjoy your walk."

Sanders followed her to the door, and then held her arm for a moment. When she had gone he stood by the door for a moment, listening distantly to the few sounds in the almost empty hotel.

Sitting down at the desk again, he completed the letter to Paul Derain, adding a final paragraph and farewell. Sealing it into a fresh envelope, he addressed it to Derain and propped it against the inkwell. He then took out his cheque-book and signed three of the cheques, slipped these into a second envelope on which he wrote Louise's name. He placed this beside Derain's letter.

Downstairs in the foyer he paid the previous week's bills for both himself and Louise, and settled their accounts for a further fortnight. After exchanging a few pleasantries with the Portuguese owner (the desk-clerk each morning, the drab light in Port Matarre, and the steamer), Sanders went out for his usual pre-lunch walk.

Usually his walk took him down to the river. He strolled through the deserted arcades, noticing, as he did each morning, the drab light in Port Matarre, and the drained forest beyond it. At the corner, opposite the police station, he flexed his injured arm for the last time against one of the pillars. Somewhere in the crystalline streets of Mont Royale were the missing fragments of himself, still living in their own prismatic medium.

Thinking of Radek, stumbling forward with the cross over his shoulders, and of Suzanne Clair, escaping from her own recognition of herself, Sanders reached the waterfront and walked down along the deserted jetties. Almost all the native craft had gone, and the native settlements on the other side of the river were abandoned.

One craft, however, as usual still patrolled the empty waterfront. Three hundred yards away Sanders could see the red and yellow speedboat in which he and Louise

had first made their journey to Mont Royale, and the tall raffish figure of Aragon standing patiently at the helm.

Sanders walked towards him, feeling the wallet in his jacket. As he reached Aragon the latter waved to him slowly, then started his motor and moved off. Puzzled by this, Sanders walked on, and then saw that Aragon was taking the craft down-river to the point on the bank where the crystallised body of Matthieu had been cast up two months earlier.

Sanders caught up with the boat, and then walked down the bank towards it. For a moment the two men regarded each other.

"A fine boat you have there, captain," Sanders said at last, repeating the phrase he had first used to Aragon.

A few minutes later, as they surged off into the mouth of the river, Sanders leaned back in his seat when they passed the central wharfs. In the choppy water the spray broke unevenly, the fallen rainbows carried away in the dark wake behind them. In the square between the arcades an old negro was standing in the dust with a white shield in his hand, waiting for the boat to go past. On the police jetty, Louise Peret stood next to a native corporal, her eyes hidden by the sunglasses, watching Sanders without waving as the boat sped on into the deserted mouth of the river.

**the end**

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